

Department of Marketing

Exploring social media influencer-follower relationships and its impacts on content creation

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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.”



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Ethics Approval

Ethics approval from AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC) was granted on 14 July, 2021, for a period of three years up until 13 July, 2024. The ethics application number is 21/254.

ABSTRACT

With the continuous growth of social media and the rise of social media influencers, there is an increased need to understand their behaviours, more specifically, an understanding of the influencer-follower relation from the influencers' perspective. Horton and Wohl's (1956) original concept on social relationships, parasocial relationship, has been used in numerous studies to review the influencer-follower relationship; however, due to the unilateral direction it entails, these studies have only focused on the follower's behaviours and perspectives. Most of these studies have not accounted for the reciprocal engagement that social media influencers and their followers have within the online platforms. Due to this, Lou (2022) has created a concept called Trans-parasocial relationship to acknowledge this gap. This study uses a general inductive approach to explore how influencers perceive their relationship with their followers and how that relationship could impact the content created. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven micro-influencers who have 10,000 to 100,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest the environment (online and offline), self-identity of an influencer, and online engagement impacts how the micro-influencers' perceive their relationship. That perception they have on themselves and on their relationship with their followers create self-influenced content and follower-influenced content. Externally, there is also brand-influenced content, although the relationships formed do not directly create brand-influenced content, it has an indirect impact as influencers still choose the type of brand they endorse based on what they prefer (self-influence) and what their followers would want to see (follower-influence). The results from this study fills in gaps within academic literature on influencer-follower relations and support the trans-parasocial relationship concept by confirming the key traits from the influencer's perspective. Managerially, this study provides marketers and small businesses insights on how to use influencer marketing to promote their businesses. By understanding how an influencer feels and behaves, will provide opportunities to enhance influencer-brand relationships for successful implementation of influencer marketing.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of social media and introduce the key focus of this research, social media influencers. The first section of the chapter provides the background of the study. It reviews the emerging literature that explores the current understanding of influencer-follower relationship within social media platforms. The second section discusses the problem statement in relation to the theoretical gaps in existing literature that will set the scene for the purpose of this thesis. Next, the aim of the research will be discussed along with the introduction of the research question. The key contributions will be discussed, and the chapter will conclude by discussing the specific structure of this thesis.

1.2. Background

Social media has created a strong online platform for individuals to engage with others globally, as it is a vast ecosystem that has intricate networks of relationships and levels of interactions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These online platforms were initially created and designed to enable personal connections (Lim & Kumar, 2019), it has created opportunities for businesses and marketers to leverage its platform to engage with consumers as engaged consumers tend to feel stronger connections using these methods (Calder & Malthouse, 2008). Its continuous growth has allowed many individuals to build their own brand, so this study focuses on those individuals within Instagram (social media platform), specifically known as social media influencers or online celebrities, as they have a strong influence on followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Social media influencers are considered individuals who have gained influence over their followers they obtained from posting content online (Ki & Kim, 2019). They are also known to be referred as opinion leaders (Chang et al., 2020) or online celebrities (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and can be categorised based on the number of the followers they've gained (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). For the purpose of this study, the key focus will be on micro-influencers, who have 10,000 to 100,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), to understand how they view their influencer-follower relationship. A numerical measure allows for an ease of participant selection, and the large range provides the ability to increase the chance reaching out to an influencer as it's difficult to obtain contact with influencers.

Previous literature has indicated that people tend to gravitate towards relationships that provide basic need fulfilments (Guardia et al., 2000). Using this

understanding and attaching it to human brand theory (Thomson, 2006) as a theoretical lens towards influencer-follower relations, Malik et al. (2022) had identified social media influencers as human brands due to their personas facilitating the creation of influencer-follower relationship. Human brand theory suggests that influencers can create lasting relationships with followers by the ability to fulfil their needs when they possess certain traits (Thomson, 2006). As a basis for this research, the concept of human brand theory will be used to understand how social media influencers perceive themselves and how that could influence their influencer-follower relationships.

Through their work on social interactions, Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of parasocial relations, which illustrated the persona that media creates on celebrities or influencers through traditional media (i.e., traditional television, radio, films). This concept was used widely across recent studies on social media influencers to explore the influencer-follower relationship (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Yuan et al., 2019). It is widely known as a one-way, or more specifically, a unilateral relationship, in which an individual would express their interests towards a public figure (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). There are no reciprocal interactions between the two parties, which make it distinct compared to other kinds of social relations. Kowert and Daniel (2021) view parasocial relationships with defining features such as its 'broad-reach' and 'restricted access'. The influencer-follower relationship differs from traditional media, which introduced parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and there are many studies that address that relationship from the follower's perspective. This study will explore that relationship from the influencers' perspective to further expand on this new concept of Trans-Parasocial relationships by Lou (2022).

Since the era of traditional media has rapidly evolved over the decades with the rise of the internet and the multiple social media platforms, two-way interactions between social media influencers and followers are no longer one-sided (Reinikainen et al., 2020); hence the introduction of trans-parasocial relations by Lou (2022). Lou's (2022) concept introduces a reciprocal, two-way relationship between influencers and followers online, specifically in social media, which exhibits the following characteristics: collectively reciprocal, co-created content, (a)synchronously interactive, to distinguish it from the original parasocial relationship by Horton and Wohl (1956).

When Lou (2022) discusses the trait of being collectively reciprocal, she refers to the engagement between social media influencers and followers. Engagement is a form of an interactive relationship that is generally between consumers and brands, which later develops communities (Brodie et al., 2013). Within this study, social media influencers are viewed as brands and the followers are the consumers who absorb their content online. In the online environment, engagement, or rather social media

engagement, is initiated when content or posts have been loaded, making it context specific (Dessart, 2017), which varies based on different platforms. For example, Youtube content creators engage with their followers through the videos they post, whereas on Instagram, content creators can engage in many other ways through image posts, videos, or live streaming. Although there are many academic studies on social media engagement, there are not many that connect engagement to the development of relationships.

Content creation is a mandatory feature within social media platforms. Studies have shown that valuable content can provide benefits for enhancing the quality of customer-brand relationships (Steinhoff et al., 2018; Verma et al., 2016). However, there are varying attributes to relationship quality as it's comprised of multiple factors such as; trust, commitment (Clark et al., 2017), reliability, and truthfulness (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). On top of these attributes, Abid et al. (2020) has emphasised the importance of personalised content on ensuring relationship quality. In the context of influencer-follower relationship, how content creation is impacted by that relationship is still a mystery as minimal studies have explored how the quality of a relationship can influence content creation.

Ever since the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been observed that many businesses are onboarding digital strategies. Influencer marketing has become one of those strategies that is becoming an integral part of digital marketing (Ki et al., 2019). Statistics provided by Linqua (2019) has shown that influencer marketing is a highly effective strategy for advertising campaigns during 2017, and it has been continuously growing with the enhancements of social media platforms and over 3.5 billion users on social media during 2019 (Kemp, 2019). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that identifying suitable influencers as partners is critical for the success of influencer marketing. By further understanding influencer-follower relationship, especially from the influencers' perspectives may prove beneficial for the successful implementation of influencer marketing.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Past literature has indicated that prior research on social media influencers (SMIs) and the influencer-follower relationship focused more on SMIs perspective rather than the followers, specifically in regards to influences of their roles (Ki et al., 2020). Although that may be true, that prior research has focused on understanding SMIs roles and their influence on the influencer-follower relationship (Casalo et al., 2018; Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019), and the influence on their followers' decisions (Ki & Kim, 2019; Lin et al., 2018), the data retrieved within those studies were obtained from the followers,

not the SMIs themselves. This means that the results found were not truly from the influencers' perspectives, rather, from the follower's perspective. This still leaves a gap in academic literature, to explore the influencer-follower relationship, truly from the SMIs perspective, where the data is obtained from the influencers.

The relationship between social media influencers and followers has been argued to be significantly different from parasocial relationships in many ways (Abidin, 2015). Abidin (2015) had argued that parasocial relations was theorised on how media displayed personae when influencer-follower relations is more intimate. Communications between influencers and followers is more interactive on social media platforms, whereas parasocial relations are unilateral (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The presence of social media has opposing effects on the influencer-follower relationship compared to the original traits of parasocial relationships (Abidin, 2015) due to this, Lou (2022) created her concept of trans-parasocial relationship to capture the traits of influencer-follower relationships online. However, Lou's (2022) concept was built on conducting studies on social media users (followers) and has not accounted for the influencers' perception on the relationship. To expand on and to confirm the concept of trans-parasocial relationship, further understanding is required on how influencers perceive their relationship with followers to provide insights from both sides of the relationship. Having that understanding from both sides of the influencer-follower relations is critical as the concept of trans-parasocial relations has a trait of being collectively reciprocal meaning there is engagement from both sides of the relationship (Lou, 2022).

Of all recent studies on human brand theory, only studies by Malik et al. (2022) and Ki et al. (2020) were conducted on SMIs. Others were conducted on celebrities (Koo, 2021), film directors (Pluntz & Pras, 2020), journalists (Klab, 2019), or corporate brands (Giertz et al., 2022). Ki et al. (2020) found that SMIs persona (i.e., inspiration, similarity) and content-driven (i.e., informativeness) attributes made followers feel attached to them as it fulfils the followers' needs. Malik et al. (2022) expanded on that study by discussing how the SMIs persona contributes to the followers feeling more connected to them through the fulfilment of their needs to self-improve and escape reality. Both studies were conducted from the follower's perspective on the influencer-follower relationship which maintains the current theoretical gap to explore the influencers' perspective on that relationships. In relations to human brand theory, existing literature explores how follower's perceive the influencers' persona, however, there is a gap to understand how influencers' perceive themselves and how that impacts their human branding.

There is an abundance of existing literature on influencer marketing, and many studies on how social media influencers are a beneficial tool for this strategy due to their strong influence and bonds with their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Swant, 2016; Hall, 2016; Farrell et al., 2021). However, like many studies on SMIs, have obtained their data from the followers perspective. These studies don't provide an understanding on how influencers view their influencer-follower relationships, even though it has been acknowledged that maintain a proper fit between a brand and influencer is critical for successful influencer marketing implementation (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). Many studies have been conducted from the followers' perspective, however, there is still a need to understand the influencers' perspective to build a well-rounded understanding of how influencer-follower relationships works to maintain a influencer-brand relationship for the use of influencer marketing.

1.4. Research aims and questions

This research focuses on social media influencers, micro-influencers specifically, who are defined as influencers with between 10,000 to 100,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Each participant must be on Instagram, as the main platform, due to the complexities of finding influencers as participants for academic research. Due to the gap in literature on research that explores influencers' perspectives, it is important for the participants to meet those specific criteria. From the theoretical gaps discussed in the previous section of this chapter, the following research questions will be explored:

How do social media influencers perceive their relationships with their followers and how does this influence the content they create?

As this is a qualitative study, a general inductive approach will be taken to conduct the research. An inductive approach allows themes to emerge from the findings within raw data without restrictions from other methodologies (Thomas, 2006). This approach aligns with interpretive research paradigm which is a form of research where the truth is identified from having dialogues and interactions between the subject and its researcher (Davies & Fisher, 2018). The relationship between researcher and researched, based on the interpretive paradigm, refers to the researcher as the listener and interpreter and the participant provides the data through dialogue which the researcher interprets (Davies & Fisher, 2018). Based on the paradigm and inductive approach, semi-structured interviews are conducted on the participants, micro-influencers, to collect the data.

An effective interview facilitates a level of reciprocity between the researcher and participants that provides the ability to get clarity and understanding (Galletta &

Cross, 2013). To enhance the findings of the interviews, the author will conduct projective techniques to further explore the preferences or behaviours (Chandler & Owen, 2002) of micro-influencers. To analyse the data, the author will use thematic analysis to develop a data structure that identifies the key themes and produce a data model to present how the themes answer the research question.

1.5. Significance of the study

The present research has the potential to contribute to academic research on influencer-follower relationships in many ways. First, by exploring the relationship between the influencer and follower from the influencer's perspective, it will provide new insights to support the Lou's (2022) concept on trans-parasocial relationships. The focus will be on the key characteristics within Lou's (2022) model, collective reciprocity and co-created content or strategy.

Second, existing studies on human brand theory delved into the persona of social media influencers based on how their followers identify them (Ki et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2022). This study looks at a difference angle and explores how micro-influencers perceive themselves and how that will impact the influencer-follower relationship.

Third, although there are recent studies that uncover the impacts of social media engagement, these studies use the concept of parasocial interactions (PSI) to explain its impact on influencer-follower relationships (Shin, 2016; Wei et al., 2022). However, PSI is derived from Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial relations which has been explained earlier in this chapter, as a unilateral, non-reciprocal relationship and engagements which does not account for the reciprocal environment that social media platforms provide. The findings from this study will fulfil this gap in literature by providing insights on how engagement impacts influencer-follower relationships while also using the findings from Lou's (2022) study on trans-parasocial relations.

Fourth, extant research has been done on the impacts of content creation on relationship quality between consumer and brands (Steinhoff et al., 2018; Verma et al., 2016; Goh et al., 2013), however, very few studies have explored how content creation is influenced by influencer-follower relationships. This study contributes to this theoretical gap by exploring how the relationship between micro-influencers and their followers influences the content that they create.

Finally, the findings from this study can provide beneficial practical implications for businesses that choose to use influencer marketing as their digital marketing

strategy. Understanding the behaviours of SMIs and the relationship they have with their followers can prove useful to maintain or build a healthy influencer-brand relationship .

1.6. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter one provides an introduction to the study by providing a conceptual basis. It includes the context and aims of the research, the research question, a discussion on the key arguments that differentiate this study to others, the theoretical contributions of this study and the overall structure of this thesis.

Chapter two discusses the theoretical perspectives and the concepts that provide a foundation for this study. It reviews existing literature on social media influencers and the influencer-follower relationship, and the key concepts that contribute to this study such as; human brand theory, trans-parasocial relations, influencer marketing, and content creation.

Chapter three introduces the interpretive research paradigm and general inductive approach. It provides the philosophical perspective and methodology that guides this research when exploring the perspectives of social media interviews using a qualitative approach. Afterwards, this chapter outlines the methods used to implement the data collection and analysis of this study. It concludes with a discussion on the research's credibility, trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter four presents the key findings from this research by discussing the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with the participants. This chapter further discusses the themes by explaining its relevance and contribution to the research question.

Chapter five, the final chapter, offers an analysis of this thesis by discussing the theoretical implications this research has on existing literature, and practical implications of this study on influencer marketing. To conclude, the limitations and opportunities for future research is shared.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss and review existing literature to introduce the concept of social media influencers and the theories and concepts that impact the influencer-follower relationships, such as Human Brand Theory, Social Media Engagement, Influencer Marketing, Parasocial Relationships and Trans-Parasocial Relationships. This literature review is separated into two sections, the first section discusses the concepts of which social media influencers could build relationships from. Lou's (2022) trans-parasocial model will be introduced within this section. The second section discusses the existing concepts of influencer marketing and how that can be associated with influencer-follower relationships. Following this, how relationships could be strengthened through content creation will be discussed. Each section will identify key gaps that drive the purpose of the study's research question.

2.2. Building Relationships with Followers as a Social Media Influencer

2.2.1 Social Media Influencers – who are they?

With the continuous growth and use of social media, social media influencers (SMIs) play a significant role since the uprising of social media platforms. They are considered, first and foremost, content generators who have many followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Due to this, they have also been referred to as “online celebrities” and are known for constant creation of content, having unique personae and wielding influence over their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). They tend to post content in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and usually appeal to groups within the same environments who share similar interests (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). SMIs are also high in demand for influencer marketing as individuals who are experts and established credibility within specific markets (Alampi, 2019).

In existing literature, there are different definitions to group types of influencers, one type of categorisation defines each type of influencer by the total number of followers they have. The brackets of followers have varied, however, Campbell & Farrell (2020) have created a concept that categorised influencers into the following; Nano-Influencer (0-10k followers), Micro-Influencer (10-100k followers), Macro-Influencer (100k – 1 million followers), Mega-Influencers (1 million+ followers). Although Boerman (2020) created different categorisations, such as micro-influencers (less than 10,000) and meso-influencers (10,000 – million), Campbell and Farrell's (2020) categorisation captures a realistic range that can be contacted but also will

provide different types of participants to identify whether there are any key differences between influencers in the lower range, who are starting their influencing journey, versus those in the higher range, who have more experience. Others have defined influencers based on the role or functionality. Influencers are also known as opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are individuals who exert their influence on others as their followers would seek advice or information from them (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). Others have defined them as “bottom-up, frass-roots” influencers, meaning individuals who gained fame from as content generators (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Regardless of how one would define or group them, all influencers have a following from whom they exert any amount of influence. As of current, there are limited studies that delve into these specific influencer types and how these specific influencers act or whether there's a difference in how they perceive their relationships with followers.

Opinion leaders, influencers and celebrity endorser are all alternative terms used for SMI's (Chang et al., 2020), an opinion leader specifically, are considered individuals who exert an abundance of influence on the decision of others (Flynn et al., 1996). Since SMI's hold influence over their followers across social media platforms, they are considered opinion leaders through definition. The only difference in definition between opinion leaders and SMIs, is that SMIs have an online platform to exert their influence.

There has been extant research on social media influencers, especially through the relationships they have with their followers, however, most studies have only received results through either content analysis like the study by Taillon et al. (2020) who explored the relationship between online influencers and their followers through their 'closeness' or through surveys completed by followers. Majority of studies were completed through quantitative methods which restricts deeper understanding of people's emotional or psychological intents and are explored through the follower's perspective rather than the SMI (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020; Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

There have been recent studies that explored relationships between influencer and followers through the influencers' perception themselves (Casalo et al., 2018; Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019) that identified multiple roles among SMIs that could influence a follower's choice or decisions. Balaban & Szambolics (2022) had completed a recent qualitative study that explores the concept of self-perceived authenticity from the SMI's perspective. They had found that although multiple social roles are played by social media influencers (Trepte & Reinecke, 2011), staying authentic and consistent in communication with followers is a mandatory requirement. However, their studies do not look at a specific group of influencers i.e., nano vs macro vs micro influencers and

how their perceptions of their relationships with followers, would impact content creation as it could vary between each type. Due to this, this study will focus on micro-influencers to get a deeper understanding on how a specific group of influencers operate.

2.2.2 Social Media Influencers and Human Brand Theory

Human Brand theory is a relatively new concept that was coined by Thomson (2006). It theoretically explains the mechanism of influencer-follower relationships once the influencer develops into a human brand (Malik et al., 2022). Thomson (2006) defines a human brand as person who have distinct features that creates strong relationships with followers. This trait can create impactful success on marketing effects. This theory provides a conceptual lens for this study as it explores the identity of an influencer which could have a direct impact on the relationship with their followers. An individual's identity, that differs them from others can be defined as a human brand (Moulard et al., 2015) which in turn, can influence creating strong relationships with their followers (Duffy, 2005; Thomson, 2006). Previous literature on human brand theory has conducted studies on idols or celebrities (Huang et al., 2015) and athletes (Carlson & Donovan, 2013) where their audiences are drawn to their human brand, however, minimal recent studies have associated the theory with social media influencers.

Of the few studies that associate social media influencers to human brand theory, Malik et al. (2022) explored how followers view and follow their online influencers and found that social media influencers hold as much influence as a human brand compared to contemporary brands by enriching and fulfilling their needs for ideality (Ki et al., 2020). Another study was conducted by Ki et al. (2020) and found that the emotional bond created between SMI (social media influencer) and follower from their human branding has significant influence which could be maximised for influencer marketing. However, like existing literature, these studies only looked at the relationship from the follower's perspective rather than the SMIs. This creates a gap for further studies to be conducted on SMI-follower relationships from the influencer's perspective and how their 'human brand' could impact the relationship building process.

With the continuous growth of social media users, there is clearly a growth of SMIs. Followers don't necessarily follow for specific content, they generally gravitate towards the influencer's human brand (Malik et al., 2022). Thomson's (2006) Human Brand Theory proposes three key points within its process; personas, fulfilments of needs and strong attachments to be considered a "brand" to build strong relationships.

This study will explore how micro-influencers perceive themselves and their own 'persona' to confirm whether it impacts the relationship using the process for human brand theory.

2.2.3 Use of Social Media Engagement to Build Influencer-Follower Relations

Theoretically, social media engagement is a concept that was derived from customer engagement, within social media, engagement is context specific (Dessart, 2017). Context specific engagement means that communication is specifically based on what was posted within a social media platform. However, there will be different forms of engagement based on the platform. For example, Tik Tok is solely based on quick video content where engagement is strictly based through comments on the specific video. Instagram is based on a mix of video and image posts, and twitter engagement is highly text-based. Voorveld et al, (2018) confirms within his study that digital engagement is highly dependent on the type of social media platform.

Extant research on social media engagement has shown that there are varying levels and forms of engagement on the different social media platforms. These platforms have allowed social media influencers to directly communicate with their followers (Barcelos, et al., 2017) through comments, direct messages, or live streams. Barcelos et al., (2017), Beukebook, et al. (2015) and Hughes et al. (2019) have confirmed in their studies that a personal form of communication, or a human voice, with informal styles increases online engagement between followers and their influencers or brands. This supports the idea that relationships could be built off informal forms of communications from the increase of reciprocal engagement online. A recent study conducted by Giertz et al. (2022) looked at engagement behaviour concepts in asynchronous and synchronous social media. Asynchronous social media refers the separation of content creation and consumption, non-instantaneous. Synchronous social media refers to immediate consumption of content through live chats or live streaming. Many social media platforms, including Instagram now have synchronous features which allows live streaming. However, like many studies, it doesn't connect these engagement behaviours to how relationships could potentially be formed.

Over recent years, there has been a significant increase in visually oriented content, Instagram being one of the primary platforms. It has been found that there is a significant and positive impact on the presence of image-based content (Li & Xie, 2020) as it increases the user engagement. Hughes et al. (2019) have identified that social media engagement is dependent on the characteristics of the post which differs across the types of online platforms. Although there is extant research on social media

engagement, there is still a gap to further understand the impact of engagement on the brand relationship (Hollebeek et al., 2016) or the influencer-follower relationship. Because of this gap, academics started to explore another concept of social media engagement, Parasocial Interaction (PSI). PSI, in relation to parasocial relationship, refer to the engagement or interaction that builds on online relationships (Shin, 2016), specifically with SMIs. However, there isn't a two-way interaction with the concept of PSI as it usually looks at the follower's interaction rather than both influencer and follower (Wei et al., 2022) which still leaves a gap to explore the impacts of social media engagements from the influencer's perspective on relationship building.

2.2.4 Trans-Parasocial Relationships between Influencers & Followers

The concept of parasocial relationships have been widely explored since it was originally coined by Horton & Wohl (1956) in relation to parasocial interactions. Traditionally, it referred to the one-sided and non-reciprocal interpersonal relationships that are formed from viewers and television characters or celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). This type of relationship is formed through parasocial interactions, social attractions, sense of attachment and psychological connections (Rubin et al., 1987; Rubin & Step, 2000; Cohen, 2004). With the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, there has been a shift from parasocial relationships with traditional media characters to social media influencers.

Most recent studies that explored the parasocial relationship between SMI's and their followers have solely focused on the followers' experience based on the interaction and observance of influencers. In a business or marketing perspective, many studies discussed how this parasocial relationship affects brand equity through followers' shared feelings or empathy towards an influencer (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Hwang & Zhang, 2018) and their perceived likability and attractiveness towards influencers (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Taillon et al., 2020) across different market segments and industries. It has also been discussed that successful personal bonding through parasocial relationship can positively impact a brand and its products (Farivar et al., 2021).

Although there is extant literature that explores the effects and impacts of parasocial relationships between influencers and followers, it overlooks the mutual influence between them since social media is an interactive platform where both parties, followers, and influencers, can engage. Lou (2022) had recognised this gap and has enhanced the original concept of parasocial relationships to include the bi-directional interactions found within social media platforms. She has created a concept

that extends from parasocial relationships and names it “Trans-Parasocial Relations”. The difference between parasocial relations and trans-parasocial relations is the reciprocity in communication, online vs. offline environment and the strategy in how content is created shown in **Figure 2.1**. This new concept welcomes new avenues of research to enhance the understandings of relationships between SMIs and followers. As this study delves into the micro-influencers’ perspective, it will examine the relationship for trans-parasocial characteristics.

Figure 2.1: Trans-Parasocial Characteristics

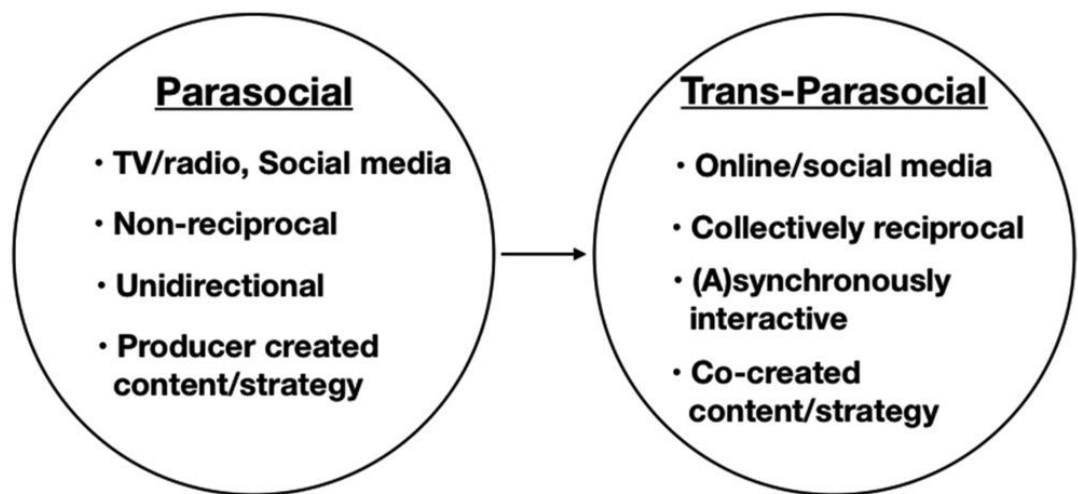


Figure 2.1 : Trans-Parasocial Characteristics

Note. This figure was produced by Lou in 2022. From “Social media influencers and followers: Theorization of a trans-parasocial relation and explication of its implications for influencer advertising”, by Lou, C., 2022, *Journal of Advertising*, 51 (1), p. 4-21.

2.3. The Impacts of Influencer-Follower Relationships in social media

2.3.1 Influencer Marketing with Trans-parasocial Relationships

With the growth of social media platforms and influencers over the last decade, influencer marketing has become an important strategy for brands to reach their audiences. Linqia (2019) produced an industry report that indicates that over 80 percent of brand marketers had used influencer marketing in their campaigns in the year 2017, which over 90 percent found it effective. Brands have taken advantage of the influencer – follower relationship to accrue social capital and use influencer marketing to endorse their brand and products (Farivar et al., 2021).

Opinion leadership is a key factor of influencer marketing alongside parasocial relations based on the findings from Farivar et al. (2021)’s study as they both co-exist during the influencing process. However, existing studies state that opinion leadership

is focused on the follower's perception of the SMIs' expertise or competence and leadership (Koohikamali et al., 2015) and parasocial relationships are determined solely by the followers' perception of the influencer. With Lou's (2021) discovery of trans-parasocial relations which is shown in **Figure 2.1**, Many recent studies (Chung-Wha et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020; Yuan et al., 2019) including Farivar's et al. (2021) study is flawed as they focus on SMIs, who are solely based online, and connects them with the well-known concept of parasocial relationships which is traditionally defined to be within the offline environment. Focusing on Lou's (2021) new concept can redefine influencer marketing with trans-parasocial relationships by further exploring how SMIs create content based on how they perceive their role and relationships with their followers.

It is well known that influencers are deemed to be more credible and relatable compared to traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) hence the demand for businesses to make use of influencer marketing. Not only are SMI's more relatable, but they are also perceived to specialise in specific categories, like fashion or gaming, which increases trust significantly (Swant, 2016) which established continued engagement between influencers and followers (Hall, 2016). This makes SMI's a highly valuable tool for influencer marketing. Within the context of parasocial relationships, studies have shown that these digital bonds between influencer and follower are intense and strong which increases the likelihood of consumer-brand interactions (Labrecque, 2014), however, that is only from the follower's experience. To implement successful influencer marketing, brands need to understand the influencer-follower relationship from the SMI's perspective, especially because there has been a significant shift in brand partnerships with SMI's (Farrell et al., 2021). It is strategically important to maintain a proper fit between brand and influencer since studies have found that brand control can negatively impact how followers view both the brand and influencer (Martinez-Lopez, et al., 2020). It would be beneficial for marketers to better understand the relationships between influencer-follower from both ends, through the concept of Trans-parasocial relationships to maintain the influencer-brand partnerships.

2.3.2 Influencer-Follower Relationship and Content Creation

When discussing online content creation and relationship quality, academic literature usually refers to a customer-brand relationship. These relationships can be strengthened when relevant or valuable content is offered by the 'brand' (Steinhoff et al., 2018). This is supported by the study by Verma et al. (2016) which also confirms that social media platforms have potential to increase relationship quality from the content posted. This is because social media content has a strong influence on receiving direct communication or engagement (Goh et al., 2013). However, Abid et al.

(2020) believes that this could have a negative effect that impacts relationship quality if the content created is curated instead of created, meaning that content was taken from external sources resulting in a loss of interest with followers. This means that personalised content is an important factor to consider improving or maintain relationship quality.

Relationship quality is comprised of the following factors, trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Clark et al., 2017). Relationship's trust includes important dimensions such as reliability, truthfulness, and sincerity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Relationship's commitment is comprised of belonging, pride, and loyalty (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Finally, a relationship's satisfaction refers to the overall satisfaction a customer may have with the relationship itself (Palmatier et al., 2006). When looking at the context of social media influencers, the influencers are the brand and followers are the customers in this customer-brand relationship. To increase the relationship quality, it is suggested that content must include those elements to build trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Abid et al., 2020).

There are limited studies that explore the impact of content creation based on the relationship between SMIs and their followers. Using the understanding of the concept of customer-brand relationship and content creation, this study will examine how the influencer-follower relationship could influence content creation within social media.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The primary focus of this study is on micro-influencers, using Campbell and Farrell's (2020) categorisation of influencers. This means that the influencers would have between 10,000 to 100,000. The purpose for this decision is the accessibility to social media influencers themselves. It is difficult to find candidates with a larger following, and fortunately, the author of this study had some connections with a few within the micro-influencer category. Due to a gap in existing literature on understanding specific influencer groups or types, it is worthwhile to explore a specific group rather than generalising all influencers as one. The COVID-19 pandemic has created difficulties to conduct research in today's environment, fortunately, qualitative methods could continue to be used with the use of digital interviews and recording functionalities. This provides access to anyone, anywhere.

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to create a guide or basis for this research. It portrays the research paradigm for this study that provides a lens for the methodology and research method. Following this, it will discuss the methods used for data collection and analysis. To conclude this chapter, it considers the ethical considerations for this research.

3.2. Interpretive Research Paradigm

This research uses the lens of interpretivism to guide the methodology and research approach. In general, a paradigm is a set of beliefs, accepted concepts, theories, or patterns that guides our actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, religion is a belief or concept that guides the values and actions that people would follow throughout their life. In research, a paradigm is a lens that guides how research questions are asked and how to conduct the research (Davies & Fisher, 2018). There are many different research paradigms where there are plenty of sources that define them within literature, of which the interpretive paradigm is one of the many major paradigms (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Davies & Fisher, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The interpretive paradigm is used in qualitative research that seeks the truth by understanding the perspective and meaning behind what people would attach to the events in their lives (Grant & Giddings, 2002). It is a form of research that generates findings from having dialogues and interactions between the subject and its researcher (Davies & Fisher, 2018). Grant and Giddings (2002) explain that the relationship between the researcher and participant using interpretivism is that the researcher is the listener and interpreter of the findings or data that is presented by the participant, of which the researcher's interpretation is the fore front of the analysis of the data.

Because of the importance the researcher's interpretations, **Figure 3.1** demonstrates the researcher as the larger figure in the image (Grant & Giddings, 2002).

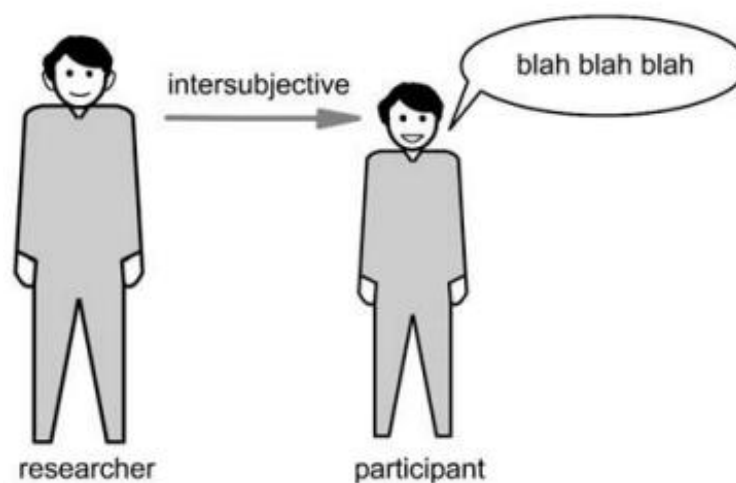


Figure 3.1: The Interpretivist Relationship

Note. Retrieved from “Making sense of methodologies: A paradigm framework for the novice researcher” by Grant B.M. & Giddings, L.S., 2002, *Contemporary Nurse*, 13, 10-28. 2002 by eContent Management Pty Ltd.

All paradigms have several components that define them. **Table 3.1** provides an overview of those components that highlights the key characteristics of interpretive research. Some of those components look at the ontology, which is how the researcher views reality, and epistemology, how the researcher knows what the reality is (Creswell & Poth, 2018. P.59). It also includes the strategies of how the research is conducted through the methodologies used under the interpretive paradigm (Davies & Fisher, 2018). However, critics would argue that it is difficult to transfer or generalise the findings through this paradigm due to the reality being subjective and the answers differing from individual to individual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This criticism could be avoided using an inductive method to collate and analyse data, as it refines that data to common themes shared amongst the participants (Thomas, 2006) which is the approach that this study undertakes.

Table 3.1: The Characteristics of the Interpretive Paradigm

Characteristics	Interpretive Paradigm
Ontology	Multiple realities that are subjective and mentally constructed by each individual
Epistemology	Truth is only discovered by understanding the perspective of the individual's events or lives. Researcher is entwined in the production of the knowledge
Research Methods	Qualitative Research

Methodologies	Includes Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, Narrative, Biographical
Criticisms	Limitations on the transferability and generalisability of the findings

Note: Adapted from “Understand research paradigms” by Davies, C. & Fisher, M., 2018, Journal of the Australasian Rehabilitation Nurses’ Association, 21(3), 21-25.

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1 Original Methodology Option

Originally, before conducting and finalising the research design for this study, the author decided that netnography was the best fit for this research. It was a methodology that had gained recent attention for digital studies on public behaviour (Morais et al., 2020). Netnography was derived from ethnography which examines shared patterns of an entire culture-sharing group but based within the online context (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to enable the techniques derived from ethnographic research to be applied online (Kozinets, 2002). However, the process within the methodology consists of mostly observation or participatory observations (Goulding, 2015) which includes examining existing content online to explore the impact on online communities (Kozinets, 2002). However, the key approach to obtain data for this research is through semi-structured interviews which does not provide the observational method which is crucial for netnography, therefore netnography is not fit for purpose.

Semi-structured interviews is the main source of data for this research. With a sample size of seven participants, and each participant sharing similar experiences as an influencer within the same category as ‘micro-influencers’, the author has decided to use a general inductive approach as the key methodology for this paper which allows for an in-depth analysis of interviews. To add credibility and rigor to the data, projective techniques are used to enhance the quality of the conversations and data obtained. A general inductive approach has been used to systematically analyse the data from the interviews to obtain quality analysis. These methods and methodology will be discussed further within the following sections.

3.3.2 General Inductive Approach

There are many procedures, used within qualitative data, that are generally associated with specific approaches like grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), or phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), and narrative analysis (Leiblich, 1998). However, Thomas (2006) discussed that not all procedures or approaches are generic or could be labelled within any of the approaches listed earlier, so the general inductive approach was presented. This approach allows for the research findings to emerge

from dominant or significant themes that appear from the raw data (Thomas, 2006) which is critical to answering the qualitative research question for this study.

The inductive approach is ideal for this research as the author uses its systematic procedure to analyse the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews on micro-influencers. The key purpose of this approach is to allow the emergence of findings from frequent or main themes drawn from the raw data without the restrictions from structured methodologies (Thomas, 2006) such as netnography or ethnography. The inductive approach uses a coding process through inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006), shown in **Figure 3.2**, which this research heavily uses during the data analysis stage.



Figure 3.2: Coding Process in Inductive Analysis

Note: Adapted from “A general inductive approach for analysing qualitative evaluation data” by Thomas, D.R, 2006, *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.

Each of the stages have been outlined by Thomas (2006) in the following:

1. First stage includes the preparation of the data and formatting it as required and closely reading of the text to gain familiarity.
2. Second stage includes creating the initial segments or codes from the text within the raw data that is related to the objective of the research.
3. Third stage includes labelling the segments into categories, which can range between thirty to forty categories.
4. Fourth stage includes reducing the overlap of the categories as segments can be grouped into multiple categories. This further refines the categories to around 15-20.
5. Final stage includes grouping the refined categories into main themes which can be used to create a model

The following sections will review how the author used the inductive approach to collate and analyse the data for this study.

3.4. Research Method

3.4.1 Participant Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this research as they had to meet specific criteria as a micro-influencer. Random selection would not have been ideal for this study due to the specific number of followers an individual must have. The benefit of using purposeful sampling allows for a specific selection of samples involved to meet specific purposes (Stenbacka, 2001).

As the primary focus of this study is on the perspectives of social media influencers, the participants had to be considered an influencer as part of the eligibility criteria. There are many different groups or categories of influencers, to avoid generalising all influencers into one group, it was decided to focus primarily on micro-influencers, which is defined by Campbell & Farrell (2020) as those with between 10,000 to 100,000 followers. The next criteria are that they had to have an online profile on Instagram to ensure consistency and allow for participants to discuss their engagement across the same functionalities within the online platform.

This study does not have any restrictions or criteria on gender, age, or specific type of content that they would post. The purpose of this is to allow the ability to examine any outliers that could differentiate participants from each other. However, it is important to understand that there are complexities to finding social media influencers as candidates as they generally are difficult to reach for academic purposes.

3.3.2 Sample Size

In qualitative research, there is debate as to whether sample size is important. There is a general agreement that there many factors that can affect the number of participants or interviews to achieve saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). Most methodologists recognise the lack of standards for sample size; however, it is not a 'one size fits all' situation as clearly explained by Patton (2002) in this statement:

"There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources." (Patton, 2002, p. 243).

Due to the limited time and access complexities, for the purpose of this thesis, the concept of data saturation was considered which entails conducting interviews, or bringing in new participants, until the findings of the data has reached saturation or nothing new is being added (Bowen, 2008).

Seven individuals were found and participated in this study. **Table 3.2** presents an overview of each participant by highlighting their gender, follower count (as one of key eligibility criteria) and the type of content they post. To respect the privacy of these influencers, they remain anonymous, so within this study, they will be referred to as *Participants 1-7*.

Table 3.2: Data Sample

Participant	Gender	Number of Followers	Content
1	f	22k	Lifestyle/health
2	f	11k	Lifestyle/health
3	f	78k	Lifestyle
4	m	10k	Lifestyle
5	f	31k	Fitness
6	f	25k	Beauty
7	f	13k	Beauty/Fashion

3.3.3 Interview Process

Generally, the use of qualitative research through practice theories is to gain an understanding of subjective meanings of certain phenomenon and to generalise theoretical propositions (Carrigan et al., 2011). In this study, this understanding was produced by conducting semi-structured interviews on the participants listed in **Table 3.2**. Each of the participants were asked to participate in this study through direct messages on social media, specifically Instagram. They were also asked to refer someone who would be interested to participate that fits the eligibility criteria. Those interested would receive an invitation with an information sheet and were asked to complete a consent form via email. These were stored securely in a safe manner. Examples of this information is provided within the Appendices.

3.4. Data Collection

As the general inductive approach is a qualitative approach, it is important to collect qualitative data that will allow inductive analysis in the study (Thomas, 2006). This study obtained its data using semi-structured interviews to explore the perceived relationship that micro-influencers have with their followers and its impact on content creation. Within the interviews, projective techniques were used to develop questions and findings further.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

In the semi-structured interview for this study, the interviews are not fully scripted, instead an interview guide was used to assist the engagement with a series of open-ended questions *[refer to Appendix C]*. For an effective interview the following activity took place using the guide by Galletta and Cross (2013), the facilitation of reciprocity was used to achieve clarification and understanding. Reciprocity is referred to as a 'give and take' with mutual negotiation and meaning (Lather, 1986), the reciprocal engagement between the author and the participant allows further elaboration and depth towards the focus of the participant (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

An introduction of the author and the objective of the study was briefly discussed at the beginning of every interview. Although the interview does introduce the participant, that information remained confidential, and the identifying information is anonymised (King, 2004) to the public. Only the author and their supervisors for this thesis would have access to the personal information, which the participants were made aware of. Given the uncertainties that covid lockdowns gave during the time of data collection, the author ensure that they will be available for their interviewees. During the lockdown, it was a difficult time for both the author and the participants, which created delays and countless rescheduling, so the author had to ensure their time was flexible to adapt with the interviewees. Regardless of the delays, the participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, so if they needed to, they could withdraw their interest in the interviews at any given time.

As part of the semi-structured interviews, projective techniques were used to develop questions that would diverting the participants to review types of content they posted such as:

[While referring to a post] can you explain what you're trying to communicate within this post? Or What was the purpose of this post?

This technique provides the ability to permit further investigation on preferences or behaviours (Chandler & Owen, 2002) and allowed the micro-influencers to express any underlying beliefs or feelings at any instance (Vidal et al., 2013). Other ways this technique was implemented, was by asking the participants to imagine a third party and to describe their likes and dislikes of them. This provided an understanding of different success traits of an influencer. The types of questions using projective techniques were 'what', 'who' questions that projected to either the content, or third parties to keep the question open-ended. The author explicitly ensured that 'yes' or 'no' answers were avoided and if it was to occur, to always have a follow-up question for the participant to elaborate. The interview guide was proven useful to ensure an effective and successful semi-structured interview for the study.

3.5. Data Analysis

How data is analysed is fundamental to ensuring researchers have thoroughly reviewed their data set, especially with qualitative research. For this study, a general inductive approach was used to conduct the analysis. Inductive analysis refers to using detailed information from raw data, from the interviews, to develop the key concepts, themes, or models (Thomas, 2006). Compared to other analysis approaches, an inductive approach seeks to develop themes or categories that is most relevant to the research objectives, whereas grounded theory, where it's most similar, aims to build a theory from the themes (Thomas, 2006).

The process for inductive analysis or coding is detailed in Thomas' (2006) study, it involves initialling reading the raw data, identifying specific segments or codes from the text, labelling those segments to create categories, and then further refining those categories to develop key themes. Ideally, there should be no more than eight final themes, as that could be seen as potential for further refining (Thomas, 2006).

The data within this study consists of 7 semi-structured interviews which totals to around 90 pages of transcribed data. Each interview was conducted through an audio call online. Each interview was recorded and professionally transcribed and loaded into NVIVO, a well-known software used for qualitative data analysis, for coding. An inductive approach for analysis allowed the opportunity to code each interview in parallel with each other when awaiting more transcripts.

To implement the inductive analysis, NVIVO was primarily used as it had the ability to easily highlight quotes and attach it to key segments. Following the analysis process, those key segments were further refined to categories and themes which were then exported into a table to details the connection and key quotes that were associated to each theme shown. To provide a visual example of the inductive analysis process, **Table 3.3** provides an example of how quotes from the raw data were segmented or coded.

Table 3.3: Example of First Level Coding

Quotes from Interviews	Segments from First Level Coding
<i>Participant 1: "Influencer' means that you've got an influence over someone, and I just think that's a strong word to use."</i>	Doesn't like using the term 'influencer' for themselves
<i>Participant 4: "I know I do influence others; I just don't like the term"</i>	
<i>Participant 3: "Calling yourself one seems a bit arrogant. If you state you are an influencer, you're acting like some big shot."</i>	Feels that calling yourself an influencer is self-boosting

<i>Participant 2: “Once I got my first brand deal, was when I realised. Many people can get followers, but not many people with a lot of followers get brand deals”</i>	Realising they become an influencer when they received brand deals
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Following the first initial coding across all the interviews, it is followed by coding the segments into categories. These categories provide a sub-theme to the initial first segments that were coded initially. Once a sub-theme has been identified, the sub theme is grouped into a main theme that drives the findings for the research question. **Table 3.4** takes the example from **Table 3.3** to develop the segments into categories and further developed into the main theme.

Table 3.4: Example of Categorising Codes and Developing Themes

Segments from First Level Coding	Categories (Sub-Theme)	Main Theme
Doesn't like using the term 'influencer' for themselves	Doesn't identify as an influencer	Self-Identity
Feels that calling yourself an influencer is self-boosting		
Realising they become an influencer when they received brand deals	Realisation of being an influencer	

3.5.1 Data Trustworthiness

Credibility is one of the four general types of trustworthiness within qualitative research, founded by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To ensure credibility in this study the author, firstly, included stakeholder checks. Stakeholder checks involves opportunities for people with specific interests for evaluation to comment on the findings or interpretations made. In this study, some of the interviews and summary of the data findings were shared with the author's supervisors to review and make their suggestions where necessary. Participants were also invited to choose whether they would like to receive the findings of the results or not once it has been finalised. Secondly, during the interviews, the author ensured that tactics were used to build rapport at the beginning of the interviews [refer to Appendix C] by asking open-ended questions to create a flow in conversation. This tactic ensures credibility by building trust with participants and initiating rapport (Thomas, 2006; Williams & Irurita, 1998).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted based on the guidelines provided by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC Reference number: 21/254 approved on 14 July 2021). When recruiting participants for this study, everyone was informed of the

general aim of the study. Prior to the scheduled commencement of the study, participants were sent the participant information sheet which detailed the motivation of the research and its procedures. Participants were informed that the participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their involvement of the study at any time without reason. To ensure the confidentiality of each participant, their identities remained anonymous within the findings of the research by being assigned pseudonyms. The author remained transparent with the participants on their identity and motives for conducting the interviews. Each of the participants were also informed that they have access to the findings if they wish to review it.

3.6. Summary

This chapter justifies the purpose of using general inductive approach for this study and why the previous option, netnography, was not the best fit for this study. It outlines the key steps within the process which the author uses as a guide to conduct the research on micro-influencers and to explore how they perceive their relationship with their followers. Following, it delves into how the author used the inductive approach to collect and analyse the data. This chapter concludes with a discussion on how data trustworthiness was obtained and the approach towards ethical considerations. The following chapter will examine the findings from the analysis and its relation to the research question.

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the key themes that emerged from the analysis and interpretation of the data collated from the semi-structured interviews of the seven participants listed in *Table 1*. Each of the participants fall within the definition of a micro-influencer that is based on the number of followers they have using Campbell & Farrell's (2020) brackets. In this case, micro-influencers have between 10,000 to 100,000 followers. The purpose of this study is to further understand the relationship between influencers and their followers to explore the following question:

Research Question: How do social media influencers perceive their relationship with their followers, and how does it influence the content they create?

When examining the data derived from the interviews, inductive analysis was used to identify the key themes that emerged from the data. This means that the themes were developed from the interview transcript by analysing and identifying patterns while also further refining the patterns to produce the final themes. Four key themes were identified from the analysis: Relationship, Self-Identity, Content Creation and Traits of Success. Using thematic analysis, **Figure 4.1** provides the data structure that breaks down the development of the key themes and defines each theme based on the key sub-themes and codes found from the interviews conducted. The theme, 'Relationship' refers to how micro-influencers perceive their relationship with their followers. 'Self-Identify' delves into how micro-influencers perceive themselves as an influencer. 'Content Creation' refers to the factors that impact the reason or motivation for what a micro-influencer would post within their Instagram page. The 'Traits of Success' explores what factors would define a successful influencer from the perception of a micro-influencer.

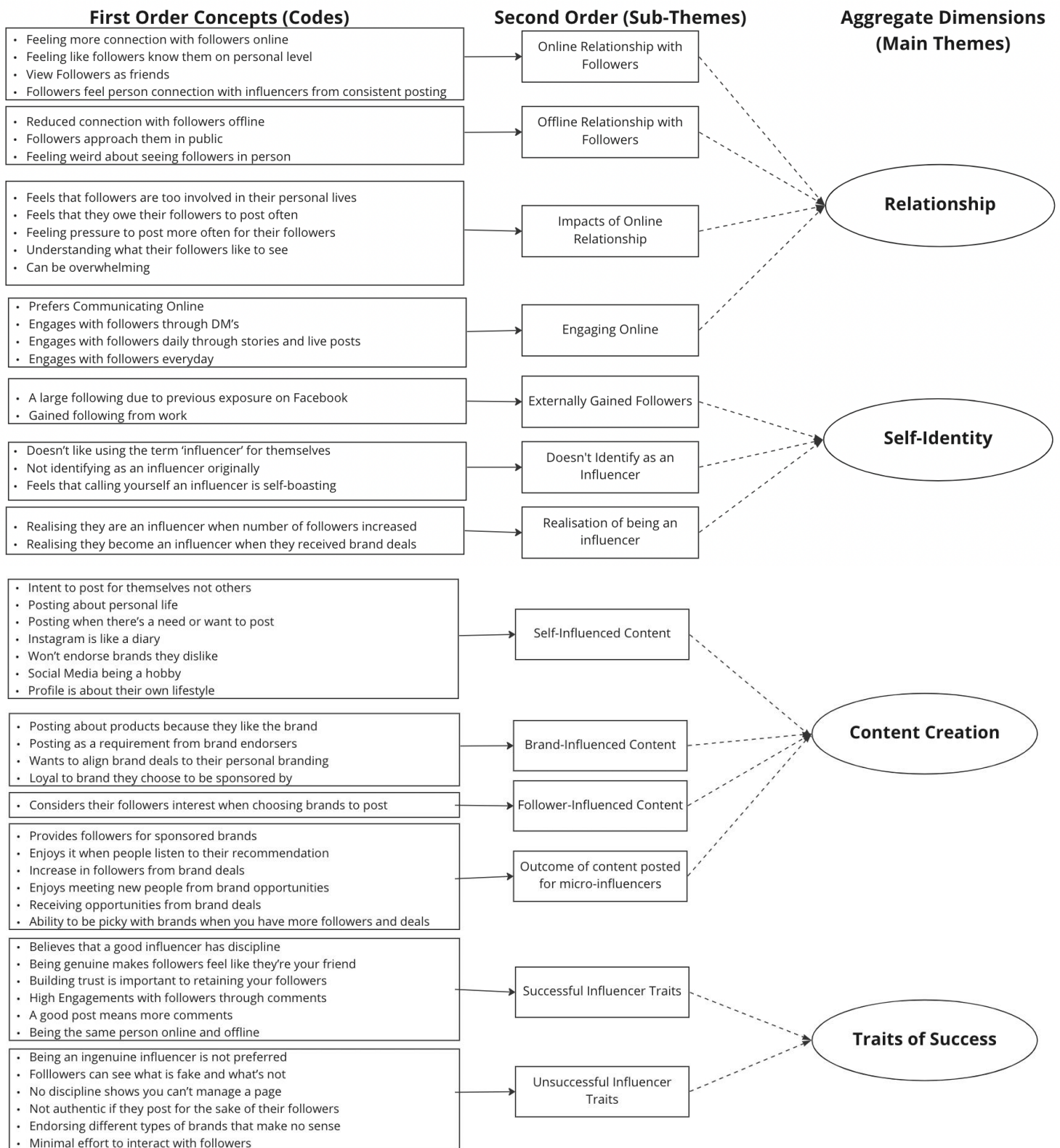


Figure 4.1: Data Structure

The chapter addresses the research question with three sections that examines the factors that impact how influencers perceive their relationship with their followers, and how each perception influences different types of content. The first section delves

into the themes, Relationship and Self-Identity, which creates the perception that influencers have of themselves and their followers that impacts the overall relationship that these micro-influencers believe they have with their online community. The second section represents the theme, Content Creation, which explores the types of influence that impacts the content that influencers decide to post within their page. The final theme, Traits of Success, is examined across both sections as it defines both how relationships are formed and what drives the type of content created. Successful or unsuccessful traits are determined by how micro-influencers perceive success. This is obtained and measured based on how they portray those they admire within social media or their approach towards maintaining a positive relationship with followers. Project techniques, discussed within the methodology chapter, are used to identify how the participants perceive success. The final section is a summary of the key findings which will answer the research question. It will provide a new perception of relationships between online influencers and their followers and the impacts of that on content creation.

4.2. Micro-Influencer's Perception of Their Relationship with Their Followers

The term, Parasocial Relationship, is most used to describe the relationship between followers and influencers. However, the meaning behind it is no longer relevant when looking at a reciprocal relationship with an online influencer and the online community as it is originally used to describe a non-reciprocal interaction or relationship (Lou, 2022). This section explores this reciprocal relationship from the interview participants' perspective based on the following factors that were identified (e.g., online, and offline environment impacts, influencer's self-identity, and online engagements). Each of these factors play a key role in building the relationship with online followers which has been found to be consistent across all the seven participants. Regardless of the number of followers, or the type of influencing that these micro-influencers conduct, they each have a similar perception on how they view their relationship with their following based on the factors that will be discussed.

4.2.1 Differing impacts on relationships within the online versus offline environment

In today's current understanding of influencer-follower relationships, followers would describe their relationship with their followers as partially reciprocal, due to the effort of influencers engaging back with them in the online environment (Lou, 2022) compared to the lack of reciprocity received when looking at parasocial relationships (Tang et al., 2018). This study supports Lou's (2022) findings but looks at the relationship from a

micro-influencer's point of view. However, it has been found that the participants view the relationship differently when online compared to when they come across their followers offline.

Within the online environment, the findings from the data suggest that engagement with followers has a direct impact on the establishment of influencer-follower relationships. The participants have claimed that they feel a close or personal relationship from the consistency of their engagement which consists of using Instagram features such as comments on posts (publicly seen) or direct messages (not seen by the public) which is supported by the following statements from the data:

[Participant 1]: I definitely feel more of a connection with my followers digitally.

[Participant 2]: They (followers) know me as a friend when they communicate with me through comments or DM [direct messages].

[Participant 5]: It's like we are already familiar with each other whenever I respond to them.

The importance of engaging online with their followers is consistent across all the participants based on the effort they produce. For example, *Participant 3* had stated that *"I try to talk to them everyday by replying to their messages...I can't get to all of them but everyday I'd interact with at least one of them"*. The effort on engagement is consistent with how the participants view, what they consider, a successful influencer. One of the key success traits found was having high-level engagement as supported by the following examples from the data:

[Participant 1]: ...posts with a lot of comments, that's how I know people actually like it.

[Participant 3]: It doesn't matter how many people there are, if there are no comments on your posts, it is very dull and uninviting, like they don't care about your posts at all.

In reverse from this success trait, findings have suggested that when influencers make minimal effort to engage with their followers online, it is an undesirable characteristic that is believed to be unlikeable by followers based on the following statements:

[Participant 4]: They don't even try, I understand it is hard to get through all your comments – but you should address it, you know?...get involved.

[Participant 1]: I always talk about discipline, like the consistency of when you reply to comments or messages. If you're not disciplined, you don't know how to manage your time or the way you live your life.

The findings suggest that there are negative aspects to the online exposure too. For micro-influencers, the online relationships they build have many impacts or effects on how they view their followers and the pressures that come attached. Most participants feel that their followers tend to be heavily involved in their personal lives which causes an overwhelming pressure to post more often. This is supported by the statements made by the participants saying that:

[Participant 2]: They [followers] want to know everything about my personal life and expect constant updates.

[Participant 7]: If I miss even a day or so, I receive so many questions about what is going on"

The offline environment has mostly a reversed response to what has been claimed about the online environment. All participants, excluding *participant 3*, have referred to the idea that the connection with their followers is significantly reduced offline from their perspective. The online presence as a micro-influencer does mean that they will be recognised and approached in public, which causes a sense of unfamiliarity with their followers compared to the 'close connection' they have when engaging online. Some statements, from the data, to support this says:

[Participant 5]: ...overwhelming in real life, but its much easier to do it [communicate] over the phone [application].

[Participant 2]: Obviously it is my first time seeing them, so it is a bit weird when people come up in public sometimes.

Followers would generally feel that they have a personal bond with the influencers that they follow (Farivar et al., 2021), so they would feel that they know everything about an influencer based on what they post, but this isn't the case for the influencer as they don't usually have any knowledge about the people they meet as mentioned by *Participant 1* who claims that "*obviously they've [followers] have been watching me for a while, but I have no clue about them, I would be like – Who are you?*". However, the relationship in the offline environment is not all negative. *Participant 3* has claimed that they "*enjoy meeting my followers, it makes me feel closer to them – it feels real*". This specific participant has a significantly higher number of followers, as a key difference, than the rest, as shown within the data sample in **Table 1**. This finding may indicate that influencers with larger followings, in comparison to the ones with less within the same "micro-influencer" category may have varying perceptions on offline relationships, however, further studies would be required to confirm this.

Other than the different environments, a relationship may vary for specific followers based on why they started following the influencer. Three participants have indicated that they have had previous exposure to the public, whether it is through work or through other public platforms. Participants 1 and 2 previously had a public profile within Facebook, many years before they started their Instagram page, where Participants 3 and 4 had been exposed to the public from their jobs. The previous exposure had provided them followers automatically when they started their Instagram pages. According to *Participant 3*, “*I feel a different kind of connection with the people who knew me before I blew up on Instagram, you know? It’s special*”, which means that there may be more of a connection with specific types of followers they have.

4.2.2 The Self-Identity of a Micro-Influencer

Although there are many labels that social media influencers have, i.e., opinion leaders or endorsers (Chang et al., 2020), it has been found that all interviewees do not prefer to label themselves as an influencer or do not identify as one. However, for each participant, there is a point within their journey where they accept the fact they technically are an influencer, by definition, even when they don’t self-identify as one. How an influencer views themselves impacts the approach they have when engaging with their followers, which in turn impacts their relationship. All interviewees have discussed why they wouldn’t purposely identify themselves as an influencer due to the term being a word, they can’t self-associate with, for example:

[Participant 1]: ...that it’s a strong word to use.

[Participant 3]: I would prefer just stating that [I] am a public figure

[Participant 6]: Calling myself one, [influencer], can feel so cringey”

[Participant 4]: People look at you like you’re ‘all that’ If you state that you are an influencer, like some big shot. I prefer just stating that I am a public figure.

Other interviewees have also stated that “*..I just don’t fully see myself as one*” (*Participant 3*) due to the fact that they didn’t start their Instagram profile for the sake of becoming an influencer or influencing others generally. All participants have indicated that they started their page for personal reasons. The findings from this study identifies that, for micro-influencers, they generally do not self-identify as an influencer due to the feeling that the term ‘influencer’ is derogatory and since they didn’t originate from influencing on purpose, they choose not to use the term for themselves.

Even though the participants would not self-identify as an influencer or label themselves as well, they do accept that what they do online does make them an influencer based on the numerical count of followers and the brand opportunities they receive. *Participant 7* states that their influencer journey started when they “...saw an increase in people following me online” whereas *Participant 5* discusses that influencing truly starts when “...brands start to recognise you, that’s when you’re like oh, this is more than just posting”. The findings show that micro-influencers depend on growth of followers and brand endorsements to consider their job as influencing. However, the growth of followers on its own is not enough to justify being an influencer based on the statement made by *Participant 1*, “...you can have a lot of followers but not many people with a lot of followers get brand deals”. This indicates that brand deals or opportunities plays a direct impact on the acceptance of being an influencer in association with the number of followers. However, having brands doesn’t equate to a successful influencer. An unsuccessful trait for an influencer, identified from the data, is if they endorse brands that don’t match their identity as per the examples below:

[Participant 5]: There’s one [an influencer] that has soo many different brands, that it makes no sense? How is anyone going to relate to you if you are all over the place.

[Participant 7]: I feel like people get sick of it if you work with brands with no consistency to who you are.

Self-identity impacts the relationship between the micro-influencers and the followers as it impacts the mindset of the individual and how they feel towards their followers. Majority of the participants perceive themselves to be like normal people, non-influencers, which allows them to feel connected or more familiar with their online community. This is portrayed by the comments below:

[Participant 2]: I am normal, I am just like everyone else. I think that’s why I can relate to my followers more.

[Participant 3]: Well, not seeing myself as an influencer means that I’m no different from anyone. I am only human which makes it easy to build a friendship-like bond with my followers.

4.3. The Key Influences on Content Creation

Recent studies on content creation, in context with social media influencers, generally look at the impact that online content has on marketing (Schouten et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2020, Lee & Watkins, 2016), however, not many observes what influences the micro-influencers to post specific content. The findings within this study looks at what

influences different types of content posted based on the perceived relationship that was observed by micro-influencers. This section explores the three key sub-themes that were identified that influenced the content created by the micro-influencers. Content posted are either self-influenced, where they post based on personal reasons and intentions, brand-influenced, where the post is triggered or requested by brands, and follower-influenced, where the post was created for the sake of the followers and what they would want to see. All participants have discussed different scenarios where each post was influenced by either of these three sub-themes.

4.3.1 Impacts of Self-identity of self-influenced content

The concept of self-identity within this study, which is how an individual perceives themselves, not only impacts the relationship between an influencer and their followers, but it also influences the content they generate. Social media influencers are considered “human brands” as they try to differentiate themselves (Ki et al., 2020) which can be shown in their conscious belief to be authentic or to portray authenticity (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). The findings within this study supports this understanding as it has been identified, within the data, that a key success trait for an influencer is ‘being genuine’, for example:

[Participant 1]: I'd say someone who is authentic, and is real about what message or post they want to portray with their followers.

[Participant 7]: It's important to be true to who you are, don't be fake, followers can see right through what you post, they know if you are being fake.

The interviewees all had similar origin stories where they each began their online platform for themselves, they would describe it as:

[Participant 6]: ...kind of just like a diary...because I can look back and reflect”

[Participant 4]: It started off as a hobby, a personal photo album”

From these statements, it can be assumed that most influencers would start off initially with self-influenced content, meaning that the content they used were for personal reasons and based on what the individual would prefer to post. Micro-Influencers generally post when they want, or when they feel the need to but participants have stated that they “try and get out of the headspace that [I'm] posting for people” (Participant 1) which indicates that they are self-consciously ensuring they keep their content more personal or more towards their own personal branding and interests. When it comes to brand deals or opportunities, all participants are selective with whom they would work for. Although they may work with certain brands, there is still

indications of self-influence since they specifically pick and choose which brand, they would want to work for to ensure it aligns with their personal interests which is supported by the statements:

[Participant 4]: If someone like McDonalds hit me up I'd say no...because I don't feel like that's a part of my brand.

[Participant 1]: I've turned down a lot of brands, even well-known ones...because I don't like the products.

The findings demonstrate that micro-influencers are self-aware of their own personal branding and would ensure to keep control of the content within their online profile, so it continuously portrays their own personality. However, these statements may also indicate a purposeful approach to ensuring they are perceived a certain way for the followers' interest although, further study would need to be conducted to examine if there are any further intentions.

4.3.2 The influences of brand-influenced content

Within the online environment of today's world, it is common for businesses and marketers to use influencer marketing with micro-influencers to promote or sell products (Boerman, 2020). Influencers are the key marketing source which challenges traditional marketing (Casalo et al., 2018). This sub-section explores how brands influence the participants to post brand-influenced content which has been found to be one of the main types of content that micro-influencers post within this study. Although the research question focuses more on content that is influenced the relationship, there were many discussions that lead to brand-influenced content.

When it comes to brand-influenced content, this specifically refers to posts where the influencer is obligated to create content for a brand or feels the need to post about a brand. All participants have received brand deals or opportunities at this stage of their influencing career, the most common content that followers would see would be sponsored posts. However, there is content that isn't marked as 'sponsored' which shows our participants either using or reviewing the brand or service because of obligations or needs which is captured in the following scenarios:

[Participant 1]: I have to post certain types of content to fulfil the contracts that I've signed with them.

[Participant 3]: I had a little bit of a break, but I know my agent is actually on me today.

These micro-influencers don't always post about brands because it is mandatory, they also post brand related content when they personally enjoy the brand or are loyal to specific brands from whom they aren't contracted with. *Participant 5* had described a scenario where *"Big Boy Sneakers, they gifted me sneakers and clothes, and I did like a Tik Tok and Reel on Instagram"*. This shows that the gesture provided by the brand had influenced the content that was created about it. With loyalty towards un-contracted brands, *Participant 1* described a scenario where *"I always buy from Sprint Fit, and I absolutely love them! I am not working with them in anyway, but I would post about them"*. The findings suggest that brand-influenced deals aren't always an obligation or mandatory requirement from brands. Micro-Influencers would choose to post about brands of their own choosing based on personal interests. This indicates that brand-influenced content is also influenced by the influencer's personal preference. When it comes to the success traits of influencers, the following statements were made:

[Participant 5]: They would consistently endorse irrelevant brands...followers would lose interest.

[Participant 7]: I don't think you should be posting about brands that your followers aren't interested in. Followers want to see related content that they purposefully follow you for.

These statements indicate that brand-influenced posts must also consider what the wants and needs of the followers. These findings indicate that brand-influenced posts have indirect impacts from both the influencer and the followers. The findings model in Figure 4.2 highlights the relation to self-influenced and follower-influenced content on brand-influenced posts. It provides an insight that the relationships between influencers and followers have an influence on the decision of brand-influenced content.

4.3.3 The influences of follower-influenced content

From the findings discussed so far, micro-influencers value the relationship they build with their followers online, which impacts our final sub-theme, follower-influenced content. Most of the participants have discussed that they would genuinely consider the interest of their followers when posting certain content for example, *Participant 6* had mentioned that *"though mostly I stick to brands I personally vibe with, I also consider what my followers would want to see"*. This statement is in relation to brand related content, which indicates that the influencer does consider what brands their followers would associate themselves with as well as themselves. *Participant 3* had also discussed in further detail that they would *"be inclined to click through to or listen to, and if it passes that check or filter, I am more than happy to go ahead"* referring to what

they would research while stepping into the shoes of their followers. Follower-Influenced content is directly impacted by the relationship the influencers have with their followers. To consider their interest, they need to understand what their followers would want or need. However, some of the participants have highlighted that it is relatively simple to align brands with their followers due to the similar interests they have because they follow their page in general as mentioned in this statement:

[Participant 4]: I also consider what my followers would want to see, but yeah, my followers follow me for my specific content anyway.

As an influencer, it is expected that the content created, regardless of the motivator for the content, would provide any kind of influence for the followers. Each post would achieve opportunities or perks which have been highlighted by our participants. The increase in followers for both brands and the influencer themselves, along with the perks is appreciated by micro-influencers as stated in the following:

[Participant 2]: I enjoy seeing the growth, not just for me, but for the brands I work for...it is satisfying.

[Participant 1]: I've done photo shoots and that stuff, and I've met some really cool people.

With the growth and opportunities that come from the content posted, it allows the micro-influencers to be able to pick and choose who they would want to work with which gives the opportunity to align more brands with their personal brand as mentioned in this statement *"I have many options I can choose from which I really do appreciate. It gives me the opportunities to figure out what aligns with me best"* (Participant 6). The outcomes of content posted allows micro-influencers to relate their content to their personal interests and to continue their relationship they would build with their online following.

4.4. Summary of Findings

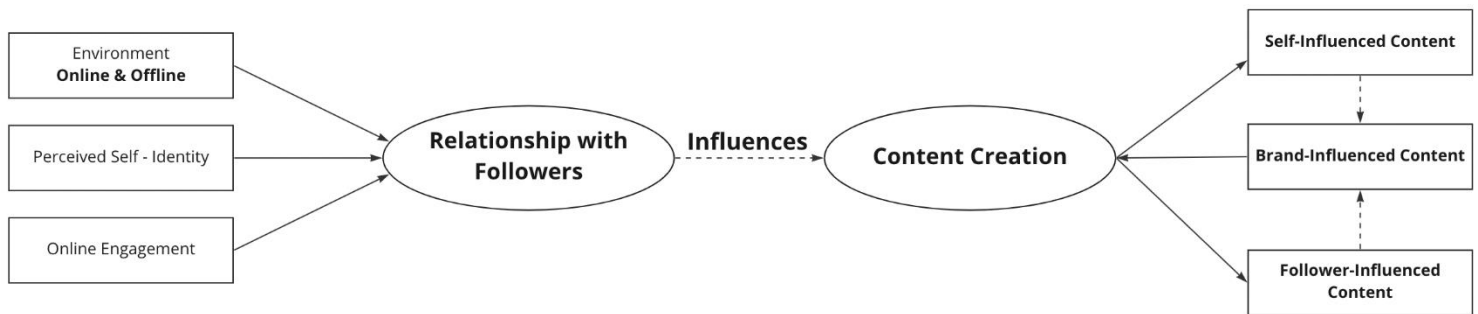


Figure 4.2: Findings Model

From the findings that have been discussed within this chapter, a model has been constructed in **Figure 4.2** to provide a visual answer for the research question in this study. The first part of the question explores how influencers, specifically micro-influencers perceive their relationship with their followers. The findings suggest that it varies based on the environment (online vs. offline), where they interact with their followers, how the influencers perceive themselves, and the type of engagement they have with their followers. Each of these factors have a direct impact on the influencer-follower relationship as shown in the model, which influences the type of content that they post. This section summarises the findings within this chapter to explain the model which address the research question.

Within the online environment, micro-influencers tend to have a stronger connection with their followers compared to the offline environment. However, it has been noted that the *Participant 3*, who has a larger following within micro-influencer bracket, has a positive relationship with their followers in the offline environment compared to the other participants. Even though the engagement online does have negative aspects (i.e., impacts on privacy, pressure to engage), it doesn't impact the "closeness" or familiarity that the influencers feel towards their followers online. How a micro-influencer perceives themselves also has a direct impact on how they feel towards their following. The findings suggest that they generally don't view themselves as an influencer, or an individual who is deemed high-profile, they see no difference between themselves and their following. This creates the idea that they are "normal" and can relate and connect with their followers at a personal level. These 3 key factors play a critical role in how influencers build and perceive their relationship within the online community.

The relationship that has been built, from the influencers' perspective, impacts the content they create within their profiles. The findings from this study have shown that their self-identity and the familiarity they have with their followers is highly valued

which directly influences the self-influenced and follower-influenced content posted. However, brand-influenced content has an external influence on content creation from the brands themselves based on contractual agreements. Even though it is an external influence, there is indirect influence from the self- and follower- influenced content. Self-Influenced content impacts the brand-influenced content because the influencer's self-identity and the importance of being genuine or authentic, provides the opportunity for these micro-influencers to pick and choose which brand to be sponsored by. Follower-influenced content impacts the brand-influenced content by providing an understanding of what brands the influencers know would interest their followers. This study identifies that the perceived relationship micro-influencers have, has strong influence over the content creation.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1. Introduction

With over 3 billion users on social media since 2019 (Kemp, 2019) the continuous growth in social media usage has skyrocketed providing people access to anyone and anything. This tends to mean an increase in social media influencers who are the key focus for this research. The primary purpose of this study was to explore how SMIs perceive their relationship with their followers through the concept of trans-parasocial relationships and how that relationship could influence different types of content created. The curiosity for this research was driven by the author's connection to existing SMI's who have made comments about how their followers interact with them and the parasocial relationship effects. With the understanding of existing literature, parasocial relationships are a one-way relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956) which doesn't explore how influencer's view followers. This curiosity led to the following research question for this study:

How do social media influencers perceive their relationships with their followers? And how does this influence the content they create?

This study reached out to micro-influencers to understand firstly, what impacts the relationship with their followers and secondly, whether that relationship impacts their content creation in any way. Data was collated from the semi-structured interviews and an intensive inductive analysis was conducted to develop key findings to the research question. Four key themes were identified which were discussed within chapter four of this thesis. These themes, all though have their own impact individually, are also interlinked to drive both the relationship and content creation which suggests

how relationships are perceived and how those relationships impact the content posted.

This final chapter of the thesis presents a conclusion to this study by addressing the research question and elaborating on the key contributions it has made to existing literature and managerial implications. Following this, the limitations of the study will be discussed to open suggestions for future research. Finally, the chapter will be concluded with a final summary to complete this paper.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

Based on the findings from this study, this section will address the key impacts that the findings have on existing literature. The literature review in chapter two highlights the key concepts that built the foundation for this research. Key gaps were addressed, especially regarding Lou's (2022) new concept on trans-parasocial relationships, where minimal studies on social media and influencer-follower relationships have acknowledged the influencer's perspective. This section will address the theoretical gaps discussed within the literature review to identify the contributions this study has made current academic literature.

5.2.1 Reciprocal Relationships between Influencer and Follower

This study contributes to Lou's (2022) existing concept on trans-parasocial relations by examining the levels of reciprocity and expanding it by observing the impacts of the reciprocity within the online and offline environment. Although the focus of this research is on the online platforms, the offline environment is relevant as it is an effect of the online-built relationship between influencer and follower. This concept of trans-parasocial relationships refer to the two-way relationship between SMI's and their followers. One of the key characteristics for trans-parasocial relations, which is shown in **Figure 2.1**, is the idea of being collectively reciprocal. Reciprocity refers to both parties being willing to return favours to build mutual interactions (Li et al., 2018) which in context with this study, means that both parties engage with each other both ways and they feel a close, mutual connection both ways. Within the online environment, this study has confirmed that there is reciprocity as the micro-influencers feel that they have more of a connection and mutual understanding with their followers online through reciprocal engagement, and they feel like they know them on a personal level.

In the offline environment, where influencers may come across their customers face-to-face, that feeling of mutual connection vanishes. Instead of a trans-parasocial effect, it reverts to the one-sided parasocial characteristic (Horton & Wohl, 1956) where the audience (followers) often know their influencer well, whereas the latter (influencer)

does not (Escalas & Bettman; Tsai & Men, 2013). The findings in this study found that micro-influencers tend to feel a reduced connection with their followers offline, while feeling 'weird' or 'awkward' about the interaction. This situation does remain a parasocial relationship because the followers tend to approach the SMI's in person as they still feel a close connection. This study suggests that the trans-parasocial trait of being collectively reciprocal only exists within the online environment for micro-influencers.

The findings also indicate the importance of online engagement on relationship building. Online engagement is also key to support Lou's (2022) trans-parasocial characteristic trait of being collectively reciprocal. Extant literature on social media engagement has suggested that engagement is positively impacted by image-based content (Li & Xie, 2020), which is seen on platforms like Instagram, the focus platform for this study. However, existing literature on social media engagement have failed to explore how impacts of engagement on influencer-follower relationships. The concept of parasocial interactions do relate engagement with relationships, but only in a one-way relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This study supports Lou's (2022) findings by exploring how online engagement impacts the perceived relationship between micro-influencers and their followers.

The findings in this study have found that micro-influencers prefer to communicate online by engaging with their followers through comments on posts, direct messages, and live stories on a daily basis which increases the engagement between SMIs and followers, this supports Li & Xie's (2020) study by confirming that image-based content positively impacts engagement rates. Consistent online engagement is considered one of the success traits for an influencer as it is deemed a discipline to maintain the engagement and shows the effort that is made to communicate. This study has found that the micro-influencers notice a positive impact on their relationship with their followers when they keep engagement levels high. This is supported by the study by Farrell et al. (2021) who states that engagement with consumers build trust which establishes an emotional tie between influencer and follower.

5.2.2 Self-Identity in relation to Human Brand Theory

The findings within this study identifies that micro-influencers do not associate themselves as an 'influencer'. Although they do acknowledge that they are one, they will not openly identify as one due to the term reflecting a negative tone in their perspective. Because of this, they brand themselves as "normal" and "no different from the "followers". Malik's et al. (2022) study on human brand theory in relation to

influencer-follower relations suggests that one of the key factors that fulfils a follower's need is the attribute to feeling connected at an emotional level. The concept of human brand theory, as mentioned within chapter two, identifies that a strong human brand must consist of a persona, fulfil intrinsic needs and strong attachments to develop a strong brand that can build strong relationships (Thomson, 2006). The micro-influencers' 'persona' in this study suggests 'normal' and 'genuine' personality which has been found to connect these micro-influencers and followers at an emotional level. This persona fulfils the needs of connectedness for the followers which results in a strong attachment. This suggests that the micro-influencers within this study have a strong human brand which correlates to the building of their relationship between themselves and their followers.

5.2.4 Relationship Influences on Content Creation and Influencer Marketing

Minimal studies, if any, had observed how content could impact relationship quality. From the literature review, one study was found that examined the qualities of content to ensure high relationship quality between a consumer and a brand (Abid et al., 2020). This study highlights that the content developed must be able to build trust, commitment, and satisfaction to increase the relationship quality. The findings from this study suggests that Abid et al. (2020)'s principal could be used in the context of influencer-follower relations and social media content creation. This research confirms that content holding those elements can build relationship quality, but this study adds that the relationship can also influence the content to include those elements.

This study had identified that the relationship perceived between micro-influencers and followers holds influence over the type of content that the influencers decide to post. Referring to **Figure 4.2**, Self-influenced content and follower-influenced content are impacted directly by the factors of online engagement, environment (online vs offline), and how influencers perceive their self-identity. Self-Influenced content is impacted by the need for the influencer to stay genuine and authentic. Follower-Influenced content is driven by the posting what the influencer believes is what the follower would want to see based on their understanding of their wants and needs through the relationship they've built. Brand-influenced content is the only content that is driven from external factors (i.e., brands or businesses) – however, it is interlinked to the self- and follower- influenced content as micro-influencers still choose who to work with that best aligns with both them and their followers. These factors align with the influencer success trait, confirmed within this study, to stay authentic and ensuring they post relevant content to keep everyone interested.

Literature on influencer marketing has had a key focus on the influencer-follower relationship, however, only from a parasocial lens (Labrecque, 2014). It had been highlighted that it is critical for influencer marketers to maintain an influencer-brand relationship in order to be successful (Martinez-Lopez, et al., 2020). The findings from this study on relationship impact on content creation contributes to this need to provide marketers an understanding on how to maintain that relationship between them to ensure a successful customer-brand relationship through influencer marketing. This study provides an understanding that influencers highly value their self-identity and is cautious of the needs and wants of their followers. When brands approach a SMI, specifically micro-influencer, they need to be aware that the brand must be aligned to that self-identity of the SMI and the type of audience they have. When there's a close relationship with followers, there's a need to product follower-influenced content which brands must align with.

5.2.5 Co-Creation through Trans-Parasocial Relations

Content within the parasocial realm was largely controlled by the media personae, it was considered nondialectical as there were no mutual development (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Within the new concept of trans-parasocial relations, co-creation of content or strategies is one of the key characteristics that defines the reciprocal influencer-follower relationship. Lou's (2022) findings found that followers do feel that influencer take into account their comments or suggestions for new content. However, co-created content within social media may not be a critical factor that impacts influencer-follower relations as studies have found that followers don't lower their admiration or interactions with influencers if they see sponsored or promoted posts (De Jans & Hudders, 2020).

Regardless of the minimal impact of co-created content on influencer-follower relationship through trans-parasocial interactions, this study can confirm that there are elements of co-creation which is influenced by the relationships influencers have built with their followers. Follower-influenced content is one of key examples of co-created content, but findings in this study also suggest that brand-related posts can also be co-created due to the influencer ensuring that the brands align with what followers may want to see too.

5.2.6 Summary

In answering the research question, by identifying how micro-influencers perceive their relationships and how those relationships can influence the content creation, this study is able to fulfil many gaps within influencer-follower relationship in social media. It also

highly contributes to the main concept that drove this research, trans-parasocial relationships by confirming the key characteristics but also contributing to it by including different aspects of how influencer-follower relationship can impact those characteristics.

5.3. Managerial Implications

Based on the findings from this study, marketers, small businesses or individuals could benefit from the understanding of how micro-influencers operate and perceive the relationship they have with their audience.

5.3.1 Approaching Micro-Influencers for Brand Sponsorship or Advertisements

Existing literature has indicated that followers don't tend to negatively be drawn away from influencers if they were to see sponsored or brand related posts (De Jans & Hudders, 2020), this is a benefit to small businesses who are targeting micro-influencers to help promote their product or service. This study can aid these businesses by providing an understanding of the importance of the relationship between an influencer and their followers. Understanding that relationship can guide the business to determine whether the brand aligns with the specific influencer or not. The findings within this study suggest that an unsuccessful trait of an influencer promotes brands that aren't consistent or aren't relevant to the audience and the influencer themselves.

Small business owners could benefit from using micro-influencers to grow or enhance their business, especially in New Zealand, where there is a large number of small business owners. Since Covid-19, many businesses have gone towards the digital approach, so when involving a micro-influencer, it could promote the business to different target groups and create exposure.

5.3.2 Improving your brand on social media

The findings from this study can guide not only businesses, but individuals who aims to build a social presence within online platforms. Participants in this study had claimed that staying genuine and authentic towards your own self-identity promotes a healthy bond and relationship with your followers. Building a relationship first, can aid with the understanding of what people would want to see from you in the future. Even if an individual may not be aiming to be an influencer at first, social platforms can still provide an opportunity to grow into something more, as all the participants within this study did not originally create their profile for the purpose of influencing, it was all personal accounts for personal use.

5.3.3 General understanding of social media engagement

By understanding the importance of social media engagement on building relationships, online brands can strategize their approach on communication to ensure they maintain the quality of a consumer-brand relationship on social media platforms. Many businesses can benefit from this study by understanding how micro-influencers engage with their audience. This understanding can aid marketing strategies or improve communication approaches.

5.4. Limitations & Future Research

Although the findings in this study contributes to providing a new perspective on influencer-follower relationships, like any other study, this has limitations and potential opportunities for future research.

First, it was acknowledged within chapter four, that one of the participants had a significantly higher number of followers compared to the other participants within the same micro-influencer bracket of 10,000 – 100,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This participant's response to how they perceive their relationship in the offline environment was opposite to the rest. Future research could re-examine the influencer brackets to determine whether new categories could be discovered. It could also examine whether influencers with a larger following than the sample provided would alter the response from the micro-influencers.

Second, due to the small sample size, there is a lack of diversity between male and female participants. Majority of the participants were female and there was only one male influencer that was interviewed. This lack of diversity may impact the generalised findings on micro-influencers as male participants could view certain phenomenon differently to women. Future research could extend on this study to confirm whether a majority of male micro-influencers would alter the current findings in this study.

Third, due to time and budget restriction for this thesis paper, netnography could not be utilised for this research. Although an inductive approach has its benefits to support this research, conducting content analysis on each participant could identify new findings or further support the current findings that impacts the relationship building or content creation. Additionally, due to the nature of this research, this study was bounded by restrictions through digital aspects only. If influencers were observed in person, it could prove interesting to discover more insights on influencer-follower relations in the offline context which could be an opportunity for future research.

Fourth, only one platform was used and generalised as social media. Instagram was the prime focus due to the inability to find other participants across different platforms. Other social media platforms have different functionalities which impact the type of content created and the forms of engagement within the platform itself. It is encouraged, for future research to explore other social media platforms i.e., Tik Tok, Twitch to examine how influencers would operate.

Fifth, micro-influencers were the primary focus for this study due to the diverse groups of influencers currently existing within Campbell & Farrell's (2020) categories. This limits the findings to a small portion of SMI's which indicates that the findings cannot be generalised across all influencers. Future research could extend on this study by examining different influencer groups to identify key differences or challenges compared to micro-influencers.

Sixth, this study only captures some of the concepts that relate to social media, SMI's, influencer-follower relationships. Other concepts would be beneficial to understand this context further, like the concept of Social Capital which explores the relationship between social groups that accumulates shared values within that relationship (Hwang & Kim, 2015). It also would benefit from exploring the different roles that SMIs play that could impact their relationship and content creation i.e., opinion leaders – could be a term that has a less negative tone for the participants who disliked the term influencer.

5.5. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research paper was to understand how social media influencers perceive their relationships with their followers and whether that relationship plays a role with the content creation. This study has presented some interesting findings that interlink different factors to relationship building and identifying the different influence types for content. In particular, the understanding that brand-influenced content can correlate with the other types to enhance the relationship is beneficial for marketing purposes. Overall, the findings in this study draws attention to the importance of understanding both sides of a relationship, whether it is influencer-follower relations, consumer-brand, or influencer-brand, both sides can provide different perspectives and validate assumptions which is beneficial to advancing academic knowledge.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

14 July 2021

Yingzi Xu
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Yingzi

Re Ethics Application: **21/254 Understanding relationships and its impact on content creation: The Influencers' Perspective**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 13 July 2024.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee
Cc: Anna.huynh94@hotmail.com; Crystal Yap

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

	Sections	Questions
1	Introductory Questions to create rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your journey of becoming an influencer begin? • At what point of your journey did you realise you were an influencer? • What type of influencer would you say you fit under? i.e well-being, family • Tell me about your daily routine as an influencer • What do you enjoy the most of being an influencer? Why? (any <i>different</i> events) • What challenges arise from being an influencer?
2	Exploring the Relationships between Influencer & Follower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your day to day engagements with your followers • How do you interact with your followers? • Describe the activities you have when you interact with followers? - <i>Probe further about their activities</i> • How would you describe your relationship with your followers? (projective technique) - 3rd party posts/random photos/symbolic - choose 3 posts to explain relationship with followers. Choose 3 words that define the relationship • How often do you engage with them? Elaborate – How do you maintain the engagement/relationship • * Using some of their posts* - (<i>try this method if the above doesn't receive much answers</i>). Can you please explain what you're trying to communicate? • What do you hope to achieve from this post? • What restrictions do you have in terms of what you share with your followers?
3	Exploring what motivates/influences content creation (projective)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often do you post?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of content do you usually post? Can you please show me some examples. Elaborate. • *Using some of their posts* - What was the purpose of this post? • • How do you think of what to post? • What feedback do you expect to get from the posts? • Can you show me a post that you liked the most/most of proud of? • Why did you choose this post?
4	Measurements of Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you focus on achieving through each post? <p>Think about a role model that you admire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is it? • What do you admire about them? • What do they do that you think is successful? • What do you suggest they could do to improve or better their performance? <p>Think about any public figure that you dislike:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do they do that you find is not likable?
5	Concluding Questions (dichotomous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I contact you again for any clarifications? • Are there additional comments about what we talked about today? • Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

Project title: *Understanding relationships and its impact on content creation: The influencer's perspective*

Project Supervisor: *Dr. Yingzi Xu & Dr. Crystal Yap*

Researcher: *Anna Huynh*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 27 June 2021.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be recorded and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted AUTEK Reference number type the AUTEK reference number

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

27 June 2021

Project Title

Understanding relationships and its impact on content creation: The influencers' perspective

An Invitation

My name is Anna Huynh, and I am a Master's student in the Marketing department at AUT University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research on Social Media Influencers, specifically within Instagram. Participation in this research is solely voluntary and all information you provide will be confidential. You can withdraw your participation at any stage prior to the completion of the research.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research explores the relationship between social media influencers and their followers, specifically at the influencer's perspective. There is a gap in academic literature, where most of the understanding of influencer and follower relationship is based on the follower's point of view. This is where my research comes in, to explore the relationship at the influencer's perspective. Following the understanding of the relationship, this research will also evaluate whether the relationships impact the content created in social media. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited to participate in this research as you fit the criteria as a social media influencer, based on your number of followers. This information sheet will provide the details you need to understand this research and your role. As an influencer, you play a crucial role to help me explore the relationships between you and your followers and identify how they potentially influence the content you post. Hence, you have been invited to participate in this research.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research, you can email me at anna.huynh94@hotmail.com or contact me at this number +64 21 145 2575. You will need to complete a Consent form which is attached along with this information sheet. Please complete the form and email them through to me. Participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

You will be involved in a semi-structured interview. This means that there is no strict format to follow, and you are open to provide and discuss any information that comes to mind during our session. The interview will be between 30-40 minutes. Things to know about the interview:

- The session will occur online via skype, zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Chats.
- All sessions will be recorded for reference
- Information provided will be confidential, and your name will not be mentioned in the research.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Don't worry, there will be no discomforts or risks when participating in my research. You can decline to answer any question and only discuss what you feel comfortable with providing. For your convenience, you can choose when the interviews will take place.

What are the benefits?

This research aims to provide marketing researchers a thorough understanding of how relationships between influencers and followers may influence the content creation. Current understanding is mostly based on the followers' perspective, but this research can provide new insights at the influencers' perspective. This also benefits businesses who plan to implement influencer marketing in their strategies, to get a better understanding of how influencers think and work.

As the participant, you will receive an e-gift card worth \$50 NZD as a 'thank you'. You will also get the opportunity to access the final results of the study if requested.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your participation is strictly voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential, and the information you provide will only be used for the purpose of this research. A confidentiality agreement will be signed to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality of the information you provided.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no costs to you, as the participant. The only thing we need from you is roughly 30-40 minutes of your time for the interview session.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will be given up to 2 weeks, from date of invitation, to consider whether you would like to participate in my research.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you would like to receive feedback on the results from this research, please ensure you tick the box within the Consent Form that indicates your interest on the results. A summary of the findings will be emailed through to you once the thesis is complete.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr. Yingzi Xu - yingzi.xu@aut.ac.nz

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of ATEC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Anna Huynh

Anna.huynh94@hotmail.com

Mobile: +62 21 145 2575

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Primary Supervisor: Dr Yingzi Xu - yingzi.xu@aut.ac.nz

Secondary Supervisor: Dr Crystal Yap - crystal.yap@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 921 9999 ext 5800

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, ATEC Reference number *type the reference number*.