



Instagram beauty influencers communication strategies and the Covid-19 pandemic

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Candice Anne Breeze

22 February 2021

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This thesis has been through a pandemic, three lockdowns, an inter-island move and several emotional breakdowns. It hasn't been easy to do with the world as we know it collapsing under the wrath of Covid-19. The original thesis subject was changed in the middle of the first lockdown as I found myself struggling with quarantine and a world that revolved around being inside. I took an entire month off and managed to somehow pull it together to submit on time without extension, a miracle I'm not quite sure how I managed to pull off. I have put my heart and soul into this as I try to unravel the communications strategies that changed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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This thesis is dedicated to Todd, Ivy, Poppy and myself.

Abstract

This research explores the communication strategies of Instagram beauty influencers during the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States of America. Four Instagram beauty influencers posts were analysed from February 2020 to April 2020 which includes one month before the pandemic and one month into the pandemic. A thematic analysis was performed on influencers social media posts to identify key shifts in their communication strategies. Pre Covid-19, a beauty influencer's main communication strategies were focused on being confident, aspiring, relatable, authentic, and use persuasion communication to help sell products that they are endorsing for various brands.

The analysis found that during Covid-19, these communication strategies changed as beauty influencers were unable to curate and produce the same content as before. Due to the unprecedented times that Covid-19 left them and with a majority of the United States being put on a 'Stay at Home Order', influencers were forced to change their communication strategies. Beauty influencers felt they had a responsibility to set an example for their followers when it came to dealing and living with a new normal because of Covid-19. From this they began to include health messaging into their communications, urging their followers to stay at home, practice social distancing and to wear masks when in public. A new normal in terms of content began to be created with these influencers testing out different content types such as education, cooking, lifestyle, and family posts. Additionally, given the impact of Covid-19 on mental health, beauty influencers also produced care-related content. For instance, participants in this study attended therapy sessions with their therapists live on Instagram and posted these, whilst also promoting self-care. Furthermore, the participants in this study also began to open up to their followers unlike ever before, being open and honest about their personal struggles and exemplifying issues that confronted women during the pandemic.

Additionally, the research found that beauty influencers persuasion communication shifted from selling beauty products to persuading their followers to be sensible during the pandemic. Content production became flexible precisely because they wanted to be relatable

to their followers during this time. As such influencer's persona shifted to become more health and pandemic conscious to ensure relevancy and currency.

Before the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order was placed, aspirationalism was glamorous, luxurious and sought after. It was an attribute that was found most attractive to followers and would be the carrier between success and failure as an influencer. However, during quarantine aspirational content was seen as distasteful and not pandemic conscious. Because this attribute was no longer deemed as desirable the aesthetics, colours and themes of the four influencers changed severally during the Covid-19 pandemic. In short, the research found that the influencers developed novel and intriguing ways to negotiate the pandemic by transforming their communication strategies and content without losing their brand image and aesthetics.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Influencer culture has become a phenomenon in today's society with influencers gaining mass followings in various industries. Due to their large following, companies capitalise on these influencers by securing brand deals and sponsorships to sell their products in a cost-effective and personalised manner (Matthew, 2018). With technological advancement and social media dominance, the days where legacy media was the only way of advertising and fostering consumption is no longer viable (Matthew, 2018). Influencers have paved a new way for brands to promote their products or services directly to their target audience within a niche community (Matthew, 2018).

The largest platform for influencers, Instagram, brought in more money than YouTube in 2019 with a whopping \$20 billion in advertisement revenue (Fingas, 2020). According to the latest statistics from Omnicore (2020), Instagram has 1 billion+ monthly active users, of which more than 500,000 users are categorised as influencers (Aslam, 2020). Each of these influencers has their own niches they fit into from Fitness to Sports, but the industry that houses the most influencers is Beauty and Fashion, with over 19.2% of influencers fitting into that category (Guttmann, 2020).

By March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had hit several countries including the United States of America, forcing a majority of the states to go into quarantine to try and contain the virus. For the United States of America (USA) this was the beginning of months of isolation in their homes (CDC, 2020). California was the first state to order a mandatory Stay at Home Order on 19 March 2020, and by 8 May restrictions began to ease allowing essential services and retail to reopen (COVID19 CA, 2020). Due to the rapid spread of the pandemic and states having to quarantine, businesses started to struggle and many had to shut down (Baek, McCrory, Messer, & Mui, 2020). Due to the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, companies' advertising and marketing budgets were the first to go during the Stay at Home Order which meant influencers sponsorships were quickly evaporating, and brand deals came to a halt (Criddle, 2020). Influencers and the rest of the world tried to find a new

normal in a time of uncertainty. For many influencers, this meant having to suddenly shift their content as they found themselves isolated at home, with restrained creative freedom. Suci (2020), writing in *Forbes* called the shift in content the 'Post Pandemic World' and discusses how influencers will have to change for good by listening more to what their followers want, to help them stay relevant. Marshall Sandman host of the Instagram Live Series *Spilling the Quarantea* and an Influencer Marketing expert noted that influencers who are 'one deaf' to the pandemic would seriously harm their followers making them feel alienated (Suci, 2020).

In this chapter, I will briefly outline the context of the research or background, articulate the research aims and objectives, and provide an outline of the thesis structure. Given that this study aims to examine shifts in Instagram beauty influencers' communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic in the USA, this chapter will first introduce the platform, the Stay at Home Order, and the beauty influencers. This is the context. The chapter will then outline the rationale for the research by situating the research aims and objectives in relation to relevant literature. The final section will set out the thesis structure.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 Instagram Platform

Instagram was founded in 2010 by Mike Kreiger and Kevin Synstrom (Mullen, 2018). It is a free photo and video sharing social networking app where users can upload visual content to share with their followers or friends. Users can also view, like and comment on photos and videos posted by other users (Instagram, 2020). In 2012, it was sold to Facebook for USD 1 billion (Mullen, 2018).

There are several features within Instagram that users can access and use to enhance their experience on the social media platform. Discover reels, for instance, is a tab at the bottom of the Instagram app where you can watch videos from other creators on Instagram. Stories is another feature that enables users to post moments from their day-to-day life that is fun and casual and are only up for people to access for 24 hours. Further, the platform has here

a feature that allows users to send messages, photos and videos to friends privately. Another significant feature of the platform is Instagram TV, launched in 2018 which enables content creators to upload videos that are longer than 60 seconds. This is different to the video function on Instagram profiles that limits users to upload 59-second videos. Instagram also launched a Shop tab where people can browse and purchase the latest trends from their favourite brands or creators. A further feature is the option to go live on your Instagram story where friends and followers can see live what you are up to (Instagram, 2019). And in 2020, Instagram 'launched a new feature called Co-Watching that allows users to share photos and videos over video chat to watch together' (Leskin, 2020). The Co-Watching feature had been in testing since 2019, 'but the company decided to make it available amid the coronavirus pandemic to offer users more ways to 'come together right now' during the time of quarantine and work from home' (Leskin, 2020).

Visual communication is a powerful tool in today's society. Without it, platforms such as Instagram would not be successful. Social media statistics show that visual content is 40 times more likely to be shared than text-only content (PwC, 2017). Furthermore, video content has become increasingly popular on social media platforms including Instagram. A study by Kusumasondjaja (2019), for example, found that posts with video content received more user interaction than static images.

The reason why Instagram is widely successful compared to other social media platforms is that it has evolved to be not just for personal use but for businesses, with many using it as a marketing tool. Studies show that Instagram's per-follower engagement rate is 58 times higher than Facebook and 120 times higher than Twitter. Users are also 2.5 times more likely to click on an advertisement on Instagram compared to any other social media platform (Jones, 2018).

1.2.2 Stay at Home Order

The influencers that have been chosen to participate in this study come from the states of New York and Texas. New York was the first state to go into a mandatory 'Stay at Home Order' on 22 March at 8.00 p.m. when Covid-19 cases surged to over 7,000 (Evelyn, 2020). Just over

a week later, Texas also put on a Stay at Home Order from 2 April at 12:01 a.m. The Stay at Home Order for both Texas and New York meant only workers who were deemed ‘essential’ could leave their homes. And all non-essential businesses were forced to shut down. While residents were allowed outside for exercise, they had to practice social distancing and team sports were not permitted. All gatherings of any size that were not for essential work were banned (Evelyn, 2020). On 8 June 2020, after the city had been in quarantine for 78 days, the Stay at Home Order was lifted, and New York City began to operate as normal (Levenson, 2020).

The governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, decided not to call their order a ‘Stay at Home Order’ but rather ‘essential services and activities only’ order. This created confusion over the order and its rules with residents; however, he informed residents that they should only leave their home to go to the grocery store, doctors office or a handful of other essential activities. Failure to comply with this new order would result in a fine of up to \$1,000 or jail time of up to 180 days, or both (Svitek, 2020). While New York was in quarantine until June, Texas’ order ended on April 30 (Flores & Livengood, 2020), with malls, stores, restaurants and movie theatres allowed to reopen but only at 25% capacity. Additionally, barbers, hair salons, massage parlours and gyms having to wait till mid-May to reopen (Barragan, Garrett, & Morris, 2020).

1.3 Influencer Introductions

As noted previously, for this research, four Instagram beauty influencers were selected. The purpose of this section is to introduce each influencer, provide background information about them to better understand who they are, and contextualise their social media footprints.

The first is Grace Atwood, a 38-year-old female living in Brooklyn, New York, who was initially known as the creator of the fashion and lifestyle blog *The Stripe* (Atwood, 2020). She prides herself on interior design and tends to design her entire apartment in a colourful mid-century modern style. Grace is also the co-host of a podcast titled *Bad on Paper* which is an audio version of a book club (Schumacker, 2020). Her favourite part of being an influencer is connecting with people, and being able to work for herself. Before running her blog and

becoming an Instagram influencer, Grace was the director of Social Media for BaubleBar (Atwood, 2020). She focuses on beauty and fashion content and currently has 157,000 followers on her Instagram account. Grace wrote and appeared in several online articles when the pandemic first hit the USA and was praised for having the perfect 'mesh' of sponsored content and sensitivity to Covid-19 (Manning, 2020; Hoffower, 2020; Colon, 2020, and Chena and McNeal, 2020).

Elizabeth Savetsky is a 35-year-old female who lives in New York. She started her career with a fashion accessories blog *Excessories Expert*, after which she branched out onto Instagram. Her Instagram following started to grow when she started sharing posts about her fashionable life and her proud Jewish heritage (Mark, 2019). Her content focuses predominately on fashion and beauty, but she also uses her platform to inform her followers of important things going on around the world, especially those relating to Israel and her Jewish identity. Elizabeth also appeared in articles discussing changes in communication strategy amongst influencers brought on by the pandemic (Carmen, 2020; Connelly, 2020). She currently has 169,000 followers on her Instagram account.

The third influencer selected for this study is Sai De Silver, a 39-year-old female currently living in New York. She started her Instagram account initially for her daughter, London Scout, intending to use the platform to capture creative shots of London's fashion style. At only 4 years old, London Scout currently had over 100,000 followers. Over the last couple of years, London's Instagram account has evolved into Sai's Instagram, documenting lifestyle, fashion, beauty and motherhood content for her 324,000 followers (Dumbo, 2019). She appeared in an article on *Business Insider 2020* saying she stayed in New York at home for her family and to maintain as much normality as possible.

The fourth influencer Katie Sands is a 27-year-old female living in New York. She started a blog called *Honestly Kate* and used the platform to share her journey as a young woman living in New York City (Sands, 2020). She also states the 'honestly' part of her blog is purposeful as she lives and breathes authenticity and honesty. Katie's Instagram has over 286,000 followers, where she shares fashion and beauty trends. She appeared in articles that stated

she was adjusting her content to suit the current circumstances (Shacknai, 2021; Mullen, 2020; Grimm, 2020; Michel Feld, 2020).

1.4 Research Aims & Objectives

The research aims to identify key themes and patterns of beauty influencers communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic in the USA. Two research questions animate this thesis: *Do Instagram beauty influencers have a shift in communication strategies during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order in the United States of America?* and *How does their content change during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order in the United States?* Research on social media influencers argue that influencers play a key role in shaping our understanding of beauty, fashion, lifestyle and identity (Calissano, Arnaboldi, & Agostino, 2019). According to Biaudet (2017), ‘influencers are individuals who have the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship’. Social media influencers are everyday people who influence consumers into making a purchasing decision and anyone can become an influencer (Biaudet, 2017). Fredberg (2011) suggests that social media influencers play an important role in the way users interact on social media and companies have learnt to use this to their advantage from a marketing standpoint. Social media influencers promote brands and enhance companies’ popularity by promoting different brands and products through blogs or posts insinuating that it is something they experience or use in their daily life (Calissano, Arnaboldi, & Agostino, 2019).

A beauty influencer is defined as a social media user with a significant and engaged following endorsing specific makeup and beauty brand through shareable, digital content’ (Izea, 2017). Woods (2016) notes that the lines between a post from a friend on social media versus a post that is #sponsored can be blurred. ‘You log onto Instagram and a celebrity confesses their love of Chipotle with a burrito in their hand. Later, you are scrolling through Twitter and one of your friends tweets an image with their Starbucks Frappuccino’. He suggests that both of these are examples of influencer marketing but the only difference is that one person is getting paid for it while the other is not (Woods, 2016). This can also be said for beauty influencers on Instagram. Influencers will post a photo or video of them using skincare or makeup and confessing their love of the new products.

The increasing number of beauty Instagram influencers and the high following that they have justifies the need to look further into how influencers navigate their public image during a pandemic. According to Glucksman (2017), authenticity and persona are the two most common attributes that an influencer should aim for if they want to be successful. Beauty influencers should come across as their true authentic self if they want to attract brand deals and grow their audience (Todd, Kozłowska, & Bain, 2019). And because followers see influencers as authentic, they look up to them for guidance, reassurance, knowledge and entertainment (Killoren, 2016).

As previously noted, this research examines the communicative role Instagram beauty influencers play during a crisis. It examines how Instagram beauty influencer's content, performance and demeanour shift during a pandemic. Research has underscored that celebrities have often been used as advocates for various crises (Brown & Basil, 1995). This research will conduct a thematic analysis on four influencers Instagram posts to identify key shifts in their communication strategies during the pandemic. The objective is to develop a greater understanding of the inside world of beauty influencers and their place during a crisis. It is anticipated that influencers, their followers and other researchers will gain knowledge and insight from the findings of this study.

1.5 Thesis Structure

To address the research topic, this thesis is organised into five chapters. Chapter One – Introduction – contextualises the research, outlines the research aims and objectives, and the structure of the thesis. Chapter Two – Literature Review – analyses existing scholarship on social media influencers to gain a better understanding of influencer culture broadly and beauty influencers specifically. The chapter focuses on beauty influencers persona, persuasion communication and sponsorship/brand deals. The literature review also explores what a pandemic is and how celebrities and influencers are utilised to help advocate messaging during a crisis. The third chapter – Methodology – discusses the research methods that will be used in this study. The chapter will look at qualitative research design, and discuss why thematic analysis has been chosen to analyse the data collected from the participants. Additionally, the methodology chapter looks into the research problem, the researcher's position as well as the data collection method. Chapter Four – Findings & Discussion –

provides a critical overview of the findings from the thematic analysis performed and discusses the key shifts discerned in the communication strategies of the four influencers. Instagram posts of the influencers one month before the pandemic starting and one month during the Stay at Home Order were analysed. Chapter Four is divided into two sections – Pre-Covid-19 and During Covid-19 – as this helps to identify the shifts in content. From the analysis, seven themes emerged which are discussed in detail including Responsibility as an Influencer, New Normal, Care, Community, Health Messaging, Motherhood and Brand Image. In the Conclusion chapter, the research questions will be reviewed as an overview of the findings will be detailed.

1.6 Thesis Journey

Before I move to Chapter Two, I wish to outline this thesis's journey. When I enrolled in the Master of Communication Studies programme in February 2020, I intended to conduct research examining the persona of beauty influencers on Instagram. Specifically, I wished to explore the personality shifts from online to offline and the authenticity of the posts influencers uploaded. The research intended to use analysis of posts and semi-structured interviews to identify the online and offline persona of beauty influencers. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world including New Zealand, where I live, it changed the direction of the study. Like many others, life for me changed drastically and I was immersed and living through the struggles of the pandemic. This was when I decided to incorporate Covid-19 into the research. Two reasons motivated this: first, it made me reflect on the significance of my initial research and second, and more importantly, I began noticing influencers changing their content. I then decided to pivot the original research to focus on the communication strategies of influencers in the USA during a crisis. At this stage, I had drafted the Literature Review chapter and the change in research focus meant I had to adapt and re-write major parts of the chapter.

Following this decision, I applied to the AUT Ethics Committee for ethics approval to conduct semi-structured interviews with beauty influencers. The ethics application began in March 2020, but due to sudden lockdown measures in New Zealand, the ethics application was halted. It was picked back up in May 2020 and submitted on 2 June 2020. Due to a backlog of

ethics applications because of the Covid-19 lockdown, ethics approval for this research was received on 3 September 2020. This delay caused significant anxiety as I still had the task of contacting the beauty influencers to seek their participation. When I did contact several influencers, I had no response. Only one influencer Katie Sands responded and agreed to an online interview. I then decided that I would use the interview with Katie as a case-study chapter and conduct an analysis of the other three social media influencer's posts. I then sent Katie the AUT Ethics Consent Form and requested that she sign and return it before we conducted the interview. She did not return the Consent Form and after several attempts at communicating with Katie, without response, I decided to not proceed with the interview portion of this study. Instead, I decided to add Katie Sand's Instagram posts to the posts of the other three influencers. This was partly due to the time frame for this study as the thesis was due in February 2021, the unexpected delays caused by Covid-19 lockdowns both here and the USA, as well as the tyranny of distance as the researcher and participant live in different countries.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to conduct a literature review of the key areas and debates relevant to this research. Here, I examine debates on social media influencers to better understand what an influencer is, the online persona of influencers, and how Instagram beauty influencers use persuasion communication with product placements and sponsored advertising. The chapter also examines the relationship between social media and pandemics, focusing on how celebrities and influencers are used to help advocate messages during a crisis.

From the existing literature identified, it is clear that there has been significant research done examining Instagram influencers. Further, there has been some research around social media and pandemics, as well as celebrities and pandemics, but there has been no research done around how Instagram Influencers react to and perform during a crisis. There is currently no research that pertains to my proposed research questions on the role of Instagram beauty influencers during a pandemic.

2.2 Social Media Influencers

2.2.1 What defines an Influencer and what do they do?

According to Solomon (2018), an influencer has been a word used in the English language since the 1600s and was defined as someone who has the power to alter the beliefs of an individual. The word influence first made its way into the English language and had nothing to do with people at all but rather astrology and the movement of spheres (Solomon, 2018). But it was not until 2016 that the word influencer had a definition in online dictionaries. The term influencer became popular because it was not tied to any particular platform, which meant that the term could be used widely. An influencer currently means an individual that can affect the buying habits of others through content on social media (Matineau, 2019).

Fredberg (2011) suggests that social media influencers are a new third-party endorser who helps form users' attitudes through posts, tweets and blogs. They play an important role in the way users interact on social media and companies have learnt to use this to their advantage from a marketing standpoint. Social media influencers ~~promote brands and~~ enhance a company's popularity and image by promoting different brands and products through blogs or posts, thus suggesting that it is something they experience or use in their daily life (Agostino Deborah, 2019). An example of this can be seen in Figure 1 below, when a bottled water company in Fiji partnered with the fashion influencer Danielle Bernstein on a campaign called 'Body Wore What', where Bernstein offered 8-minute workout videos with personal trainer Eric Johnson. The idea behind the campaign was hydrating people that want to look and feel as fit as Bernstein.

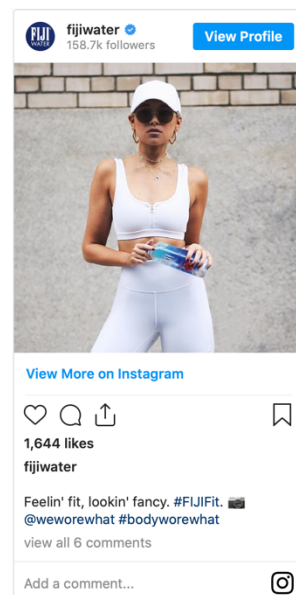


Figure 1: Fiji Water Brand Deal

According to Agrawal (2019), not all influencers are the same, or more precisely that there are various tiers within the influencer sector. For example, a Nano Influencer can have as few as 1,000 followers on Instagram, a Micro-Influencer will have between 5,000 – 20,000 followers, a Mid-Tier Influencer has 20,000-100,000 followers, a Macro Influencer has between 100,000 – 1 million followers and a Mega Influencer has over 1 million followers (Agrawal, 2019). With the rise of social media over the last decade, becoming an influencer has become a potential full-time job that is extremely popular (Biaudet, 2017). According to Biaudet (2017), 'influencers are individuals who have the power to affect purchase decisions

of others because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship'. This indicates that influencers with a persuasive audience who look up to them can have the power to sell products and services to them. While an influencer can be deemed a Nano influencer with only 1,000 followers on Instagram, Espinosa (2020) who surveyed over 300 paid Instagram influencers and 50 different brands conclude that to start getting paid for advertisements or brand deals/endorsements, an influencer has to have a minimum of 15,500 followers if they are in the fashion industry and 84,200 followers if they are in the makeup/cosmetics industry (Espinosa, 2020).

In short, an influencer can be anyone that has a following of at least 1,000 but to become a paid influencer, an individual has to have the following count of 15,000 and upwards. Companies who believe that their visions align with an influencer will partner with them by paying them to post about their products or services that the companies hope will entice followers to purchase or consume.

2.2.2 Celebrity vs Social Media Influencer

A celebrity is an individual who has built their following through channels such as television, radio or magazines (Barker, 2018). For example, Lady Gaga is seen as a celebrity as she is a famous singer who gained a following through television and radio. Celebrities often can be seen doing brand deals on their social media, which is a highly effective marketing strategy that attaches the fame of a celebrity to a brand or product (Geppert, 2019). While it is effective due to followers aspiring to be like them, celebrities lack authenticity and approachability due to their low interaction with their followers (Nouri, 2018). Celebrities also seem to endorse just about anything if the right monetary value is offered and their followers are starting to see through celebrity-endorsed content, often labelling them as artificial (Holt, 2019).

A social media influencer is someone that has grown a following and become famous through their social media profile (Barker, 2018). An example of this is Shane Dawson, a YouTube influencer with over 4 million subscribers, who earned his fame through social media. When he joined Instagram, his YouTube following allowed him to become an instant influencer on

Instagram rather seamlessly. Influencers are also perceived by their followers as being more relatable and approachable compared to celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) as they directly address their followers, which makes their followers relate to them as peers (Erz & Christensen, 2018). Social media is also an influencers main income, generated through paid advertisements and brand/product deals and this compels influencers to remain as authentic as possible to their brand and themselves (Nouri, 2018). Due to influencers creating content in particular niches it means that they have to choose brand deals that carefully align with their brand image and followers (Comcowich, 2015). Unlike celebrity endorsement that ties a celebrity to a brand, influencer marketing creates a word-of-mouth style of advertising using trusted people (Geppert, 2019). Whether it is Instagram, Facebook or YouTube influencers generate and create their own content that is often catered to a particular niche. Unlike celebrities who often gain their following as people admire their talent in music or acting, influencers usually have a following because they create content that is relevant to a specific niche such as food, beauty, health, gaming or fitness (Barker, 2018).

Turner (2006) develops the concept of celebrification to articulate the processes by which ordinary people are transformed into celebrities. He notes that the rise of reality TV has significantly contributed to this process which brings together the every day and the spectacular, the ordinary and the special. (Turner, 2006). Celebrification comprises the changes at the individual level, or more precisely the process by which ordinary people are transformed into celebrities. This transformation is a confirmation of individuality (Braudy, 1986) and consists of the embodiment of a subjectivity that unites 'the spectacular with the every day, the special with the ordinary (Dyer, 1979).

The process of celebrification can be accidental or purposeful. In her ethnographic study of celebrification amongst Instagram influencers, Tanya Yeru (2019) found that while the reasons for becoming an influencer were diverse, a common theme was they did not start Instagram to become an influencer or Instagram celebrity. The second instance is when someone becomes a celebrity from a discipline or field purposefully. While a majority of interviewees in Yeru's study did not start with the intention to become a celebrity, one individual noted that as her following grew, she decided to actively help increase it by creating

content and posting strictly twice a day to grow her audience as an influencer (Yeru, 2019). In this instance the celebrification was purposeful.

It is clear from Yeru's (2019) study that it is not always an individuals' plan to become an influencer on a social media platform. There are instances where people will start a social media account with the sole purpose of becoming an influencer, but it can also be something that slowly develops due to posting particular photos or content that people find appealing. This can affect how influencers construct their persona and use their persona as an influencer.

There is a clear difference between being a celebrity and an influencer: a celebrity is someone who gains a following in the public eye due to more traditional mediums and influencers gain their audience through content creation in a particular niche on social media. That said, the two – celebrity and influencer – certainly have elements that overlap. Celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing strategies are often similar, as they are both viewed as well-known individuals who influence a target market. However, it is the way they deliver their content and influence their followers that makes them different (Geppert, 2019). Influencers are often specialists in their field, have built a community of followers with whom they have shared values, and are highly engaged with. Due to this, brand deals usually involve an influencer creating the entire message around a product (Geppert, 2019). However, celebrity endorsements are more about being seen and reached rather than being interactive. Celebrities are given scripts and told what to do and they are there to be the face and a messenger for the product (Geppert, 2019).

2.3 Influencers and Persona

2.3.1 Persona

Persona is a vital tool for a fictional representation of a product or service (Cooper, 2020). It is a powerful aid that once mastered can help a company flourish and connect with its consumers (Cooper, 2020). Having a persona is vital to an influencer as it helps people connect with influencers as they are seen as authentic (Ots & Abidin, 2016). The success of an influencer heavily relies on their own taste and credibility as a person (Abidin, 2015) and can

have a ripple effect on their own media brand's effectiveness as a brand. Persona for influencers help mould connections, create impressions on their followers, and how they are perceived.

As with any other influencer, beauty influencers must exert confidence in their posts to assert to their followers that the claims they make about products are valid. Influencers will use certain terminology and keywords to show this such as 'this is my all-time favourite product' or 'I never leave home without it' (Forbes, 2016). This, in turn, makes their followers trust their opinion. At the end of each beauty video post, the influencer will model her face in different angles and lights to show off the makeup and products (Forbes, 2016). This can be seen in Figures 2 and 3 below which shows lifestyle and beauty influencer Taylor R's Instagram post for her brand deal with First Aid Beauty and Victoria with her brand deal with Bulgari.



Figure 2: Taylor R Brand Deal with First Aid Beauty



Figure 3: Victoria Brand Deal Bulgari

Beauty influencers also need to be relatable, which is largely what makes them appealing to their followers and helps build trust with them. Being relaxed and informal can make viewers feel like they are watching or confiding in a friend, which in turn helps them trust the influencer and the products or services they are trying to promote (Forbes, 2016).

Influencers must also be knowledgeable and helpful, and many spend a significant amount of time to become familiar with a product or brand and then produce content that can help their followers such as a makeup tutorial using certain products they want to push. This is the most popular form of content creation in the beauty influencer industry (Forbes, 2016).

The review above leads to the conclusion that influencers have to act and behave in a certain way and showcase certain mannerisms to succeed as an influencer. However, these same behaviours could be what stops them from becoming an influencer as they may find it hard to genuinely be their authentic self. This could cause them to have distrust within their audience. Additionally, this could also make influencers feel pressured to always act and behave in the same way all the time.

2.3.2 Influencer authenticity

Joseph (2016) states that authenticity is highly valued and that we often judge a person's authenticity by their passion for what they do. He argues that anyone can be passionate about anything, and an inauthentic person can easily do this. The key to authenticity, Joseph (2019) suggests, is to look at the character of the person. Psychologists definition of a truly authentic person is someone that can have realistic perceptions of reality, accept themselves and others, are thoughtful, have a non-hostile sense of humour, can express emotions easily, open to learning from mistakes and lastly understand their motivations (Joseph, 2016).

Authenticity is crucial in influencer marketing as it allows them to build a relationship with their followers and brands (Glucksman, 2017). It is a quality that influencers actively promote and is why brands value them as honest compared to traditional advertising (Kozlowska, 2019). YouTube influencer Lucie Fink points out that she thinks her success as an influencer is due to her being her true authentic self, claiming she is the same person on and off camera (Glucksman, 2017).

Brands are looking for authenticity when choosing an influencer that they wish to sponsor as it enhances the quality and increases the sale purchase intentions of their consumers. Authenticity can involve motivated behaviours which originate from the influencer's desires or passions. Inauthenticity is often driven by outside pressures that have a reward or punishment attached to it and is often determined by other people (Audrezet, 2018). However, working with brands as an influencer can compromise authenticity as they feel pressured to create content that satisfies the company paying them as opposed to creating content that they wish to make or share with their audience (Audrezet, 2018).

2.4 Instagram Beauty Influencers

2.4.1 *Instagram Beauty Influencers*

A beauty influencer is defined as someone who has a social media account that has an interactive following where they specifically endorse makeup and beauty (Izea, 2017). While a beauty influencer is focused on beauty, including products, techniques, and styles, the influencer does not need to be a model to be a beauty influencer. Some are professional makeup artists and others are amateurs, everyday people, who enjoy makeup and have built a large fan following (Izea, 2017).

It should be noted that conceptions of beauty are subjective, ever-changing and expanding to include women and men of all shapes, sizes, ethnicities and ages (Givhan, 2020). Research by Givhan (2020) shows that we are more accepting of people because it has been demanded. Further, Givhan suggests beauty is culturally mediated, meaning that what one culture deems as admirable or beautiful might not be considered the same by another culture. Beauty is also personal, and thus what one person may consider as beautiful will differ from someone else's view (Givhan, 2020). While beauty is personal and is often interpreted by 'the eye of the beholder', the literature consulted suggests that those who consider an influencer to be beautiful or who aspire to be like them will be their followers, which means that influencers still have to adhere to a certain (normative) beauty standard within their following.

Beauty influencers post various kinds of content including aspects of their daily lives, instructional videos such as makeup tutorials, and paid product placement. This is often in the form of a photo of a product or them holding up a product and confessing their love for a particular lipstick or foundation. This is exemplified in Figure 4, a photo of Katie Sands, one of the beauty influencers selected for this study, personally endorsing a product. Because of their cult-like following, followers will often trust the opinion of their authentic makeup gurus and buy the product. Followers will also ask for recommendations or seek guidance from influencers for recommended products or services. Fashion and beauty influencer marketing is highly effective as it allows consumers/followers to see what an outfit or product looks like,

which helps build trust with a brand. And if an influencer is also attractive fans are more likely to purchase the product to try and achieve a similar look (Ferreira, 2020).



Figure 4: Katie Sands endorsing Caudalieus

Brands work alongside beauty influencers to help promote their products. This often means giving the influencer the products to be promoted along with a monetary value that the organisation had discussed with an influencer. The influencer will then generate content around the product which often can be seen in a makeup tutorial which is sped up showing products they are using along the way. Influencers may also do a story about how much the product has changed their lives or upload a photo with them and the product along with a blurb about why they are endorsing it (Woods, 2016).

For brands to be able to track sales generated by an influencer they have partnered with, they often provide the influencer with a special coupon code who then offers it to their followers for a discount on the product. AX Paris, a clothing label, for example, has partnered with various influencers on Instagram giving each an affiliate link to share with their fanbase. Ferreira (2020) states that for every \$1 that is spent on influencer marketing, brands end up profiting \$18, thus making it an extremely lucrative way to enhance sales (Ferreira, 2020). Influencer marketing has become increasingly popular and is being used more frequently than other marketing strategies such as affiliate marketing, paid search and display (Foster, 2019). Foster also rated influencer marketing as the fastest-growing channel for gaining new consumers online surpassing organic search and email marketing.

2.4.2 #Sponsored and Product Placement

Influencers have a range of posts from sponsored advertisements to personal posts that they share with their online audience. It can be hard to differentiate between what is a personal post an influencer has shared and what is a sponsored post, especially if the influencer does not disclose #sponsored or #ad at the beginning of the Instagram post.

Woods (2016) notes that the lines between a post from a friend on social media versus a post that is #sponsored can be blurred. He suggests that both of these examples are influencer marketing but the only difference is that one person is getting paid for it while the other is not (Woods, 2016). Influencers can also either have product placement in the post or not. For example, an influencer could have lipstick on and put in the description of what it is or #ad or they may place the product in the photo for people to see as exemplified in Figures 5 and 6.



Figure 5: Manny MUA without holding the product



Figure 6: Manny MUA holding the product

Not all influencers use the #sponsored or #ad so their followers may not realise they are being advertised to. Nora Lisa Ewers's (2017) research on sponsorship within Instagram compared product placement and sponsorship disclosure vs non-disclosure. She points out how easily you can misinterpret or not realise that an Instagram post is sponsored, focusing on one influencer *dagibee* who did two almost identical posts. One post said 'Love my new lip balm from @velvety! My lips are so soft!'. The other post said 'Love my new lip balm from @velvety! My lips are so soft! #sponsored'. From these two almost identical posts, it is clear that the first post does not appear as an advertisement from the way she has worded it.

However, the second post which had the same wording had #sponsored at the end which then makes it clear to her followers that while she does love this lip balm, she is being paid by a brand to post it (Ewers, 2017). An influencer who discloses that their post is #sponsored will make people aware of the persuasive message behind the Instagram post which could lead to negative interaction with the post (Ewers, 2017).

Brands must approve posts, videos, stories and any other medium they have paid for before the influencer can post it. This means that the influencers have to have pre-curated content, and if the brand is not happy with the content the influencer must change it to suit the brand's needs. This can affect an influencer's persona on Instagram as a brand may want them to act or look a certain way or say certain things, almost the same as an advertisement on TV. The brand that they are working with also decides on the day and time that each post will go live on their Instagram.

In 2017, Instagram introduced a Paid Partnership tool to help influencers and brands communicate their content as well as create transparency on sponsored posts on the platform (Dreghotn, 2020). For followers, this is a useful tool that helps them discern whether a post is paid or not before engaging with the product or service that an influencer is recommending (Dreghotn, 2020). With this new feature, influencers can upload content for a brand deal and tag the brand; however, the brand can also require approval of the content before the influencer posts. Since the reveal of this new feature on Instagram, the USA's Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has created strict guidelines around influencers and brands disclosing paid partnerships.

In the USA it is illegal for an influencer to not state that if their post is an advertisement on their Instagram account. The FTC states that they are working to stop deceptive advertisements and illustrate ways in which influencers can do advertised posts on the right side of the law (FTC, 2019). The FTC says influencers must disclose product placement or advertisements so that it is not 'hard to miss'. Sponsorships need to be in the endorsed message and must not be long enough that a follower has to click the 'more' button. Furthermore, the sponsorship should not be in a group of hashtags or links. There are also strict guidelines on the FTC's webpage on how to disclose a brand deal, whether it is in a live

stream, video, photo or text. The disclosure must be in simple and clear language and must be in the same language as the endorsement. Influencers also must try the product that they are endorsing and cannot be deceitful about their experiences with a product including making unsubstantiated claims (FTC, 2019).

While the FTC states that influencers must disclose when a post is an advertisement, it is clear that some influencers blur the lines when disclosing brand deals. Influencers are faced with challenges regarding their persona and whether or not they should have their brand deal and monetary value hurt due to disclosing a paid sponsorship, or whether they attempt to blur the lines to increase the value of the post. This however can have drawbacks as well, as if their followers know that it is a brand deal and it has not been disclosed, influencers run the risk of losing followers.

2.4.3 Persuasion communication

The art of persuasion is not a new concept, but one that is still used today; it is what drives someone to action (Burcher, 2016). This is especially important to an influencer as they often have the reach but it is their persuasion that helps drive followers to buy a product or service that is being recommended. To be persuasive influencers need to have certain qualities that followers look for without necessarily realising it. For an influencer to be persuasive they should exert high self-esteem, are not pushy, know their audience, use positive body language, form connections, know what their followers like, and are genuine (Bradberry, 2016).

Kelman (1958) suggests that to be an effective communicator, you have to be able to persuade your audience and have a lasting impact on them. He states that there are three fundamental characteristics a person must have to be persuasive: authority, credibility and attractiveness (Kelman, 1958). The credibility of an influencer can be defined by the individuals who follow them and whether they share similar values and attitudes (Kelman, 1958). While Kelman wrote about attitudinal change, communication and credibility over 50 years ago, it is still relevant today in the context of social media and influencer culture precisely because influencers have to maintain credibility, have authority about the subject

matter, for example, beauty and fashion, while also delivering entertaining and attractive content that persuades people to purchase a product.

Sokolova and Kefi (2019) add that in influencer culture, trustworthiness, which relates to the honesty of the influencer and reflects their perceived concern about their followers plays an important role in the persuasive capabilities of the influencer. The authors also claim that social attractiveness, which refers to the likability of the speaker, is another key component and therefore being an attractive speaker can help change the attitudes of followers. Less socially attractive speakers are not likely to influence their followers purchase decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Millennials who are often seen as the most extensive social media users often adapt their personality and/or lifestyle to that of a celebrity influencer (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). The study also found that Generation Z made stronger para-social connections, meaning that followers who were attached to an influencer were more likely to make a purchase (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Generation Y also yielded a similar response. However, when it came to beauty influencers, the results found that followers see them as more of an addiction rather than a friendship. This is not the case for Generations Z and X who consider the friendship factor as more significant. This gives celebrities and influencers on social media platforms a powerful pull for products and services with their followers.

2.4.4 Aspirational Posts

As Instagram is a social media platform that relies on imagery to engage its users, influencers have become masters of communicating visually in compelling ways (Duncan, 2018). Influencer Melanie Duncan states she focuses on her follower's desires and dreams by creating aspirational posts that her followers like but that also seem authentic. Emotional connectivity is something she focuses on for engagement (Duncan, 2018). However, although aspirational content is something that draws followers in, keeping them engaged with various influencers, people are beginning to get annoyed with artificial, overly styled posts that are not clear (Duncan, 2018). Figure 7 below is a post from Scarlett London, where she shares a perfectly curated image stating she's shared her morning routine on her YouTube channel, but then at the bottom proceeds to state it is an advertisement for Listerine.



Figure 7: Scarlett London's aspirational post for Listerine ad

This is an aspirational post, one that displays a beautiful room, tidy, a happy affect, healthy breakfast options and so on. The image composition seeks to communicate a beautiful life, one which followers can aspire to. That said, as Hart (2019) argues, the post is attempting to sell a product unrealistically, noting that the post is trying to deceive her followers and is not working. While Scarlett realises that aspirational content helps connect influencers to their followers, it does not mean each post needs to be perfectly manicured (Hart, 2019).

2.5 Social Media and the Covid-19 Pandemic

2.5.1 What is a Pandemic & Covid-19?

A pandemic is a large-scale outbreak of an infectious disease that has been spread globally. Examples of pandemics in history include the Spanish Flu, H1N1, SARS and the most recent, Covid-19 (Hickok, 2020). Commonly, a pandemic will initially be classified as an epidemic first, which is a disease spreading rapidly throughout a region, before it rapidly grows and spreads, causing it to turn into a pandemic (Hickok, 2020). Evidence implies that we are at greater risk of pandemics because of the increased amount of global travel (Madhav, et al., 2017). Since the SARS pandemic in 2002, the World Health Organization has updated regulations on countries reporting on and responding to outbreaks to help develop a global response (Madhav, et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened with Covid-19. The infectious virus has been deemed as the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War Two (UNDP, 2020). Covid-19 is a new strain of Coronavirus which is linked to the same viruses as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and has symptoms of the common cold. It is spread through direct contact or respiratory droplets. You can also contract the virus by touching the same surface as someone who has the Covid-19 (WHO, 2020). It has been declared as a Public Health Emergency of Internal Concern (PHEIC), and because it is highly contagious it has spread throughout the entire world like a wave, with some countries coping better than others (UNDP, 2020).

Not only has Covid-19 caused devastating losses in lives and widespread illness, but it is also much more than a health crisis. The virus has the potential to damage countries social, economic and political well-being (UNDP, 2020). With countries going into quarantine and lockdown, many people are losing their jobs and are unsure when any form of normal life will continue.

2.5.2 Celebrity Advocates

Celebrities are considered instrumental advocates during a pandemic. According to Brown and Basil (1995), celebrity exposure through media can have a significant impact on the way that the general public views health-related attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. After Earvin 'Magic' Johnson announced that he had tested positive for HIV, the USA's National AIDS Hotline received over 40,000 calls which was a significant increase from the normal volume of calls. Johnson also received extensive news coverage on all national newspapers and television networks. Due to the overwhelming response, Johnson became a public spokesperson for AIDS education and hoped that his testing positive for HIV would help aid in the prevention of the disease (Brown & Basil, 1995).

Kelman (1961) noted that celebrities who are found to be attractive role models often have the strongest influence on their audience (Kelman, 1961). This is a reason why advertisers rely heavily on celebrity endorsements to sell their products (Brown & Basil, 1995). And this is why celebrities are used as advocates for change and to help communicate messages related to

various crises due to their strength as influencers. During a time of crisis such as a pandemic, people often want someone to turn to, for advice and reassurance. This was seen heavily during the Covid-19 outbreak. American celebrities took to social media and became advocates for #StayHome with celebrities including Ellen DeGeneres, Barack Obama, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ariana Grande imploring people to stay home and flatten the curve. Actress Kristen Bell for example took to Instagram and played the role of an educator, telling her followers how to correctly wash their hands, sharing statistics on the spread of the disease, providing quarantine activities, urging followers to use social distancing, refrain from ordering unnecessary items, and helping companies with donations for essential workers. She turned her Instagram account and her image into a role model for how everyone should be behaving during the pandemic.

2.5.3 Influencer culture in a pandemic

The influencer culture is one thing that has been hit severely amidst the Covid-19 quarantine in the United States. Some influencers have lost sponsorships and brand deals while others continue to thrive. There have been debates on what place influencers have during a pandemic and what their content or voice should be (Chen & McNeal, 2020; Duncan, Mizrahi & Schwalb, 2020). There have also been articles discussing whether influencers should even be posting sponsored posts at all during a time of crisis (Handley 2020)

Chen & McNeal (2020) from *Buzzfeed* said that they found Instagram a nice distraction scrolling through posts to help soothe them during this difficult time. But while some people are enjoying an escape from reality, others are hoping this pandemic will see the 'death of influencers' (Chen & McNeal, 2020). Influencer Grace Atwood has been praised by *Buzzfeed* as an influencer who has been 'doing it right' told BuzzFeed News that 'people aren't yelling at the TV asking 'why are you showing ads?' And that she is nervous because she was unsure how to proceed with brand deals. But her followers, whom she deems as a community, supported her in continuing to influence them so they could support her. She has even said that her engagements are up from what it was pre-quarantine (Chen & McNeal, 2020). An influencer's success can be defined by the relationship they build and have with their followers. Relationships between influencers and followers are founded on credibility and

trust (Ots & Abidin, 2016) and the relationship between them is of distant friends, rather than acquaintances (Chae, 2018).

Similar to Grace Atwood, influencer and author Sasha Wilkins spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* commenting that she has had her biggest jump in viewership with a spike of 500% since the outbreak of Covid-19. Unfortunately, her brand deals have dried up and so, despite the increase in viewership, there is no corresponding increase in cash flow (Lee & Sakoui, 2020). She also had a major shift in content, as visualised in Figures 8 and 9 below, where she shifts from spectacular posts of flowy dresses, all expenses paid trips to posting about mundane household chores and gardening (Lee & Sakoui, 2020).



Figure 8: Sasha Wilkin's Instagram Pre Covid-19

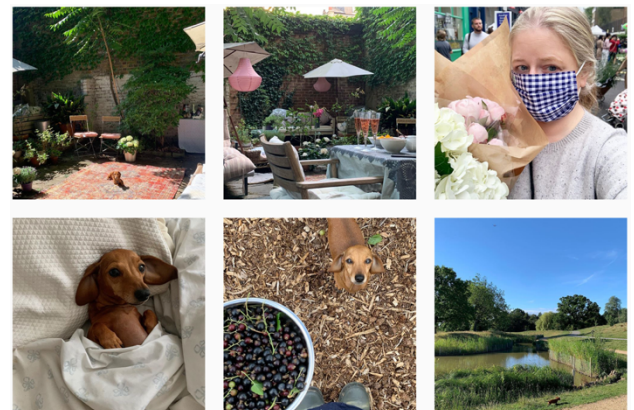


Figure 9: Sasha Wilkin's Instagram during Covid-19

This is something I will expand on further in my analysis chapter, which examines the shift in content from the spectacular to the mundane.

While influencers have been economically impacted by the pandemic, Whateley & Perelli (2020) argue that due to production companies having to shut down to adhere to social distancing measures, brands have turned to influencers to create content for them. The marketing agency *Obviously* informed the authors that it has seen an increase in the number of brands looking for influencers for content creation as they are unable to make big-budget television advertisements like they normally could (Perelli & Whateley, 2020).

While income has been lost and gained one thing that seems to be certain is that influencers have had to switch their content as they are now stuck at home adhering to the new Stay

Home orders throughout the USA. Influencers who normally post luxurious photos of their lavish lifestyle, or heavily posed sponsored advertisements are now receiving backlash and are having to show a more authentic side (Bishop, 2020). Influencers who have not been sensitive with their content have been the recipients of death threats but those who have become more 'real' and sympathetic with their posting can expect it to help them and their brand in the future (Bishop, 2020). Citing the author of *Social Media Marketing* Michael Solomon, Bishop (2020) notes that biased product reviews were threatening influencer culture and to survive influencers need to revert to altruistic messages to help people get through the crisis. Their followers, Bishop (2020) continues, look to trusted sources during a time of instability, and influencers who deliver on that will be remembered when the crisis is over.

Influencer culture and marketing is largely based on aspiration which is now flawed as you cannot aspire to have a perfect life when there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. People do not want to see influencers complaining about the quarantine while being poolside sipping on a margarita (Handley, 2020). Despite this, the Finland government has regarded influencers as 'critical operators' alongside nurses and bus drivers, as these are people who have instant access to a community of fans to help spread messages and awareness. Even the World Health Organization employed the help of influencers to secure donations for its Covid-19 Solidarity Response Fund (Handley, 2020).

In researching about the shift in influencer culture during the Covid-19 pandemic, I found that whilst there are several articles discussing influencers role during the pandemic, there has been no academic research done on the subject. This was both difficult and challenging but I nevertheless decided to examine influencers and the shifts in their content and how they responded to a crisis like Covid-19.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have conducted a literature review of the key debates and issues relevant to this research. The literature review found that authenticity is one of the most common attributes when researched that an influencer has to be successful. They must come across

as being authentic, regardless of whether they are or not. If influencers do not show authenticity, they will not gain a good audience following or receive brand deals.

It is evident that each influencer must have confidence in themselves and in the products they are endorsing. They must also be relatable, unlike celebrities, because influencers are seen as more 'real' people that their followers can relate to. This makes their audience trust them and their opinions and they are more likely to buy a recommended product. Lastly, they must be knowledgeable in their field of influencing. If they are a beauty influencer, they must know about products, face types, skincare and more. If they do not know this can not only hurt their brand deals but their audience is not going to find them trustworthy.

Deciding whether to disclose advertising as an influencer can be another challenging feat as both have negative implications. If an influencer acknowledges that they are being paid by a brand to talk about their product, their followers are more likely to have negative feelings towards the post. But if someone advertises to their followers and do not disclose that they are being paid for it, those who do realise this will often be left feeling tricked or manipulated.

From the research I have done regarding Covid-19 and the little information I found regarding beauty influencers on Instagram during the pandemic, it is clear that there is a wave of uncertainty and unfamiliarity within the realm of influencers. The influencer culture is being hurt but also thriving at the same time, and some are doing better than before while others seem to be struggling. One clear thing is that the shift in content during this unsettling time has been significant, with beauty influencers going from sharing content dolled up and out and about to be at home with their family, in their sweats with makeup-free faces. There has been a need for more authentic and real posting from the influencers as their followers look to them for guidance and a distraction during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, several persona factors come into play when it comes to becoming/being an Instagram influencer. They face many personality challenges and often have to act and behave in various ways that are pleasing to their brand deals and their followers. The strict guidelines they have to adhere to means that it is that it would be hard for influencers to maintain their own identity and authenticity online, especially during a pandemic. Beauty

influencers are now having to juggle authenticity, brand deals and their followers while being in a crisis. They are finding it difficult to find a new normal in what Instagram influencing should be like.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research method that will be applied in this study of beauty influencers and communication strategies during the pandemic. The chapter will examine qualitative research method and affirm that this is an appropriate method to be employed in responding to the research questions. This chapter will also discuss thematic analysis and underscore why this was chosen as an analytical method to critically engage with the data gathered from the Instagram profiles of four beauty influencers. Moreover, the chapter will outline the data collection and participant selection. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research method, research design, and data collection.

This research adopts a qualitative research method as it delves into the role of Instagram beauty influencers in order to explore how their communication strategies and practices shifted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative research method helps describe and analyse the meaning behind texts, images and interviews, with the main aim of measuring the social world (Gilbert, 2008) and helps to gain more depth despite the small data collection size. Additionally, as Bengtsson (2016, p. 8) points out, “qualitative research contributes to an understanding of the human condition in different contexts and of a perceived situation”. A qualitative approach will thus help gain insight into the role of beauty influencers during a pandemic, their communication strategies and the content that they produce during this time. This research method will require close observation of the subjects so that the knowledge produced is a true interpretation (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The research will use thematic analysis to analyse the data gathered.

The timeline of this research will be one month prior to the lockdown in the USA due to Covid-19 until the end of April. The pre-lockdown content showcases influencer’s normal content and communication strategies, compared to one month into lockdown. The reason this timeline has been chosen is to enable comparison between the pre and during Covid-19 lockdown posts to see how it affected the influencers communication and content. Although lockdown continued for months after, it was decided that the researcher would stop

gathering information at the end of April so that the study would not become too unmanageable.

3.2 Thesis Journey

Originally this research study's aim was to look into the persona behind beauty influencers on Instagram. The study was to look at the personality shifts from online to offline and the authenticity of the posts influencers put online with the rise of trends tricking followers into believing they are somewhere they are not. The research was to take on a narrative framework, using content analysis and semi-structured interviews to help identify key themes and patterns.

However, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world including New Zealand, where the researcher lives, it changed the direction of the study. The researcher being immersed and living through the struggles of the pandemic decided to incorporate this into the research study, combining it with elements of the original study aim. After noticing influencers changing their content due to the pandemic, the researcher made this the key focus.

The researcher then had to adapt and re-write parts of the literature review and pivot the research focus to Instagram beauty influencers and their shift in communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States of America.

Once this change was made, the researcher's intention was to do a semi-structured interview with a beauty influencer that would act as a case study for the research. The ethics application began in March 2020, but due to sudden lockdown measures in New Zealand, the ethics application was halted. It was picked back up in May 2020 and submitted on 02 June 2020. Due to a back log of ethics application because of the Covid-19 lockdown, approval for this study's ethics was delayed and finally approved on 03 September 2020.

Unfortunately, after several attempts and sporadic communication with influencer Katie Sands, the decision was made to not proceed the interview portion of this study. This was partly due to the time frame for this study, and the delays because of the Covid-19 lockdowns,

as well as the researcher and participant living in different countries. Therefore, it was decided that Katie Sands would become another participant in the content analysis for this study.

3.3 Methodological Approach

3.3.1 Research Problem

The research question for this study is: *Do Instagram beauty influencers have a shift in communication strategies during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order in the United States of America?* To answer this research question, I also mobilised a second research question: *How do their communications strategies shift during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order?* To answer these questions, this research examines the Instagram feeds of four beauty influencers in the USA, focusing on the shifts in their communication strategies. To do this, the researcher will explore the type of content produced and posted before and during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This will include examining whether they are glammed up for the camera, or glammed down, location, style, overall message, and whether it's a sponsored post.

Research on social media influencers argue that influencers play a key role in shaping our understanding of beauty, fashion, lifestyle and identity (Calissano, Arnaboldi, & Agostino, 2019). From the research done in the literature review chapter it is clear that no research has been done regarding beauty influencers on Instagram and their communication strategies during the pandemic. During a time of uncertainty, influencer culture seems to be split with some thriving and others drowning (Calissano, Arnaboldi, & Agostino, 2019). The research objective is to understand the shifts in communication strategies within beauty Instagram influencers in the USA during the Covid-19 lockdown. This study aims to find out why there was a shift in content, how they went about it and what was the outcome of the communication shift?

3.3.2 Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

A qualitative method will be used in this research as it will help interpret and understand the social interactions and communication strategies that Instagram beauty influencers make when faced with a global pandemic. The decision to do a qualitative data approach was motivated by the social nature of the study. The social nature of this study refers to how the influencers are in the public eye, and how they interact with their followers.

Qualitative research method has been used widely throughout psychology, social sciences and communication studies as an explorative technique to produce comprehensive and detailed content (Woolsey, 1986). Qualitative research involves textual and visual analysis and is considered an appropriate approach to examine different communicative materials and strategies (Steinke, Flick, & von Kardorff, 2004). It also requires close analysis of texts such as Instagram feeds, comments, photos and blurbs (Krippendorff, 2004). Qualitative methodology is useful to understand a complex social reality and the meanings behind actions of Instagram beauty influencers and why their content shifts and adapts to a pandemic (Almeida, Faria, & Andre Queiros, 2017).

A qualitative analysis was chosen for this study as it allows the research to understand the reasoning behind communications shifts during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also enables the researcher to examine the motivations and rationale for influencers communication strategies and behaviours (Atieno, 2009). This is why a qualitative approach was chosen for this study as it helps answer the research question on how and why influencers changed their content during lockdown. While quantitative and qualitative methods are both used in the field of communication studies, qualitative research explores the subject's perception and understanding, whereas quantitative looks into the statistics and numerical measurements (Malik, 2020). As communication studies focuses on the social and cultural impacts of communication, a qualitative research method is commonly used as it allows the researcher to unravel rich information in a social setting (Neuman, 2014).

In summary, qualitative research is focused on collecting, analysing, and interpreting data by observing what people do and say. It is exploratory and open-ended, enables the researcher

to work with smaller data sets, and for the purposes of this research, critically understand how and why beauty influencers post before and during the pandemic. Qualitative approach empowers the researcher to look for meanings, to make sense of the motivations of posts within specific contexts (pre and during Covid-19), and as Lester, et al (2020, p. 95) point out, generate “a deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon”.

3.3.3 Rationale and Assumptions

All the participants that have been selected for the thematic analysis are female. This was not part of the selection criteria but something that was evident when looking at beauty influencers as it is a female dominated industry. Research done by Guttman (2020) found that 84% of Instagram influencers worldwide were female, while only 16% of influencers were male. The chosen influencers for this research were originally approached for an interview but I did not receive a response. These influencers are Grace Atwood, who has appeared in several news articles regarding her content shift during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown such as *Business Insider* (Hoffower, 2020), *Cosmopolitan* (Atwood, 2020) and *BuzzFeed* (Chen & McNeal, 2020); Elizabeth Savetsky, a fashion/beauty/Jewish activist influencer who also appeared in articles discussing her shift in content; Sai De Silva who also had a shift in content during the lockdown; and Katie Sands a fashion and beauty influencer appearing in articles for her “do good” content (Shacknai, 2021; Mullen, 2020; Grimm, 2020; Michel Feld, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, female job loss rate in the USA was at an all-time high of 54% (Azcue, et al., 2020). This is largely due to the increasing burden of unpaid care which is usually carried out by women, meaning that the employment rate for them is dropping faster than men (Azcue, et al., 2020). Women on average spend two hours more than men on unpaid work every day and with the Covid-19 pandemic increasing the amount of care work, it is amplifying female unpaid work burdens (OECD, 2020). This means women are now trying to juggle working from home, looking after their children, home-schooling them as well as keeping up with household chores during the pandemic.

Beauty influencers who are now at home full time in quarantine are having to create content to the same standard while also keeping up with the unpaid work that they have to do around

the house. Beauty influencer Lisa Fennessy stated that before Covid-19 she was working on a big product, and now amidst the pandemic she is hosting six hours of school and kindergarten, cooking 100% of the family meals and trying to work a full-time job with no child care (Mroczkowski, 2020). To cope, she has had to put a lot of small tasks to the side such as Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), brand outreach and networking. Inessa Vike, Co-Founder of Vike Beauty on Instagram said that a lot of her brand deals had been pushed back, and due to the large volume of people online looking for things to do, her main focus has been on creating engaging content for her community and using the time during Covid-19 to plan for new product launches (Mroczkowski, 2020). Another influencer Christen Dominique said she has been constantly asking her audience what type of content they would like to see from her as she said it is ever evolving, with most looking for an escape from the pandemic news which has seen a shift in her normal content (Mroczkowski, 2020).

3.3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations that were considered were the influencer's anonymity. The ethical conundrum with having a study where the influencers could be anonymous meant that the study would not be as credible as it would weaken the findings. The other factor was name recognition. Name recognition is important especially when conducting a study with celebrities or someone in the public eye, such as a mid-tier influencer. The four influencers selected for this study have large followings of 100,000 or more followers and having name recognition will help strengthen the claims made. With false information available everywhere online, naming the influencers also makes them accountable. As a result, the decision was made to not grant anonymity to any of the participants for this study.

3.3.5 Researcher's Position

In qualitative research, the aim is to produce knowledge about behaviours, social structures and shared beliefs of a specific group of people. Since the methodology chosen is interpretive and less controlled, it is important that I share my position as a researcher in this study.

I have always had an eye for imagery and this is something that drew me into Instagram as a social media platform. Whilst I have an Instagram profile, I mainly fall into the category of a follower. Being a consumer, I have fallen into the trap of Instagram ads and glamourised lifestyles of influencers. When looking at doing this research project I initially wanted to examine friends and family who portray a certain lifestyle online but have a vastly different life offline. This had me thinking about influencer's authenticity and persona. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, I began to look at Instagram as a form of escapism, a break from what was really going on. During my time aimlessly scrolling through influencers feeds, I noticed a shift in style, content and communication strategies. This in turn sparked a shift in the direction of this thesis as I became curious as to why these influencers changed their strategies and started using their platforms in ways in which they would not under normal circumstances.

I have considered the various angles of this study, including that as a follower, a content creator and company. Due to this I believe that my position as a researcher will not influence the findings of this study.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Selection criteria

The selection criteria for the influencers were that they had to be a current beauty Instagram influencer with a minimum of 20,000 followers, that is a mid-tier influencer (Agrawal, 2019). Moreover, the participants also had to be currently residing in the USA at the time of the study. Lastly, they had to have a shift in communication strategies before and during Covid - 19.

Since qualitative research is based around quality than quantity, a non-probability approach was taken for the sample size, as the intention of the study is not to be statistically representative (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2013). Thus, each influencer was chosen purposefully. A purposeful sample is designed to help gather a small but powerful range of participants that hold characteristics that is known and expected in the beauty

influencing industry (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2013). The sample size for qualitative research does not need to be large in order to be effective and often has the opposite effect, losing its meaning if a sample size is too large as qualitative research is not concerned with support statements but rather provides study richness of the data produced (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2013).

3.4.2 Participant Selection

The researcher began by looking at the current Instagram Influencers that she was following. However, because the influencers that the researcher follows are diverse (beauty, health, fashion) and are international, a decision was made to widen the search on Instagram and Google to identify influencers from the USA and to focus on beauty influencers. An Instagram search of beauty influencers in the USA was first done to identify beauty influencers that have a nano (small) to macro (large) following. This process produced a large corpus of beauty influencers; from this sample the researcher identified influencers who had a noticeable change in content during the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher then narrowed this list through a Google search to identify beauty influencers on Instagram who were in the spotlight regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.

After these processes, the list of influencers who met the selection criteria was refined. Each influencer was then contacted through Instagram private message, informing them of the study and ascertaining if they were interested in participating in an interview. If the influencer had an email address on their Instagram profile they were also emailed. They were also invited to contact the researcher for this study through email if they wanted further information. In the process of identifying influencers to focus on, the gender of the participant was not part of the selection criteria. It emerged as the research progressed and as noted previously, this is partly because the beauty influencer sociality is dominated by women.

From the four potential participants that were approached, only one person (Katie Sands) replied saying that they were interested in participating in the study. There could be various reasons for this, and a major one is that the influencers chosen had a large following and do not often check their direct messages. Another reason is that a direct message goes to a

‘message request’ folder and if you have not interacted with the influencer before, it becomes harder to contact them. As noted in the Introduction to the thesis, while Katie agreed to the interview, she did not respond to the researcher’s further communication and in the interest of progressing the research, it was decided that the researcher will conduct a thematic analysis of the Instagram feeds of the four influencers selected.

3.4.3 Selection and Collection of Data

Every post from each of the four influencers within the month prior and month during the Stay at Home Order timeframe was screen shot and saved into appropriate files on a computer. Altogether the researcher collected 287 posts. A breakdown is provided below.

Influencer	Before Covid-19	During Stay at Home Order	Total
Elizabeth Savetsky	23	38	61
Grace Atwood	32	32	64
Sai De Silva	48	60	108
Katie Sands	16	38	54

Once this was done, each post was categorised into one of 4 categories: Lifestyle, Beauty & Fashion, Sponsored and Covid-19. From there, two posts were collected from each category and put into a sample folder which was then used to conduct the thematic analysis. When analysing each post, the image and the text were both analysed. This was done as the image and text are uploaded together as one post.

As the data on Instagram profiles are fragile, in that posts could be altered, deleted or edited at any time, the researcher took screen shots of every post the four influencers posted between 7 February to 17 April 2020. This ensured that the data can be returned to for analysis and that the researcher has all the posts in the event that the influencer decides to amend or delete the posts. Due to the complexity of Instagram, only posts to the influencers Instagram profiles have been collected. The decision was also made to not include comments

by followers on the posts as this would yield thousands of comments. Importantly, the focus of this research, on influencer's communication strategies, did not warrant collecting posts and comments by followers.

The data was collected systematically by capturing a screen shot of each post and naming the image file with the date that the influencer posted it on their profile. The data is then categorised into two different folders, either Pre-Covid or During-Covid. This systematic approach makes it easier to compare the two different time periods of each influencer, and helps the organisation of the data making it easier to analyse.

To help organise 287 posts that were collected for analysis, the researcher developed four categories to help segment the data, making it more manageable to analyse. These categories – Lifestyle, Beauty & Fashion, Sponsored, and Covid-19 – are not hermetically sealed, but were created in accordance to the dominant themes that emerged from each post.

- *Lifestyle*

This category was developed to include all non-beauty related posts that influencers uploaded on their Instagram feeds. These could be posts that relate to the influencers general life such as books they are currently reading, images and captions about their pets or it could be posts that are about their family. It should be noted that the term lifestyle has several different interpretations including structural (similarities and differences in cultures), positional (social structure) and individual (how individuals lead their lives) (Jensen, 2008). In this study lifestyle will be looked at an individual level, that is how influencers lead their lives, and hence posts that reflect influencer lifestyles were collated in this category.

- *Beauty & Fashion*

Beauty and fashion were a central category created as the research examines the communication shift within beauty Instagram influencers. Beauty has countless definitions with many saying that it is up to the eye of the beholder. As Holbrook (1999) notes, beauty is difficult to define. Tylka (2016) agrees and suggests that beauty is a broad concept and has various looks, characteristics, shapes and sizes. Beauty however for this category is not about the beauty of each influencer, but rather the beauty industry. As such, posts in this category includes various aspects of beauty such as makeup, skincare, fashion and jewellery.

- *Sponsored*

As influencers make a living from sponsored content, this becomes a category in itself when sorting through the data. This category also loops in with other categories such as beauty and lifestyle as often the sponsored posts would be relating to a beauty or lifestyle product. However, after analysing sponsored posts it was obvious that influencers worded their sponsored posts differently to one that was not sponsored in the same category.

- *Covid-19*

The last category that was present solely in the month during the Stay at Home Order was Covid-19. During the Stay at Home Order, all four influencers chosen for this study discussed Covid-19 and the pandemic in several posts. For a post to qualify for this category it had to discuss Covid or be related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.5 Method of Analysis

3.5.1 How data was processed and analysed

Photos and videos from the four influencers Instagram profiles were recorded from the months of February 2020 to April 2020. This timeline allowed for one month of pre Covid-19 lockdown content to be compared against one month of during Covid-19 lockdown content. Each post made by the influencer within the timeframe was documented including photo/video, caption and likes. These will then be thematically analysed to identify key themes and patterns between the influencer's communication strategies.

The data collection relies solely on information and content that can be found on an Internet social media platform. There are certain issues that are faced when collecting online data. The major one is referred to as data fragility (Kesvani, 2019) in that the influencer can change the text in the post at any time, whether it is one day later or one year later. Influencers and Instagram users can also delete posts off their profile at any time and is a common trait in users who want to change the direction of their profile. Instagram user Ellie Moore for example stated that although her profile is private and only has people she knows following

her, once a month she deletes all of her photos on her profile (Kesvani, 2019). She says she does this to have control over her Instagram as she only wants photos online that represent her in the best light (Kesvani, 2019).

3.5.2 Thematic Analysis

For this research, I adopted a thematic analysis, employed as part of a qualitative approach. The decision to advance a thematic analysis was considered in relation to taking up a case-study approach, as the latter would enable the researcher to delve deeper into the individual pivots of the beauty influencers (Dul and Hak, 2008; Yin and Campbell, 1989). While this would have been useful, the researcher was cognisant, from the initial coding, that there were recurrences or similarities in the pivots the beauty influencers made. As such, a case-study approach would have generated repetitions in the discussion of each beauty influencer, and as Idowu (2016) notes, would not have enabled generalisable conclusions to be drawn. It is for these reasons that a thematic analysis was selected.

According Braun & Clarke thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (2006, pp.79). And it is considered to be a reliable, independent, and nuanced approach in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I use this analytical method with an inductive approach where coded categories are derived from the data collected. One of the strengths of thematic analysis is that it offers the systematic element characteristic of content analysis, and also enables the researcher to combine the analysis of the meaning of texts within particular contexts (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

Thematic analysis is widely used as a qualitative method in research in the discipline of communication studies. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a foundational research method for qualitative analysis as it offers flexibility with theoretical freedom and provides support for the analysis of complex data. A key advantage of thematic analysis is that unlike other methods such as grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis or discourse analysis, it is more accessible and can be used within various theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

That said, scholars such as Nowell et. al (2017) claim that there is a lack of extensive research on thematic analysis compared to other research methods, and that thematic analysis lacks cohesion specifically in the process of developing themes. The offshoot of this is that it could lead to a possible lack of trust in the research findings (Nowell et.al, 2017; Holloway and Todres, 2003). Notwithstanding these criticisms of thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2012) argue that the capacity of thematic analysis is to locate, evaluate and discuss complex and rich data in almost all forms of qualitative research, cannot be under-estimated. Thematic analysis also allows the researcher to conduct the analysis of data with an emphasis on its context, thus ensuring that the qualitative analysis is situated (Marks and Yardely, 2004).

Thematic analysis searches the data for 'patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.86). It requires the researcher familiarise themselves with the data, generate codes and collate them into themes which are then defined. Importantly, there are no quantifiable parameters as to what constitutes a pattern (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.86). The relevance of a theme, what Braun and Clarke refer to as 'keyness' (2006. p.86) is also not quantifiable, but relies on its importance to the research questions.

To adopt thematic analysis, it is important to understand how a theme works and how it is conceptualised. Themes can be identified within the data when they share a pattern of meaning, organised around a central idea (Braun et al., 2014). Themes unite data that might initially seem dissimilar or that occurs in different and multiple contexts. Themes go beyond explicit meanings within the data and capture the implicit ideas and concrete layers of meanings that lie deep beneath the surface of the data (DeSantis and Ugarizza, 2000; Braun et al., 2019). The example that Braun et al. (2019) provide illuminates the veracity of thematic analysis. The example they use is a case study on male body hair. One of the themes that emerged was that men's body hair is natural and, importantly, a symbol of masculinity. The theme not only discussed the statements and opinions of participants about men's hair being natural to capture the surface level meanings but also explored concepts such as gendered assumptions around men's and women's body hair, and essentialised and naturalised notions around masculinity and femininity. Through this example, Braun et al. (2019) demonstrate how thematic analysis enables the researcher to uncover underlying assumption and practices are naturalised as part of a patriarchal habitus.

The construction of themes is an active and on-going process and it is the researcher's task to collate codes that are similar to identify and construct themes. The data that are coded and relevant to the respective themes are then gathered for analysis. While the data is most often gathered from participants' responses to survey or interview questions, for my research, the data to be evaluated, coded, and developed into themes for analysis emerge from the posts of the four influencers. To conduct an organised and systematic thematic analysis, it is important to be cognisant of the different phases involved in the process. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) divide thematic analysis into six phases:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data and identifying items of potential interest, which involves having a thorough understanding of the data in order to identify and reproduce important and interesting features and aspects, in relation to the research questions.
2. Generating initial codes, which deals with the systematic coding of the data to generate codes. Codes can be latent or semantic based on whether the research conducted is inductive or deductive.
3. Searching for themes involves the construction of themes as the researcher looks to identify patterns of meaning across the data that is coded. Themes should be able to work together as a whole and be able to tell an analytic story although they are ideally also stand alone and distinctive (Braun and Clarke, 2012).
4. Reviewing potential themes, where themes are checked whether they match the coded data and the entire data set.
5. Defining and naming themes, where the data are further developed to do the analysis in relation to the research questions. Themes are named and defined to provide a clear and detailed understanding of the themes and its relation to each other.
6. Producing the report involves refining the analysis where aspects such as the integration with the literature, the order of the themes, and the validity of the interpretations are considered.

For my research, thematic analysis works as method that is used to identify themes and segment the data. I used an inductive thematic analysis rather than the deductive model, where the research would be data-driven and free of analytical preconceptions. In the inductive thematic analysis approach I adopt in my study, I locate the data within wider social, cultural, and ideological contexts such as the beauty industry, platform culture, influencer culture and influencer responsibilities. In addition to enabling the data to be contextualised, thematic analysis also demands that the researcher must decide at what levels themes are to be identified – a semantic or latent level (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The semantic approach involves identifying themes within the explicit meanings of the data and the analytic process would involve surmising based on broader meanings and observations from previous literature. This approach is limiting because it does not evaluate the underlying deeper ideologies and assumptions that need to be interpreted as the themes are developed (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). A latent level analysis will attend to this by looking at the ideological, social, and cultural underpinnings that inform the data. Thematic analysis that attends to latent themes, as in my research, adopts a constructionist paradigm which attempts to make sense of the conditions that give rise to specific statements.

In a study examining destination planning and tourism, the researchers collated 194 social media posts, mainly user-generated destination images, and conducted a thematic analysis (McCreary, 2019). They uncovered the six main themes that drive destination value and used the findings to determine how place-based marketing can be productively curated. Likewise, another research conducted by Andreotta, et al (2019) examined social media data, specifically Australian Twitter commentary relating to climate change using a mixed-method approach that included quantitative analysis and thematic analysis. The researchers argued that the quantitative approach enabled them to compress the data into manageable data sets which then enabled them to make specific claims. However, they claim that the quantitative approach does not inform them of the broader social context and meanings generated through the Twitter feeds. To make deeper sense of the tweets and to understand the meanings behind the tweets, they used thematic analysis to determine how

climate change is conceived, what views are prevalent and how can climate change messaging be refined.

I discuss these two recent scholarships to make two points: first, to affirm the validity and criticality of thematic analysis to analysing social media data. Second, to suggest that thematic analysis enables me to underscore the motivations of the four influencers as they negotiated the Covid-19 pandemic. In other words, this research takes up a thematic analysis within a social constructionist epistemology, suggesting that the themes identified are socially produced (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The constructivist framing enables the themes identified to be located within a range of discourses that informs the beauty influencer's postings. This is why in the next chapter where I discuss the findings, I situate them within a broader discursive framework to enable a more rigorous understanding of the posts uploaded by beauty influencers.

Drawing from Braun and Clarke's various contributions, I identified key themes that emerged in posts uploaded one-month prior to the Stay at Home Order: curated content, the ideology of a perfect normal life, dolling up for Instagram, and a discourse of aspirationalism. These themes recur across all influencers and is not surprising given that their role as beauty influencers in a commodified world compels them to produce such posts. However, when the Stay at Home Order was put in place there was a significant shift in the nature of posts uploaded. An analysis of the posts from the four beauty influencers identified six themes as central: responsibility as an influencer; new normal; care; community; health messaging; and motherhood and the pandemic. In the next chapter I will discuss these themes in detail and underscore the ideological, social, and cultural motivations of the posts.

3.5.3 Limitations and weaknesses

Using a qualitative research method for this project does have its limitations. Given that qualitative research focuses on understanding the motivations and rationales for social interactions or experiences, it is not concerned with numerical representation (Almeida, Faria, & Andre Queiros, 2017) like quantitative research. This means that this research project is exploring themes within a small sample group and relies on in-depth understanding of why

and how, rather than the quantity of Instagram beauty influencers that have changed their content due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One other limitation is that thematic analysis is not always clear in its methods and does not assure that the selection of texts and/or images is free from bias (Jacobs, 2019).

Although there are some limitations of using a qualitative research method, the motivation for this research, to explore the deeper meanings behind the social media posts of Instagram beauty influencers during a pandemic, can be best addressed through qualitative research (Salkind, 2010).

3.6 Conclusion

A qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate for this research study as it helps to understand why Instagram beauty influencers had a shift in communication strategy during the Covid-19 lockdown. The qualitative methodology allows the researcher to understand the reasons behind actions and changes in influencer content during the pandemic. The research also employs thematic analysis to segment and categorise the data and identify key patterns that mark the change in influencer posts. Thematic analysis will help produce comprehensive content while also allowing the research to uncover the motivations that drive influencer posts during the pandemic.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the findings derived from a thematic analysis of four beauty influencers Instagram feeds as well as a discussion of the key themes that emerged. This chapter is divided into two categories pre-Covid-19 and during Covid-19. To conduct the thematic analysis of each influencer, the data was organised into categories and then a sample of posts and videos from each category were selected for analysis. To ensure the thematic analysis for each influencer was consistent, a set of questions were curated to guide the analysis of each post. The questions I employed as a guide include the following: What does the image communicate? What does the text mean? How do they relate to each other? How is this content different to pre-Covid? What are the underlying messages? Is the post curated? Are the influencers done up? How open or transparent are they? Is the post sponsored? What is the influencer trying to achieve with this post? These questions were not set in stone but were used as a guideline to ensure appropriate analysis of each post.

Each influencer had similarities and differences in their content, and all of the four influencers adapted their content before and during Covid-19. While Grace Atwood drastically changed her content to become raw and transparent with her followers during the pandemic, another influencer continued to have curated content but went outside of her normal beauty and fashion realm to include lifestyle and food posts. Another influencer glamourised the mundane and ordinary in an attempt to influence her followers to stay at home and used her activist personality to provide her followers with health messaging. All influencers attempted to do a mix of non-curated and curated images and posts, trying to balance adapting changes in their communication strategies while also keeping a part of their previous image. Based on these findings seven themes were established: Responsibility as an influencer; New Normal; Care; Community; Health Messaging; and Motherhood and Brand Image.

4.2 Pre Covid-19

In this section, posts were analysed from 17 February – 17 March 2020, one month before the Stay at Home Order being issued in New York. There are five themes identified during the analysis: curated posts where influencers have done photoshoots and pre-curated content for their Instagram feeds, the ideology of a 'perfect' normal life where influencers display a perfect version of their life while also making it seem normal, superficial posts where influencers give their followers a small glimpse into their lives, the ideology of being 'dolled up' for Instagram with a full face of makeup and perfectly picked out outfits, and lastly aspirationalism, where influencers share posts that followers aspire to be or to look up to.

4.2.1 Curated Feeds

Curated feeds are a relatively new trend that has emerged on Instagram with users and influencers curating their Instagram feeds to have particular and consistent features such as subject matter, lighting, colour palette, mood and style (Curator, 2019).

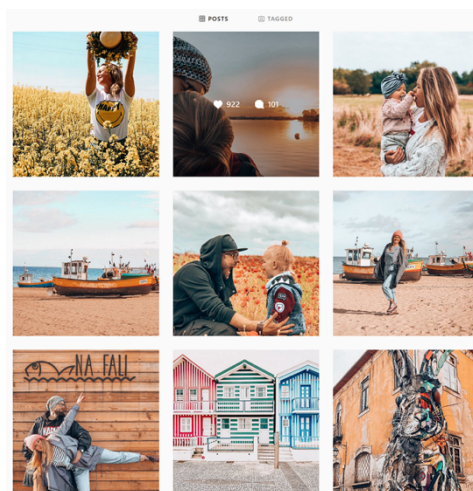


Figure 10: Curated Instagram Feed

Figure 10 above shows an example of a curated Instagram feed. The influencer has picked specific colours, styles and subject matter to blend family and travel life into her feed. To ensure a feed is perfectly curated as above, it requires influencers to plan and create content ahead of time that they can then schedule to be posted at a later date.

This was a common theme that emerged in the pre-Covid Instagram posts of the four beauty influencers. Elizabeth Savetsky, for instance, uses a specific colour palette and style with her Instagram as seen in Figure 11 below. Looking through her Instagram clearly shows what her aesthetic and style is and what kind of influencer content she uploads. She opts for pink, orange, green and brown as her main colour palette. Her style and content can be seen categorised as family and fashion. As Loren (2016) points out, a curated colour palette can help create a seamless and consistent Instagram brand image without having to strictly adhere to specific content.



Figure 11: Elizabeth Savetsky's Colour Palette & Style

Grace Atwood (see Figure 12 below) also sports an Instagram aesthetic in her pre-Covid posts; she uses neutral colours with spots of yellow and red. Her content is perfectly curated so that there are not too many brightly coloured or black and white images. From her feed, a clear picture emerges of what content she likes to post about: fashion, beauty, and lifestyle.



Figure 12: Grace Atwood Instagram uses yellows and natural hues pre pandemic.

Sai De Silva has a beautifully manicured Instagram feed where she particularly goes for neutral and black and white colours, keeping it very clean and crisp. Her content has a mix of fashion, beauty, family and lifestyle as exemplified below.

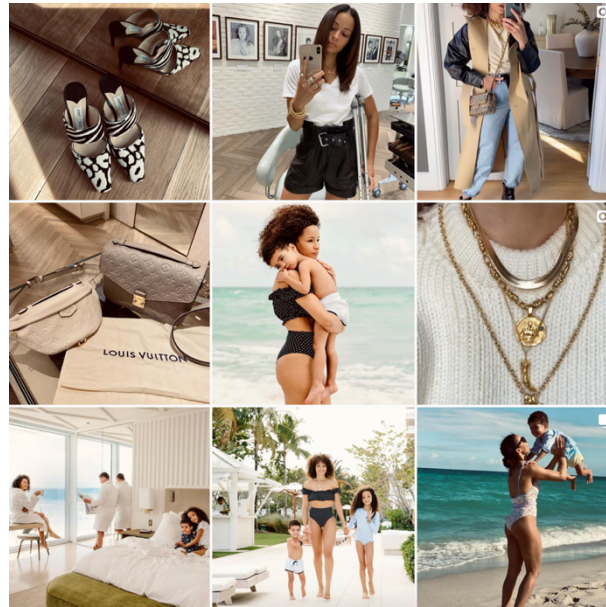


Figure 13: Sai De Silva's Black & White/Neutral Toned Instagram pre pandemic.

While all of the influencers had a curated Instagram theme, they also had their own unique take on it, tailoring it specifically with content that they like as well as content that connects with their followers. All three influencers are known for posting about beauty and fashion but do go beyond this, uploading posts about their life, family or everyday things they have been up to.

A majority of the photos that Sai, Grace and Elizabeth posted prior to the pandemic appeared to be professionally taken. We live in a world where looks matter, even when they should not, attractive things and people sell and naturally people tend to gravitate towards something they find visually pleasing (Kennedy, 2018). On a platform where someone can build an entire career, it is evident that having curated photos no matter what type of influencer you are, is important.

4.2.2 Ideology of a 'perfect' normal

Image has become everything in this digital era, and when there are millions of influencers on Instagram worldwide, you have to be able to glamourise everything you do to become noticed. Mayoh (2018) for example writing on the perfectly curated pregnancy posts on Instagram, suggests that curated images such as the ones below normalise this perfect form of pregnancy and communicate unrealistic ideals to women (Mayoh, 2019). The same can be said for every influencer, not just those who are pregnant. Influencers uploading glamourised content of normal or mundane activities help their followers see that they can be fun.

Figure 14 is a post by Grace Atwood: the first is a glamourised photo of her sitting in bed, hair perfectly done, makeup on point, wearing silk pyjamas, and looking perfect, thus implying this is how she wakes up. This is exemplary of influencers creating a 'perfect normal life'. She is not doing anything spectacular but she is communicating to her followers that this is how she looks when she wakes up. In Figure 15, Grace is reading a book in bed, again the activity itself is somewhat ordinary, but the picture communicates the message that you now have to be perfect doing anything, from waking up to reading at home.



Figure 14: Grace Atwood curated 'I just got out of bed' post



Figure 15: Grace Atwood reading a book.

This deception of reality can harm the way these influencers' followers view themselves. A study conducted by Tiggermann & Anderberg (2019) looked at 305 women between the ages of 18-30, and each participant was randomly assigned to see either a curated image or an ordinary image. It was noted that participants who viewed the 'ideal' images had decreased

body satisfaction (Anderberg & Tiggermann, 2019). Figure 16 is of Elizabeth Savetsky with her two daughters, all wearing matching styles of clothes idealising a perfect 'normal' family. In Figure 17 Elizabeth is dressed in a fancy gown, sitting in a vintage car and expensive handbag. The caption reads 'Get in loser, we're going shopping.' She also tags the designer Valentino flaunting her wealth to her followers. The image also implies that this is how you should go shopping, or at least this is how you should look when you go shopping.



Figure 16: Elizabeth Savetsky wearing matching outfits with her two daughters.



Figure 17: Elizabeth Savetsky going shopping.

Sai De Silva in Figure 18 (below) states that she is feeling confident in this outfit while checking emails, watching the kids, and asking her husband to steam her clothes. While she does state that this image is a deception of reality, she does still depict a perfect 'normal' life. She is still dressed up, has her makeup on, and looks attractive and elegant while delegating and organising her husband and kids.



Figure 18: Sai De Silva feeling confident in new lingerie.

4.2.3 'Dolled up'

Images that contain faces of humans on Instagram are natural attention-grabbing and receive higher likes and comments (Almeida, et al., 2015), making it more important than ever for influencers to be looking their best, no matter what they are doing. Being a beauty influencer on Instagram compels influencers to maintain a certain standard of beauty while also remaining authentic and confident (Forbes, 2016). When analysing pre-pandemic posts of the four beauty participants, it is clear that maintaining a certain quality of image and persona on their Instagram feeds is extremely important as exemplified in the image below of Sai out to lunch with her friend.



Figure 19: Sai De Silva with her friend out to lunch.

Grace admitted in a post during the Stay at Home Order that she usually has a photographer (@carterfish) who takes most of her Instagram photos as it is something that she is not confident doing. This means Grace would have her makeup done and outfits picked out before photoshoots being done. On the odd occasion, Grace has uploaded a makeup-less picture such as the one in Figure 20. However, she does put a black and white filter on the photo to help mask any imperfections.



Figure 20: Grace Atwood make-up free.

Elizabeth does not appear to have uploaded any photos of herself without her makeup and hair done before the pandemic. Her posts seem to be less frequent but more pre-meditated than the other influencers, meaning she put the same time and effort during Covid-19 as she did pre-Covid. Out of the four influencers, Sai seems to be the most comfortable and open with posting makeup-free posts of herself. Figures 21 and 22 show posts of Sai's that she uploaded on her Instagram sporting no makeup, yet there is still this sense of perfection in these photos.

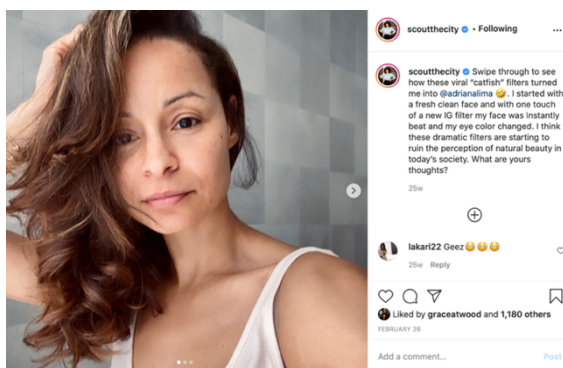


Figure 21: Sai De Silva make-up free



Figure 22: Sai De Silva make-up free with her children.

The pressure to be perfect on Instagram, especially as a beauty influencer is something that all influencers face (Jarvey, 2020). And this is also exacerbated by an ever-increasing number of influencers on Instagram and other social media platforms, which means that the competition for attention from their followers to preserve their career becomes acute. In light of this, and the broader criticism of social media and the pressure to be perfect, Instagram has created a tool kit in their 'About' section titled 'pressure to be perfect'. While Instagram states that it is a tool kit rather than a rule book, it lets people know that Instagram shows only a small snapshot of people's lives, that rarely reflects what happens offline (Instagram, 2020).

4.2.4 Aspirationalism

The last category in the pre-Covid findings is aspirational posts. While many influencers start out sharing ordinary posts, documenting their everyday life through photographs, the

pressure to grow and maintain their followers means beauty influencers are having to make even the mundane posts aspirational to keep their followers hooked.

Elizabeth's aspirational posts were predominately around fashion, sporting matching outfits, perfect makeup with her daughters, and candid photos with her husband. Her aspiration lies within the idea of a perfect family. While Elizabeth's posts can be considered ordinary or mundane, they do serve as aspirations for her followers.



Figure 23: Elizabeth Savetsky with her children at a cafe all wearing matching hats.



Figure 24: Elizabeth Savetsky with her Husband

In contrast to Elizabeth, Grace's aspirations are centred around outings and living a fashionista New York City girl lifestyle. In Figure 25, Grace posts a photo of her in a hotel room, boasting about her staycation at the Four Seasons Hotel. In Figure 26 however, her post is fairly mundane, asking followers for TV show recommendations. However, instead of pairing her image with her text, she pairs it with a professionally taken photo of her looking glamorous outside some steps in New York City.



Figure 25: Grace Atwood at her Staycation in New York.



Figure 26: Grace asking for TV show recommendations.

The need for influencers to be continuously aspirational is because we have created a world where being fake is incessantly sold as being real (Melotti, 2018). Perfectly curated images

are rehearsed, scheduled and then taken professionally: 'they don't capture beautiful moments of our life, we stop our life to create those moments,' (Melotti, 2018). Grace was not caught off guard by the paparazzi perfectly made up in her blue blazer and matching sunglasses, as shown in Figure 26; she stopped her life to create that moment with a professional photographer. However, although her followers know that they are not real moments being captured, they still get hooked and aspire to be like the influencers they follow. This creates an infinite circle where followers want to be inspired so influencers must continue to be aspirational.

4.3 During Covid-19

When the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order was put in place, influencers' worlds were turned upside down, having to abruptly adapt to the current situation and maintain a job and income despite what was happening. From the thematic analysis conducted, seven themes were established that best articulates the findings from the research on influencer's content during quarantine. The seven themes are: the responsibility influencers felt they had to their followers; how each influencer had to settle into a new type of normal; development of a discourse of care; fostering a sense of community; shift to health messaging; how influencers coped during quarantine, glamourising the mundane and having a sense of stability during a time of uncertainty; the role of motherhood during the pandemic; and how influencer's Instagram brand image, aesthetics and colours shifted.

4.3.1 Responsibility as an influencer

Being an influencer has a certain amount of responsibilities that come with the job. There is social responsibility, where influencers must have a sense of morals and ethics that they relay to their followers (United Influencers, 2020). They must also adhere to the laws around sponsored posts in their country and they must have tried and supported the products that they are recommending (FTC, 2019). Influencers in the past have predominately stuck to the category with which they align their brands, such as beauty and fashion. Before Covid-19 hit, a slow change began to appear in communication strategies with many influencers beginning to speak out on social issues they are passionate about (Powell, 2019).

When the Covid-19 pandemic first hit the USA, but before the Stay at Home Order was put in place, some influencers said nothing, while others came out with messaging around the pandemic and safety. Elizabeth Savetsky's first post around the pandemic was a picture of her still going out, but saying she was doing so responsibly (see Figure 27).



Figure 27: Elizabeth Savetsky on a date night at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak

How the text is worded, however, has a comical note to it. Elizabeth writes that she has a 'gallon of Purell and social distancing sleeves on'. She goes on to point out that this is the new day-night etiquette before telling her followers where they can buy the outfit she is wearing. The post comes off as insensitive as she is making a mockery of Covid-19 by discussing excessive amounts of hand sanitiser. With a large following, she should have set more of an example by staying home and not going out at all.

Sai de Silva's first post around the pandemic is a video of her son saying that it was day one of being at home (see Figure 28). Letting her followers know that she had begun quarantine



Figure 28: Sai De Silva posts about Covid-19 through her son.

five days before the Stay at Home Order was put into effect, Sai took a more light-hearted approach, acknowledging the pandemic but continuing as normal.

Grace Atwood took a different approach when she finally broke her silence on the pandemic. She posted a picture that was out of character: her hair is blowing in the wind all over her face (see Figure 29).



Figure 29: Grace Atwood's first post about Covid-19

She writes a lengthy post letting her followers know how she is doing with the fast-evolving pandemic, and admitting she has found this week challenging and stressful. Grace took a different approach to Elizabeth and Sai in that she decided to open up about her emotions and the challenges she is confronting, enabling her followers and creating a community of people that felt it was ok to not be ok.

These early posts marked the first major shift in communication strategies for beauty influencers on Instagram. All of a sudden, they were having to change their responsibilities as an influencer, realising that with a large following they will need to set an example for their followers. All participants quickly became more self-aware and critical of their roles as content producers. Being responsible and creating content that was aspirational to stay at home quickly became their main focus.

Once the Stay at Home Order in New York was put into effect on 22 March 2020, influencers began posting different content that focused on setting an example for their followers around the pandemic (Lu, Mervosh, & Swales, 2020). Elizabeth, for example, spoke to Ashley Carman

at *Verge Magazine* two days after the Stay at Home Order was put in place, saying she has noticed a shift in influencer content and that Covid-19 was redefining influencer culture (Carman, 2020). Elizabeth noted that health and safety come first, but that she would find the silver lining that Covid-19 has brought. This is part aspirational and part informative as exemplified the Figures 30 and 31. She is allowing her followers to see she is taking the pandemic seriously and they should too. She is also enabling her followers to give themselves hope in a time of uncertainty and doubt. Grace and Sai also followed suit and began uploading responsible messaging to their followers.



Figure 30: Grace Atwood's message to followers regarding Covid-19



Figure 31: Sai De Silva trying to hold it together during quarantine

Once Covid-19 hit, influencers were expected to talk about quarantine and the pandemic. Gone were the days of staying silent and ignoring social issues. Brands and influencers that continued to run advertisements or campaigns during the Covid-19 quarantine had to tread lightly to avoid being seen as insensitive or opportunistic (Bradley, Perelli, & Whateley, 2020).

Covid-19 has changed influencer culture significantly, making it not just about a product based or aspirational based content but also political beliefs, human rights issues and health and safety issues. Since the pandemic, influencers have been a part of major movements such as Black Lives Matter and urging their followers to vote in the recently completed USA elections (McNeal, 2020). The coronavirus marked an incredible shift in beauty influencer content, making them more responsible than ever before. This was something that was not seen on their radar previously. Beauty influencers now speak up and share their views, opinions and facts on important issues, marking a 'new normal' in influencer content. This is recognised by

Elizabeth who posted the following recognising the need for influencers to reconsider their content production (Figure 32).



4.3.2 New Normal

Having to adjust to a new normal themselves and their brand was a hurdle all four influencers negotiated. Being stuck at home meant influencers had to become creative with their content while followers were spending more time than before on social media, wanting to interact and engage with influencers (Enberg, 2020). Instagram and Facebook saw a 40% increase in usage around the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Loren, 2020). Instagram users were seeing a spike in authentic conversations around the pandemic, which was evident when analysing Elizabeth, Katie, Grace and Sai's Instagram profiles. All of the participants had to alter their content, keeping it engaging and educational, while also keeping up to date on the events relating to the pandemic. Previously, these influencers were able to create content from anywhere they liked, but now they were confined to their homes. Meanwhile, Instagram content took a shift with most followers looking for philanthropic posts.

Elizabeth for example began to post a series of Instagram TV reels where she would sing a song and upload it to her Instagram profile. This is something Elizabeth had never done before; she rarely posted a video at all. The song she debuted to her followers was one by Bob Dylan entitled 'Make You Feel My Love' (seen in Figure 33). She decided to sing her own rendition as a love note to her followers in a 'language that speaks to my soul most deeply.



Figure 33: Elizabeth Singing 'You feel my love' by Bob Dylan.

During quarantine, singing became quite normal for her, as well as more family-related posts about her children and everyday activities such as gardening. She also continued to do a mix of content with more authentic posts and the rest of the content was similar to pre-Covid, where she is dressed up and looking 'perfect'. Whilst these posts were more curated and as styled as ever, Elizabeth opted to pair them with captions that were more reflective and restrained than previously (Connelly, 2020).

Beauty influencers typically post images of themselves wearing extravagant outfits, with perfect hair and makeup and are often out and about in the city living their best aspirational lives. So, when Sai was faced with the reality of being at home, she opted to do content around family and cooking. She started a series on her Instagram called the 'Midday Break' where she would post a picture of an item of food followed by what it is and the recipe so that her followers could recreate the dishes as exemplified in Figures 34 and 35.



Figure 34: One of Sai De Silva's posts regarding her cooking series.



Figure 35: Sai De Silva doing a more 'casual' post.

Sai also did a mixture of philanthropic posts along with posts that more closely aligned to her brand before the pandemic. She tried to blend the new and the old to create a new type of normal that fit with the current crisis and her brand image. Figure 36 and 37, for example, is a post that Sai uploaded incorporating fashion and a Covid-19 friendly activity, promoting her followers to stay at home and have fun while also showing that they can still do mundane activities in style.



Figure 36: Sai De Silva glamourisation of gardening.



Figure 37: Sai De Silva sitting in her pyjamas reading.

In a post uploaded by Grace on 13 April, (Figure 38) she admits that it was hard for her to find a new normal in terms of content as she struggles with photography. She said prior to quarantine she had the luxury of being able to hire a professional photographer to do photoshoots for her posts. Once the Stay at Home Order was put in place it meant Grace not only was having to tackle Covid-19 friendly content, she was also having to try and learn a new skill, one that she was not so confident in.



Figure 38: Grace Atwood opening up about quarantine struggles.

This however may have worked in Grace's favour as her quarantine content came across as more authentic (seen in Figures 39 & 40). She started a series called 'Matching Monday's' where she would dress her cat Tyrion and herself in matching attires. Grace also began to open up during quarantine, letting followers know when she was going crazy, feeling down or when she helped with volunteering work.



Figure 39: Grace Atwood wearing matching PJ's



Figure 40: Grace Atwood doing silly skit videos.

Once April hit and influencers had been doing quarantine content for a month, their 'new normal' started to sink in, with brand deals starting up again mixed in with quarantine content and brand-specific content. Grace, Elizabeth and Sai were all featured in online articles commending them for 'doing it right'. *Business Insider* (2020) featured Grace and Sai, praising them for staying home in New York City, while many fled when the order was put in place (Hoffower, 2020). Grace Atwood wrote an article for *Cosmopolitan Magazine* stating she would not stop influencing even though people were making her feel guilty for doing so because being an influencer is her job, and without it, she has no income. She is just like everyone else, trying to survive in a time of uncertainty (Atwood, 2020). *Buzzfeed* (2020) released an article stating Grace was one of the influencers 'handling this the right way by doing a balance of pre-Covid activities and moulding it with current events (Chen & McNeal, 2020). Connelly (2020) acknowledged the good work Elizabeth had been doing on her Instagram, perfectly weaving her fashionista style in her photos but pairing it with more meaningful and refined captions.

Covid-19 impacted influencers content and set creative limitations as influencers had to juggle content creation with family, household chores, cooking and the worry and stress of a

global pandemic. Sai, Elizabeth, Katie and Grace all made attempts at creating a new normal through their content, introducing different segments that creatively sparked joy, while also allowing them to stay in their brand.

4.3.3 Care

A poll tracking the effects of mental health concerning Covid-19 run by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 45 per cent of American adults confirmed they have had trouble with their mental health (Achenbach, 2020). The Kaiser Family Foundation which runs a federal emergency hotline saw a 1,000 per cent increase in April 2020 compared to the same time last year (Wan, 2020). People started turning to social media as a form of therapy, with many therapists hopping onto Instagram to share helpful advice from self-soothing techniques to dealing with working from home during Covid-19 (Breedon, 2020). Before long, influencers began doing Instagram Live therapy sessions, including Katie Sands.

Katie decided to do a live therapy session with her therapist Stephanie Lesk which turned into a weekly event which she entitled 'Therapy Thursdays' (seen in Figures 41 & 42). Every Thursday Stephanie and Katie would do a live therapy session for one hour, where they would discuss topics that followers had sent in previously to discuss (Carman, 2020). The sessions would stay live on her Instagram story feed for 24 hours.

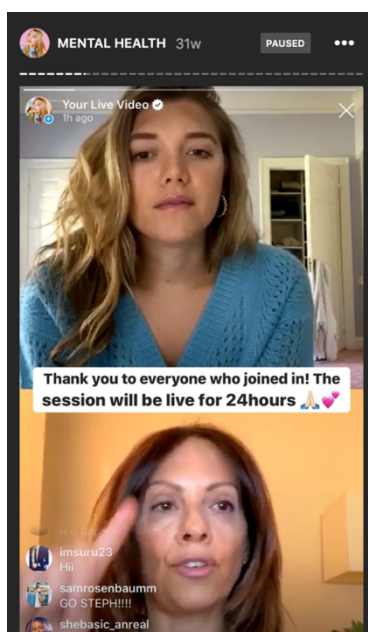


Figure 41: Katie Sand's live therapy session with her therapist.

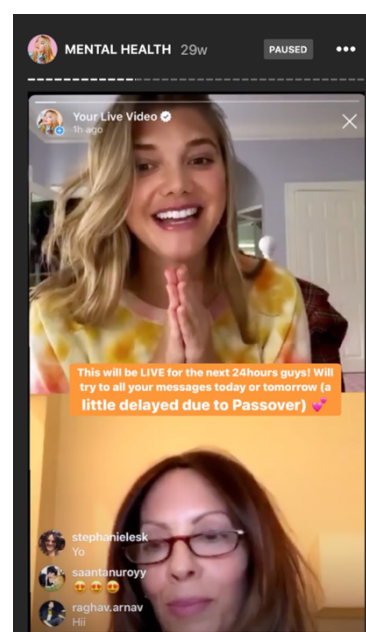


Figure 42: Katie Sand's live therapy session with her therapist.

In an article on *Guest of a Guest*, Katie was deemed as the ‘most thoughtful influencer’, where she pledged that 10% of all her sponsored posts would be donated to the local hospitals in Long Island and New York City (Grimm, 2020). She was also able to raise over \$40,000 with the help of her Instagram audience to the Northwell Covid-19 Emergency Fund. Later, Katie turned her therapy session videos along with positive messaging into a permanent story reel on her page titled ‘Mental Health’ (seen in Figure 43).

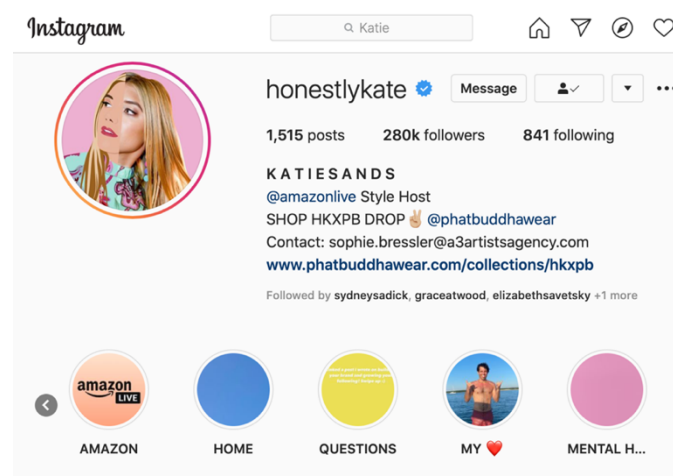


Figure 43: Katie Sand's Instagram profile with 'Mental Health' story reel.

This form of therapy that Katie does with her followers also intertwines with the responsibility as an influencer theme discussed previously. While it is therapeutic for her and her followers, it shows that Katie feels she has a responsibility as an influencer to help her community of followers through these uncertain times. Katie was not the only one who shared various types of therapy videos on her Instagram platform. Whilst sessions with a therapist are a more literal form of therapy, other forms such as art and singing can also be seen as therapeutic. Art has been known to enhance mental health and treat psychological disorders as creative expression can have healing properties (Cherry, 2020). In a study done by Petrillo and Winner (2011), they found that participants who drew a picture based on their feelings after seeing a tragic image had a more positive mood than those who drew copied shapes.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, beauty influencers began to upload content around mental health and therapy, using Instagram as a platform to help negotiate mental health issues. Another theme that came through in the findings is influencers promoting and practising self-care. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people faced mental disorders such as grief, panic, fear and difficulty sleeping often caused by watching too much news around Covid-19 (Badot & Santana, 2020). Katie, Elizabeth, Sai and Grace all added self-care into their communication strategy during the pandemic on more than one occasion. The research found that the beauty community on Instagram has become the voice and movement behind self-care. Self-care was an appropriate messaging for these beauty influencers to do, given their background in beauty and skincare.

Using journaling and art form such as pictures or photographs can be therapeutic for people especially those who are going through or have been through a crisis. A study done by (McCann, 2015) found that students who had gone through trauma or are experiencing a crisis felt better about themselves after doing art journaling. Traditional journaling without art form has also been proven to be helpful with people who have gone through a stressful event. Lutgendorf & Ullrich (2002) studied 122 students who had gone through a traumatic or stressful event. Those that wrote about cognitions and emotions of the event they went through were able to have a deeper awareness of the positive benefits of the events.

It is only natural that many influencers turned to art and creative activities to soothe and heal the effects of the pandemic. Elizabeth Savetsky shocked followers when she uploaded a video of her singing, something she had never done before. She says singing is the love language to her soul and with her performance, she is hoping to give hope to her followers. This is the first time at the beginning of the pandemic that Elizabeth tried to reach and connect with her followers on a deeper level. The black and white filter (as seen in Figure 33) gives the video a timeless feel and is the first time Elizabeth has let down her shield, showing her audience a more vulnerable side of her. It was a big hit with her followers and Elizabeth continued singing on an almost weekly basis, continuing to inspire and encourage her audience to get through this hard time with her.

During quarantine, Sai began to do her own form of therapeutic creativity by creating comedy Tik Tok videos and getting innovative in the kitchen. Grace also captioned her matching ensembles with her cat with very statements such as: 'At Home With My Cat', 'Home Alive', 'Insanity Ward', and 'Home Alone, reiterating to her followers that she is at home, to follow her example, as well as relaying the fact that her actions may be unorthodox if the pandemic was not going on. Each participant analysed had their own variation of a creative outlet that they used to help them and their followers get through the Covid-19 pandemic; whilst each creative activity was different, they all did the same thing and this became a coping mechanism and a distraction for what was going on around them at the time.



Figure 44: Grace Atwood practicing self-care.

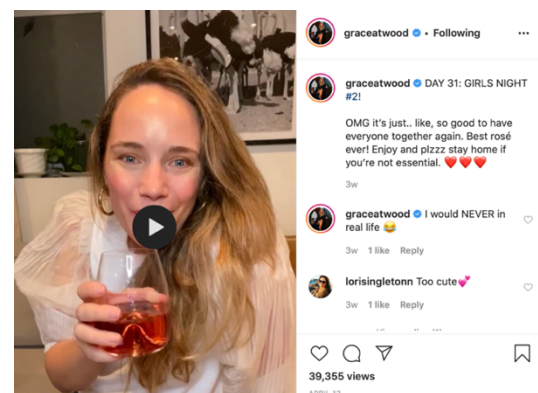


Figure 45: Grace Atwood practicing self-care with a girl night in.

With the shock of the sudden Stay at Home Order and large lists of restrictions, self-care took a back seat with many struggling to get out of their pyjamas in the morning. Many people opted to watch the news every hour and scroll on social media, getting lost in the drama of the pandemic (Geisinger Health, 2020). However, taking care of ourselves mentally and emotionally plays a big role in our overall health, with studies showing that only two weeks in quarantine is enough to have serious mental health repercussions such as PTSD, depression, confusion and anger (Geisinger Health, 2020). Influencers began to do their part to remind their followers to practise self-care for their health and wellbeing, and inspiring them to get up and get motivated.

Self-care can mean various things, not just showering and getting ready for the day but it can be physical care such as exercise and social gatherings or on a deeper level such as emotional and spiritual well-being (Caldwell, 2020). As the participants of this study are predominately

beauty influencers, to them self-care meant skincare, getting dressed out of your pyjamas and even dressing as if you are going to work. For Grace Atwood for example, self-care meant several things, whether it was getting dressed to go to work in the lounge, having a girl's night over the Internet with her close friends, or having a bubble bath with a book. This was a way for Grace to wind down and de-stress but also keep herself motivated during quarantine (see Figures 44 & 45).

Katie Sands had a different approach when it came to self-care. She was known as one of the influencers to follow for motivation (Carman, 2020), and opted to dress up every day and do her makeup as she would normally if quarantine was not happening. She also used her Instagram platform to help others with self-care by sharing posts emphasising the importance of mental well-being, family and support networks during quarantine (Figure 46). And when



Figure 46: Katie Sands after a digital detox.



Figure 47: Katie Sands discussing social distancing with her followers.

social media began to run her life during the Stay at Home Order, she opted for a 48-hour digital detox for her own mental well-being (Figure 47).

Part of Sai's form of self-care was to remain as aesthetically normal as possible on Instagram as she could (Figure 48). Most of her posts sported fabulous lighting, perfectly manicured home shots, perfect kids and outfits. She also started to glamourise everyday activities around the home, to make them seem more appealing, to herself and her followers.



Figure 48: Sai de Silva with her kids reading.

Figure 48 is an image of Sai and her two children London and Rio. The image at first glance looks like a beautifully kept home, where they are all reading on a perfect morning. The text that accompanies the image states that her house has been taken over by whiny versions of herself and to bear with her if anyone has tried to get in contact. The text is trying to convey that her life has been thrown upside down with her trying to keep up with her kids, but the image shows that they are behaving quite well and appear to be perfect children.

She also glamourises gardening as seen in Figure 49. The image could be straight out of an issue of *Vogue* magazine, which shows Sai and her daughter London dressed up in 70s attire while gardening. She captions the image asking her followers what chores they are making their kids do. This is a typical thing that Sai does, she posts a glamourised version of herself or her family, but to make it relatable to her followers she pairs it with captions that are more down to earth.



Figure 49: Sai De Silva gardening in a fashionable clothing with her daughter.

4.3.4 Community

Pre-Covid, the influencer community was more superficial. Influencers would post products or aspirational posts for followers, who would then online to look for products the influencers are promoting. Influencer culture shifted from aspirational content to a community focus and a focus on how influencers are living their Covid-19 quarantine lives (Sucui, 2020).

During quarantine, millions of people were all going through the same thing, quarantines and being stuck at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A sense of community was fostered as people began to feel connected to influencers and celebrities who went through the same struggles as everyone else. Instagram influencers became a place that people could turn to for comfort, inspiration, and togetherness (Sucui, 2020). Posts that once inspired people such as travel photos or luxurious houses were now scrutinized, being labelled as tone-deaf. Luxurious quarantines became a term that had people disgusted, as people pivoted towards influencers who were more authentic and raw about their quarantine life (Murray, 2020). A theme that came up when examining the data was the length of the posts. Before the Stay at Home Order was put in place, the four influencers posts were shorter in length, and often superficial, trying to sell a product or make it seem more relatable to their audience. During the quarantine, beauty influencers began to open up about their life and allow their followers into their life.

Elizabeth Savetsky has been known to do lengthy posts discussing her religion and Jewish heritage; however, during Covid-19 she began to allow her followers into her life. She lets her followers know how she is coping during quarantine, what she is thankful for, and how the pandemic has changed her life in more than one way. She posts about the difficulties of no longer being able to hide behind work or social engagements and how it has helped her realise certain priorities in her life. According to Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Pennebaker (1988), this is a common response when faced with a dilemma or a situation that scares or infuriates us, and is a way to negotiate stress and anxiety. Their research found that sharing negative emotions with someone can help the healing process by reducing emotional and physical distress. Similarly, research done at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) found that by

putting feelings into words, a process which they call 'affect labelling' helps relieve negative emotions (Lieberman, et al., 2008).

According to Ravenscraft (2020), when Covid-19 hit, influencers either chose to fight by posting about their lives throughout quarantine or chose flight and became absent on social media altogether. All of the participants in this study had a fight response to the pandemic. Grace Atwood began writing long posts about how she was coping during the pandemic, opening up about difficulties of learning to be self-sufficient in everything she does including photography for her Instagram (seen in Figure 50). Moreover, she opened up to her followers when she had a bad day and was not feeling the best mentally. In effect this showcases her vulnerability, making her seem ordinary, one of us.



Figure 50: Grace Atwood letting her followers into her quarantine lifestyle.

Katie Sands, likewise, who posted predominately about fashion and beauty, began to open up to her followers about quarantine and the importance of mental health and well-being, and ways in which you can connect to family and friends virtually. She even told her followers how naïve she had been, thinking that Covid-19 would be a two- or three-week ordeal, and how that impacted her emotional state (seen in Figures 51 & 52).



Figure 51: Katie Sands admits to followers she thought covid-19 wouldn't be a big deal.



Figure 52: Katie Sand's opens up about mental health.



Figure 53: Sai De Silva only dressing from waist up for quarantine work calls.

Each influencer began to let their followers into their daily lives a bit more, allowing a sense of community to develop between them and their followers. It was something that everyone could talk about and relate to as it was an international pandemic. While Kate, Grace and Elizabeth talked about the raw and realness of their pandemic journey, Sai took a slightly different approach for herself and her followers. She did not ignore the fact that the pandemic was happening, but she took a more light-hearted approach to her posts when discussing the topic.

In one post Sai discusses the pandemic by stating she never was the cooking type but now during the pandemic, you will find her spending 6 hours or more in the kitchen. She then opens an invitation to her followers saying she is going to do a cooking segment on her Instagram where she will post the ingredients and recipe before doing an Instagram live where everyone can cook at the same time. Helping people feel 'less isolated' was her motto. This is a way that Sai created a community on her Instagram that worked for her and her followers. She uses humour to help create togetherness, such as in Figure 53 when she lets her followers know she only got dressed from the waist up, one of the benefits of working from home.

4.3.5 Health messaging

During the pandemic, there was a huge uprise in health messaging, with influencers telling their followers to stay home, wash their hands, improve self-care and mental health, social distancing and mask-wearing. Influencers felt that it was their place and responsibility to help spread and educate through health messaging on their Instagram feeds.

Katie Sands made a heartfelt plea for her followers to stay at home and for all the others that are unable to stay at home such as healthcare workers, grocery-store clerks, government officials and shipping workers to practice safety measures (Figure 54). She also did a live video on her platform followed by a post doing a mask giveaway while educating her followers on the importance of mask-wearing during the pandemic (Figure 55). This is particularly significant given that masking has been politicised in the USA. On top of these, Katie did posts around mental health and therapy and wrote that we should use this time during quarantine to work on our mental health.



Figure 54: Katie Sands asking followers to stay home and stay safe.



Figure 55: Katie Sands promotes mask wearing with giveaway.

Like Katie, both Grace and Elizabeth also pleaded to their followers to adhere to the health advisory. Grace, for example, stressed the importance of social distancing, saying it is not



Figure 56: Elizabeth Savetsky shares health messaging with her followers.

about you, but it is about stopping the spread and not putting others in danger. She tags her location as 'Don't be Stupid' which became part of all her subsequent posts. Unlike the others, Elizabeth shared information that her cousin, who has a PhD in science, informed her that the

official Covid-19 diagnosis in the USA is only 10% of people who carry the virus. She then goes on to state how many people she knows who have the virus and the struggles they are going through. She uploads this healthcare message with a perfectly curated image of her on the couch with magazines, junk food and coffee (see Figure 56 below).

This could be her way of relaying that she is doing her part by staying home, but one could argue that her post would have more of an effect with a more serious image, given the information she was sharing. Elizabeth also shares her top tips for coping during the quarantine and mental health awareness such as turning off your phone, not watching the news, but picking up a book, breathing and letting anxiety take a rest (Figure 57).

Of the four beauty influencers, only Sai did not post any form of health messaging on her channel. Whilst she did do posts regarding new activities/hobbies she was doing, none of the posts related to providing awareness on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Professionals believe that it is important for all platforms to report on the virus including health authorities, government and the media, including social media such as YouTube and Instagram, stating that it aids the spread of information to a wider audience set (Finset, et al., 2020). However, they do admit that viewpoints and information would be varied and unprecedented and having accurate and factual knowledge of the pandemic would help keep the messaging consistent. Keating, Malescki & Safdar (2020) suggest that a way to counter the spread of misinformation is to provide social media influencers with risk management information and communication principles to improve public message responses.



Figure 57: Elizabeth Savetsky promoting self-care.

The Texas Department of State Health Services for instance quickly contacted local influencers to help educate the public on the dangers of Covid-19. This was one of the first U.S.

government entities to use social media influencers as a way to spread information throughout their community (Ware, 2020). They created a hashtag, #HealthyTexas, and ran a campaign that went from March to August 2020. The influencers they employed received over 33.5 million views on TikTok and 1.1 million views on Instagram, managing to not compromise on quality, accuracy and health messaging along the way (Ware, 2020).

The other forms of health messaging that were found included, getting up and getting dressed for the day, trying new things, and creating a sense of normalcy during unstable times. Examples of this is Sai doing her new cooking segment, even though she admits cooking was never her 'thing' as a way of coping during quarantine. Sai also did various posts on getting dressed for the day, even if it was just for a zoom call or to go to the lounge. Sai tried to keep as much normality in her online life as possible, with the adjustment of content due to being stuck at home. Grace also did a lot of self-care posts, doing skincare and makeup routines during quarantine as well as matching ensembles with her pet cat. Elizabeth and Katie tried to keep their online life as normal as possible with Katie continuing her job from her walk-in closet for her job as a Style Host for Amazon Live, and Elizabeth continued with dressing up herself and her kids and doing activities throughout the day.

4.3.6 Motherhood

Gender and motherhood were not something that the initial research study was going to look at, but when analysing the data gathered it was evident that motherhood played a significant part in the pandemic. The mothers that were lucky enough to keep their job due to Covid-19 were faced with juggling childcare, home-schooling, cooking, and cleaning while still doing their work from home (Andrews-Dyer, Gibson, Joyce, & McCarthy, 2020). The *New York Times* published an article by Bennett (2020) stating that we unfortunately still live in a society where most of the domestic tasks fall on the mother, with one woman interviewed said she felt as if she had five jobs during the pandemic, leaving mothers around the United States and the world exhausted. On top of that, it is women that make up the majority of people who look after sick or elderly family members (Bennett, 2020).

With the increase in unpaid work that mothers were suddenly faced with, many working mothers were left staying up late into the night to finish their paid jobs (Forde, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic sent a wave of job loss/unemployment predominately affecting women, so much so that specialists are referring to the crisis as a 'she-cession' (Shaw, 2020). Motherhood over the years has been seen as a liability in the workforce and during the pandemic that became more evident than ever. With mother's torn from two ideologies: 'the ideal worker' and 'the good mother' (Shaw, 2020).

Two of the influencers in this study – Sai and Elizabeth – are mothers. When analysing their data for this research it was evident that they were dealing with issues that the other two participants were not. While Grace and Katie both had their challenges, Elizabeth and Sai were additionally dealing with being mothers to young children. This meant that they were now having to look after their children full time, do all the cooking and cleaning which is always more of a task when someone has children, and on top of that they were trying to do their jobs as Instagram influencers.

When the pandemic first started and the Stay at Home Order had been announced, Elizabeth posted that she had a Master's degree in Education, but she never thought she would need to use it until now. By saying this she is letting her followers know that she will be teaching her kids at home, just like the rest of the mothers who had to go into quarantine. This post also allows her followers to see that she is not just an Instagram influencer, that she too will be doing what everyone else is doing and going through the same struggles. Elizabeth also posted gardening activities her kids were doing to help pass the time in quarantine whilst also being educational, as well as stating how her daughters have endless energy but make for great helpers.

Sai became quite vocal during quarantine about her having to juggle motherhood in addition to her other responsibilities. Her overall style with posts can be nonchalant and humorous, which can have a calming effect on followers who are going through the same things. Figure 58 is an image that Sai shared of her perfectly curated kids sitting seamlessly, entertaining themselves, whilst she shares to her followers that she may be behind in emails and other work-related activities due to her children taking over. In a post that she shared later that

same day, she shows her followers a daily routine she has created, which involves doing everything for the kids in the morning in terms of their education and teaching (Figure 59). She then states that when the kids are having a break, she will do her work. It shows how little time she has amongst her other duties to be able to do her job: content creation on Instagram.

A post shared several days into quarantine shows a bird's eye view of Sai's magazine-ready kitchen with the caption stating that she now spends six hours in the kitchen every day, something she never did prior to quarantine. This is a typical motherhood stereotype and a job that often falls on mothers, to cook and prepare food for the family. For whatever reason Sai was forced to step up and take responsibility. While her husband is working, Sai is cooking, teaching, entertaining, cleaning and working. This seems hardly fair, but the inequality around unpaid work for centuries has fallen on women, with women spending disproportionately more time doing unpaid work than men (Ferrant, Nowacka, & Pesando, 2014).



Figure 58: Sai doing morning routine and work with her children.

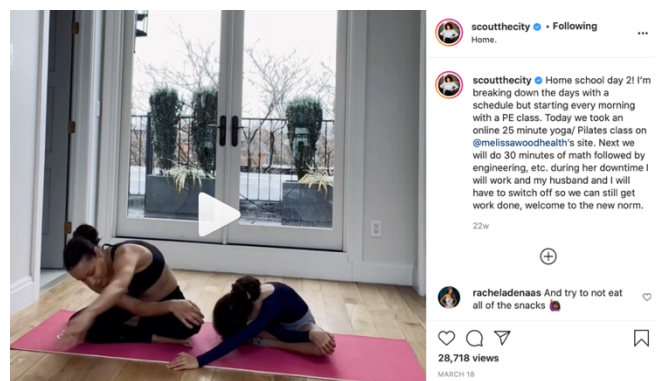
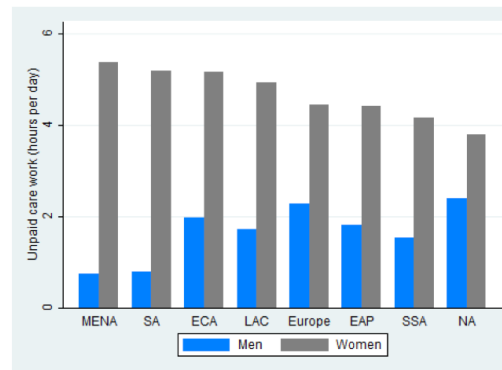


Figure 59: Sai De Silva discussing working full time while being a mother

A study done by Ferrant, Nowacka & Pesando (2014) shows that women do significantly more unpaid work than men in countries all over the world as seen below. They also argue that gender inequalities in unpaid work are the reason why there are gender gaps in the workforce. It also suggests that due to women having high amounts of responsibilities as opposed to men, they are more likely to partake in 'occupational downgrading' where women choose jobs that are below their skill level or accept poorer work conditions in exchange for flexibility (Ferrant, Nowacka, & Pesando, 2014).



Note: This chart presents the average hours per day spent on unpaid care work by women and men by regions of the world: Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia (SA), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ECA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), East Asia and Pacific (EAP), Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and North America (NA).

Source: OECD (2014), Gender, Institutions and Development Database.

Figure 60: Chart shows amount of unpaid work that men and women do.

Despite the gender inequality in unpaid work, especially during quarantine, Sai used her unpaid duties to her advantage, incorporating her unpaid work with her paid work. Whilst she was spending six hours in the kitchen every day, she decided to monetise this time by creating a cooking segment on her Instagram account. She would go live on Instagram while cooking, while also sharing the recipe and final creation on her Instagram feed for her followers. A month later and Sai had shared and created so much content around cooking that she believes that she might even create an e-book with the diverse range of recipes she had produced. Sai also shared with her follower's days of success with her kids, even the small victories such as getting her kids to brush their teeth without arguing (Figure 61). She also shared and asked her followers if they did similar 'mum things' during quarantine. In Figure 62 she says she is spending time with her 'threenager', a term that refers to a toddler who acts out similar to a teenager, and asks if she is not the only one who lets her kids stay in their pyjamas all day at home. This shows her followers that she is also just a mum trying to figure out new ways of life during uncertain andprecedented times.



Figure 61: Sai De Silva brushing her teeth with her daughter.



Figure 62: Sai De Silva spending time with her 'threenager'.

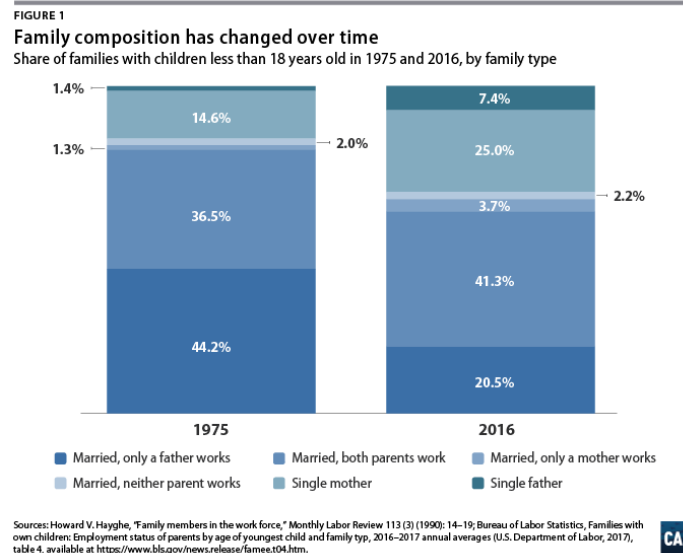
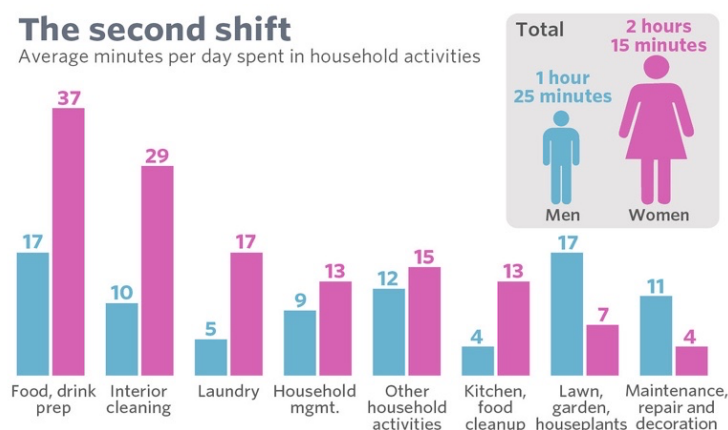


Figure 63: Family Composition over time (Glynn, 2019)

According to Glynn (2019), a majority of women who work full time alongside their spouses are still expected to keep up with the unpaid work of looking after the house and children. Figure 63 shows that over the last forty years, the number of women who have entered the workforce has increased significantly, however, Figure 64 also shows how much more unpaid work women are still doing as opposed to men such as cleaning, cooking, laundry and other household chores.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Figure 64: The second shift (Berman, 2020)

Women have been disadvantaged in the workplace for decades due to them being seen as an 'un-ideal worker' compared to men and women who do not have children (Burgess, 2013). Social theories suggest that men and women think differently in social situations because of what society has told them is normal (Eagly & Steffen, 1984), and this explains why during the pandemic, women often take on the role of carer.

4.3.7 Brand Image

According to (Mavonich, 2016) there are three different types of Instagram photos that users generally upload. Casual are photos taken most often by the user-created for friends and family. Casual focuses on privilege as opposed to being aesthetically pleasing. Professional photos are deemed ones that a photographer takes competing for attention with other photographers. Designed photos are typically the ones influencers use, where they create an aesthetically pleasing photo that is specifically designed around their lifestyle or a product and are part of a peer group on Instagram, i.e., influencers. Photos that are designed such as the one in Figure 65 are taken and edited so that they have a distinct style and look, which is commonly called the 'Instagram Aesthetic'.

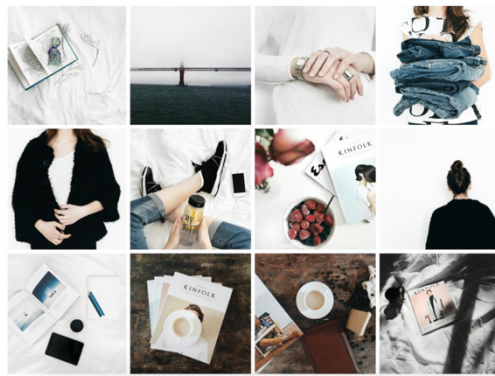


Figure 65: Examples of Designed photographs with a single author (Manovich, 2016)

Having a particular well thought out aesthetic for your brand or Instagram profile attracts more followers (Danao, 2020). It is equally as important to have an Instagram theme to complete your brand image and this could range from travel and business to fashion and beauty. However, some influencers choose to have an overall aesthetic and post about anything in their life rather than picking a specific theme (Danao, 2020).

Colour theory is nothing new to the technologically advanced world we currently live in. It has been used in branding for decades and is considered one of the most powerful tools (Talaie, 2013). Research done by the University of Loyola found that when colour is used correctly, it can increase brand recognition by 80%. It was also suggested that colour can contribute to 85% of the reason why someone will choose a product over another (Popa, Popescu, Radiana,

& Tamba-Berehoui, 2013). Psychologists (Palmer & Schloss, 2010) performed a study asking participants to rate 32 colours in terms of how much they liked the colour. Results showed the bright, highly saturated photos were preferred over pastel or muted hues of the same colours.

However, during Covid-19, it became harder for beauty influencers to have access to luxurious locations and professional photographers, making it difficult to stay in line with their brand image. A clear colour theory and designed Instagram feed can be seen in Figure 66.



Figure 66: Grace Atwood's Instagram aesthetic pre covid-19.



Figure 67: Grace Atwood's Instagram aesthetic during Covid-19.

The colours are predominately greens and yellows which signify optimism, cheerfulness, balance and growth (Scott-Kemmis, 2018). She also has a pop of red in her feed which can signify energy, ambition and passion (Scott-Kemmis, 2018). However, as exemplified in Figure 67 a clear shift in her perfectly curated aesthetic is noticeable.

Colour theory and themes were thrown out the window, and it is clear Grace's brand image shifted during the pandemic. Instead of carefully picked colour palettes she posted without paying attention to colour theory during the pandemic. She posts with an array of colours and with messy backgrounds, as opposed to the clean-looking spread in Figure 66.

Sai De Silva managed to maintain her colour theory and aesthetic on Instagram closely to what it was prior to the pandemic. As seen in Figure 68, during the pandemic there is less red being presented than it was pre-Covid-19, suggesting that her passion and energy decreased

throughout the pandemic. Her Instagram theme shifted, and instead of being dressed up fashionably walking the streets of New York and attending lavish events (Figure 68), she began posting lifestyle content such as eating healthy at home and playing with her kids (Figure 69).



Figure 68: Sai De Silva's Instagram aesthetic pre Covid-19.



Figure 69: Sai De Silvas Instagram aesthetic during Covid-19.

The pandemic marked a significant shift in communication strategies for beauty influencers. Due to being abruptly put into a nationwide quarantine, there was an emergence of a new communication strategy, but a continuation of brand image. Sai decided that her aesthetics were the most important part of her brand communications so she continued doing that while altering the content, and Grace decided that her theme and content were more important than her aesthetic. Katie Sands managed to continue her Instagram colour aesthetic while also continuing similar brand content. However, she became an advocate for mental health and therapy, even going as far as doing live therapy sessions with her therapist using the Instagram live feature. She also made a story highlight on her Instagram profile that she titled 'Covid-19' that had job listings, statistics on the pandemic in the United States and more. This was going to be discussed in detail in the findings section, however, Katie deleted the entire highlight story before the researcher was able to collect the data for it. It is not clear why Katie decided to delete this off her profile, but with many influencers going back to their original Instagram aesthetic and theme once the Stay at Home Order was lifted, this is highly likely the reason why.

The evidence in this chapter shows a clear shift in influencers communications strategies while attempting to partly align with their brand identity. The want and need to continue their brand identity during a global pandemic come from the pressures of being an influencer. While they are going through the same worries, experiences and sadness as everyone else, they also had to put on a brave face at least part of the time, to influence their followers to continue on and to get through the tough time together. *Financial Review* said that the pandemic had forced influencers to change as the industry was facing an identity crisis (Gillezeau, 2020). Whilst beauty influencers were fighting identity crises, they were also under pressure to have continuity in their brand, maintain their brand aesthetic while also being suddenly a source of information and encouragement during a global pandemic.

4.4 Conclusion

Before the pandemic, beauty influencer culture and content were relatively superficial with participants partaking in content that fit into one of four categories: Curated, Aspirational, Dolled Up, and Perfect Normal. Curated content was a huge part of influencer posts, and all influencers considered for this study posed and pre-planned their Instagram posts. A majority of their content was aspirational: lifestyle, clothing, and makeup constituted their main focus. The purpose of a post had to give their followers something to aspire to become or to do. Another theme that came up was an ideology of a 'perfect normal' where influencers would post about ordinary events, for example, reading or self-care days, but would cast in a luxurious manner, making them seem to have a perfect yet normal life; one that could be attainable by their followers. Lastly, each influencer made sure that they were perfectly dressed from the shoes to their lipstick as looks are a large component on a platform that relies solely on photographs and curated aesthetics. All of these findings show that a beauty influencer perfectly curates their ideal self for their brand image, and it is what their audience follows them for.

When the Stay at Home Order was invoked in the USA, it sent influencer culture into a wave of dismay, having to abruptly adapt their content, maintain brand deals all in the midst of a tragic and uncertain global pandemic. On top of this influencers also suddenly felt the pressure to discuss the Covid-19 pandemic with their followers and act as a role model.

Influencers began to discuss the quarantine and the pandemic, and it opened up a world of vocalising social issues. This marked the first major shift in beauty influencer culture, making it more susceptible to change and allowing discussions around human rights, social movements and politics.

Due to this shift in the influencer space, influencers were now getting used to a new normal on Instagram. For example, influencers were able to upload content more freely than ever before. Quarantine content became a significant topic with influencers posting various activities during the first month of quarantine. All of the participants in this study were commended in articles for 'doing it right' by weaving in the old with the new, discussing Covid-19 but staying relevant and true to their brand and their followers. While creative limitations were set due to being confined at home, each participant found a way to juggle content creation around their home while still being relevant to their brand, introducing various segments around cooking, self-care, family and beauty.

Mental health skyrocketed during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order, and this prompted influencers and therapists to start spreading messaging around mental well-being, therapy and self-care. Influencers selected for the study began to share content around self-care such as how to deal with working from home, provided self-care routines and tips, and one influencer, Katie Sands, live-streamed her therapy sessions on Instagram with her therapist, answering commonly asked questions and topics. Sai and Elizabeth focused on glamourising mundane everyday activities as a form of therapy to encourage followers to stay creative and busy.

Moreover, as the research discovered, Instagram became a platform for community building during the pandemic for the influencers. Posts that were once deemed aspirational were now frowned upon as followers craved authenticity and realness. Participants in the study began to write lengthy posts, allowing their followers to delve into their personal lives more so than ever. This is a form of therapy for the influencers themselves, as discussing negative issues can help to alleviate their problems.

In line with therapy, the participants of this study also partook in health messaging and used their status as influencers to inform and educate their followers on issues such as hand washing, mask-wearing and social distancing. Arguments can be made as to whether it helped or hurt the spread of misinformation around the pandemic, but the influencers who were analysed for this study, kept their health messaging to a basic standard that was informative for their followers. They also spread other health messaging including mental health messaging, reminding their followers to get up, get dressed and find a new normal with them.

This new normal however was different for the influencers who are mothers. Their new normal now meant having to take on several job titles in one; worker, mother, teacher, chef and cleaner. Sai, for example, admitted in a post that she taught her kids all day and did her paid work when the kids are on a short break, and this was in addition to her other unpaid duties that she was forced to pick up around the house during the pandemic. Elizabeth Savetsky also found herself having to take on extra roles around the house including being a teacher. This made it harder for the influencers who were mothers to adapt to a new normal as they are thrown into several roles taking up more than two full-time jobs a week.

From the above findings, it is clear that there has been a dramatic shift in communication strategies with beauty influencers on Instagram during the pandemic. Influencer culture has drastically changed, becoming significantly more community based and has opened up a realm where an influencer can now make a stance on social and political issues.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This research explored the communication strategies of Instagram beauty influencers in the USA before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. A thematic analysis of four Instagram beauty influencers posts was conducted from February – April 2020 to identify key shifts in their communication strategies. This chapter will summarise the findings and draw key conclusions of this study in regards to the research questions.

5.2 Summary of Findings

This research study sought to answer the research question: *Do Instagram beauty influencers have a shift in communication strategies during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order in the United States of America?* Additionally, the following research question was also posed: *How do their communication strategies shift during the Covid-19 Stay at Home Order?* Both research questions were addressed in the previous chapter.

The research found that in the pre-Covid-19 period, Instagram beauty influencers posted heavily curated feeds that focused on their tailored aesthetic and brand image. The content idealised an idea of a perfect 'normal' life, where the influencers appeared to have an ordinary and somewhat achievable life for their followers. Yet they also managed to make it aspirational so that it kept their followers engaged and wanting more. The research also found that all the participants in the study used professional photos wore trendy and fashionable clothes for each post to achieve a cohesive Instagram aesthetic and brand image. This is because posts where influencers dress up and wear makeup have a higher engagement rate (Almeida, et al., 2015).

As noted in the previous chapter, the research identified seven themes that articulate the key changes in influencers communication strategies during the Stay at Home Order. To reiterate, the key changes identified are the following:

- Responsibility as an influencer

- New Normal
- Care
- Community
- Health Messaging
- Motherhood
- Brand Image

Importantly, there was a shift in influencers' persuasion communication, persona, and aspirationalism. These three aspects, as the literature review identified, are key to an influencer maintaining a successful communication strategy.

During the pandemic, influencers focused their communication on social distancing, hand washing, sanitising, and staying at home. It also meant that they needed to set an example by living by these things – practising what they preach. All the participants in the study took their own spin on how to deliver these messages around Covid-19, with some taking on comical tones, others being more direct and serious, while others simply touched upon it. However, they were all responsible and made sure they only put content online that would show them behaving in a pandemic conscious way. This was the major turning point in influencer culture as pre-Covid-19 discussions of social and political issues was non-existent on the Instagram posts of the influencers. During Covid-19, however, it is something that is expected (McNeal, 2020).

Communication strategies shifted significantly when the Stay at Home Order was put in place and beauty influencers were forced to generate new content at home. All four influencers found innovative ways to create new authentic content (a new normal) while also engaging their followers. Elizabeth posted about newfound hobbies such as singing and gardening; Sai focused on her children, making comedic posts and videos with them, and glamourising gardening and cooking; Grace used her Instagram platform as an online diary and posted a mix of fashion posts with her cat, must have quarantine beauty products and wine nights with her girlfriends over zoom.

All of the influencers in this study incorporated various forms of care within their content. Katie, for example, started to do a weekly live therapy session; Elizabeth recorded videos of her singing; Sai posted humorous videos of her cooking; Grace began to get creative with her

fashion content. All of these were coping mechanisms that the influencers used to help them get through the pandemic and one that none of them participated in prior to Covid-19. During the pandemic, the beauty influencers began to upload content around mental health and therapy, using Instagram as a platform to help negotiate mental health issues. Katie, Elizabeth, Sai and Grace all added self-care into their communication strategy during the pandemic on more than one occasion. The participants in this research became trendsetters in this arena reminding their followers to take care of themselves. Beauty influencers essentially became the ambassadors for self-care, and they also became advocates for Covid-19 awareness, #StayHome movements and general health messaging surrounding the pandemic. In short, influencers communication strategies shifted significantly during this time.

Communication on Instagram between influencers and followers started to drift away from being superficial and started to become community-oriented where followers would turn to their favourite beauty influencers for comfort and togetherness (Sucui, 2020). Beauty influencers pre-Covid-19 were seen as acquaintances or distant friends (Chae, 2018) but during the pandemic, the four influencers began to open up more to their followers making them feel like a close friend. Additionally, the influencers in this study began to write lengthy posts discussing quarantine life and their thoughts and feelings of the pandemic. This is a shift in communication strategy as prior to Covid-19 these influencers would post short and snappy posts, and the ones that were lengthy were to help disguise a sponsored post. However, during the pandemic, the lengthy posts became a form of a diary entry or a message you would send a close friend. Elizabeth included long posts about her life in quarantine and how it is affecting her; Grace opened up about her difficulties of being self-sufficient and shared her vulnerabilities with her followers letting them know when she had a rough day; Katie posted about the importance of mental health and well-being, and let her followers know how she naively thought Covid-19 would be a short stint and Sai connected with her followers through cooking.

While beauty influencers predominately discuss topics such as fashion, beauty, skincare and occasionally self-care, health messaging was never something on their communication prior to Covid-19. Yet, when faced with a global pandemic, the beauty influencers delved into an

unknown territory head-on, encouraging their followers to stay safe, practice social distancing, sanitise, and take care of themselves. Health messaging was a new communication strategy that was used during quarantine and emerged in numerous forms. Elizabeth, for example, shared statistics on the pandemic's spread and infection rates and stories of people she personally knew who were infected. Katie took a softer approach, uploading posts urging her followers to stay at home for the people who are risking their lives, offering face mask giveaways and encouraging followers to care for their mental well-being. Grace, who is usually nonchalant, posted images of her looking concerned saying that she is sick of people not adhering to social distancing rules and putting others in danger. Sai was the only one who strayed away from specifics or confronting discussions around health messaging.

Motherhood during the pandemic emerged as a key theme that affected two influencers' communication strategies. Pre Covid-19, both Elizabeth and Sai had their husbands featured on their platforms, and during the pandemic neither of these mothers posted photos or videos of their spouses playing with the kids, cooking dinner, home-schooling the children, or cleaning the house. On more than one occasion Sai posted the fact that she was spending several hours a day in the kitchen on her own. Her posts were predominately centred around her domestic work. Similarly, Elizabeth only featured her daughters in her posts and informed her followers that she has sole responsibility for homeschooling them. While Elizabeth and Sai did not vocalise that there is a gender discrimination towards mother's during the pandemic, this is evident from the content that they were sharing. The content posted by these two influencers exemplifies the broader issue that confronts women. Numerous articles featured women speaking about feeling burnt out over the pandemic, both in the USA and around the world (Accordini & Molgora, 2020; Ketchell, 2020; Casas, Honderich & McClay, 2020; Strong, 2020; Bseiso, Gunther, & Justice, 2020; Cooper, 2020; and Shaw, 2020). This was having an added effect on the well-being of mothers as they were feeling distressed, fatigued and aggravated (Accordini & Molgora, 2020). A movement started on Twitter when Hillary Clinton retweeted a post by Perelman saying 'you can't have both' meaning you can't have kids and a job during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is mothers specifically who cannot have both, as mothers are shouldered with the burden of childcare and that continued during the pandemic (Dickson, 2020). And this was clear in the findings of this research.

5.3 Persuasion Communication

The literature review identified that for beauty influencers to be persuasive in their communications, they had to have a specific set of attributes. Authority, credibility, attractiveness and trustworthiness are the main characteristics that help an influencer to persuade their followers to buy products or influence them to live in a certain way (Kelman, 1958; von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2020). Moreover, as Soklova and Kefi (2019) point out, Millennials and Generation Zs are drawn towards beauty influencers with whom they have similarities and are more likely to be influenced to purchase an endorsed product (Soklova & Kefi, 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, persuasion communication took on a new meaning. As companies were shut down due to strict regulations during the Stay at Home Order, advertising and marketing budgets were the first to be cut (Sobura, 2020). This meant beauty influencers were losing brands deals, sponsorships and endorsements, and were suddenly no longer needing to be persuasive in the way they were used to. That is to say, the pressure to be commercially persuasive was reduced. In addition to losing income, beauty influencers were suddenly scrambling to change their content as their followers no longer desired the same content curated previously. Israel Cassol a fashion and beauty influencer in London receives hundreds of thousands of dollars to do posts of him sporting luxury brands, but he said nobody wants to see that type of content currently because no one could go anywhere (Criddle, 2020).

Beauty influencers started to become trendsetters, responding to what their followers desired by communicating and staying relevant about the Covid-19 pandemic. Their communication strategies shifted from persuading their followers to buy a product, to persuading them to stay safe during the pandemic. This was seen in all of the participants of this study in various forms. Grace and Elizabeth, for example, took more direct approaches in their posts, persuading their followers to social distance and stay safe.

During the pandemic, there was a notable shift in persuasive communication strategies and content. As noted in the literature review, for beauty influencers to be persuasive they needed to exert high self-esteem, not be too pushy and come across as genuine (Bradberry, 2016). However, during the pandemic, these attributes were not at the forefront of their

strategy for content. They were learning about the pandemic as everyone else was, but they did what they could to help reiterate messaging and persuade their followers to be mindful, cautious and listen to government policies about Covid-19.

5.4 Persona

As discussed in the literature review chapter, persona is vital in the success of an influencer, and whilst their persona changed during the pandemic, it was a natural change that their followers and brand companies were wanting and expecting (Cooper, 2020). Persona is seen as key to obtaining and maintaining followers, while also showing your true authentic self (Ots & Abidin, 2016) which these influencers all did during the pandemic. While their communication strategies and their personas changed, it was fitting with the ongoing pandemic. In their research on influencers and the Covid-19 pandemic, Harris, et al (2020) found that in order to be relatable, influencers posted predominately about five problems: stress, anxiety, pleasant events that happened, unhappiness during isolation, and body image. Harris et al (2020) also examined the ways in which influencers discussed the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors found that 90 per cent of content was about the influencers personal life and 58 per cent related their content to their followers. Whilst Harris et al's (2020) study was done focusing on video content of social media influencers, their findings correlate with the findings of this study. There was a clear shift in the persona of all beauty influencers examined. First, they produced content that made them more relatable to their followers. Second, and relatedly, their content production became flexible precisely because they wanted to be relatable to their followers during the pandemic. As such, the influencers shifted their persona to become health and pandemic conscious to ensure relevancy and currency. Furthermore, it was found that all the participants of this study became more open and authentic in their posts and conversations with followers. Taking off their literal mask of makeup and fashion and showing an authentic version of themselves during a time of uncertainty. Beauty influencers became trendsetters in taking off the layers of aspiration and luxury, by showing their followers that they were just like everyone else, trying to make it through another day in quarantine.

5.5 A new form of aspirationalism?

Aspirational content is key to success on Instagram with influencers focused on creating desires and dreams for their followers while making it seem genuine and not staged (Duncan, 2018). Beauty influencers, likewise, also need to have a balance of perfectly manicured aspirational posts along with posts that connect with their followers on a deeper level (Hart, 2019). However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the content of posts shifted drastically as most followers were finding aspirational, luxury posts disgusting (Murray, 2020). Followers were pivoting towards influencers who were more open and honest about their quarantine life as they craved connectivity and relatability.

Uncertainties around sponsored posts and brand deals forced influencers to go into survival mode rather than growing their business (Bishop, 2020). Their focus was on creating content that will keep their follower numbers, while also maintaining brand deals with clients. While luxurious posts took a backseat, a new form of aspirationalism developed. Influencers began to use their Instagram profiles and large audiences as a platform to encourage their followers to stay indoors and stay safe during Covid-19. The four beauty influencers began posting aspirational content that would inspire their followers to stay safe, be creative and have fun while staying at home. As noted by Ryan Detert, CEO of Influential, 'the obsession with aesthetics is being replaced by awareness and thoughtfulness. If influencers don't adapt to that, they will quickly lose credibility with their audiences' (Pastore, 2020). CEO of Influence Central Stacey DeBroff likewise agreed with Detert stating that in a global crisis 'consumers resent overly aspiration content' and that followers were looking for influencers that 'sympathise with them' (Pastore, 2020). Moreover, followers also wanted influencers to be honest about the tough times during quarantine so that they could relate to them while also feeling better about themselves (Mathie, 2020). A survey done by Matter found that 61% of Americans trusted influencers during the Covid-19 pandemic than they did brands (Carufel, 2020). With followers demanding authenticity and less aspirational posts, beauty influencers were quick to change their content to be more relatable amidst the global crisis. And as I have discussed both in the previous chapter and in the Conclusion, consumer-driven aspirational content took a less important position during the pandemic and the four influencers set an example by offering quarantine content that distracted and informed their followers. In short,

the four beauty influencers selected for this study shifted their content and messaging, ushering in a new form of aspirationalism.

5.6 Significance of Research

This research is significant as it seeks to understand and analyse how communication strategies amongst Instagram beauty influencers shifted during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is important as it marked a major shift in influencer culture. The analysis of the four beauty influencers social media data identified themes that provide an insight into how these shifts occurred. Influencers are increasingly being used to endorse, promote and spread awareness for products, services and events. With the high following that many influencers have, including beauty influencers, this study helps to understand how communication strategies change and adapt during a global pandemic and how influencers could be utilised further in the future.

Additionally, it is hoped that this study helps fill a gap in the expanding research around Covid-19. More specifically, this research hopes to contribute to a communication studies perspective and the global pandemic. The focus on communication strategies in this research aims to outline key shifts in influencer content production and the significance of these shifts to helping slow the spread of the virus and helping people cope in this time of crisis. The conclusions from this research could be utilised to help form communication strategies with influencers to educate the general public on Covid-19 so that they could spread precise information to a younger audience.

5.7 Future Research

This research leaves room for further research and here I outline four areas that could be explored. The first would be an engagement with other types of influencers including those on different platforms such as YouTube and TikTok as well as genres such as Lifestyle influencers. Additionally, other Instagram influencers could be potentially examined, especially Travel influencers who were most affected as they were not able to travel anywhere during the pandemic. The second would be conducting in-depth interviews with

influencers to discern the reasons behind their communication shifts. The third possible modality of research would be a quantitative study examining the amounts of likes, posts and comments during Covid-19 and whether there were any drastic differences in follower's engagement during this time. And the fourth would be an examination of various brands to evaluate how they dealt with Covid-19 in terms of influencer marketing.

5.8 Conclusion

During the pandemic, persuasion communication took on a new meaning as the four influencers focused on communicating the importance of staying healthy, wearing masks, and glamourising the mundane to entice their followers to stay at home. In other words, their communication strategies shifted from asking followers to buy an endorsed product to persuading them to stay safe.

Further, beauty influencers personas also changed during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic personas that were admired were discarded and instead, influencers curated a persona that was raw and honest. All the participants of this study shifted their persona and become more relatable to their followers, advancing pandemic conscious acts, attitudes and practices. All four also shared greater details of their personal lives and struggles, marking a shift in the content they uploaded and, importantly, the curation of a new form of aspirationalism: one that is less about product endorsement and more about well-being, care, community, and health. As this research found, care emerged as one of the biggest themes during the analysis of the influencer's social media data. All four influencers stressed the importance of self-care during a time where everyone is locked up in their houses, unable to enjoy little luxuries like they were able to previously.

As already noted, aesthetics and brand image are important for any influencer to consider if she/he wanted to succeed on Instagram. It was clear that while the four influencers curated a new aesthetic and uploaded pandemic relevant content, they also did ensure that their brand image was maintained. In other words, the influencers negotiated the complex pandemic landscape without losing their brand image and aesthetic while transforming their communication strategies and content.

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