HUMANS OF INSTAGRAM: EXPLORING INFLUENCER IDENTITY DISCOURSES ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Instagram has become a contemporary platform for presenting our digital identity. In this study, the Instagram influencer phenomenon is investigated from an identity, self-presentation, and impression management perspective. By focusing on the language of Instagram that enables this identity, its navigation and manifestations are explored. In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 fashion, beauty and lifestyle influencers, and the obtained data was analysed through the approach of discourse analysis, rooted in discursive psychology. Prominent discourses include a critical discussion on the ideas of aesthetic influencer identity, 'handle names', 'follower's gaze', 'stories', 'posts', and 'filters'. The findings provide an exploratory and critical perspective on the ways in which Instagram is creating and shaping identities. By offering an understanding of the facets of the influencer identity, this pioneering study highlights the different negotiations, conflicts, and resolutions in the performance of this identity.

Keywords: Instagram; Influencers; Identity; Self-presentation; Discourse Analysis.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For many years, identity has piqued the interest of scholars, most notably in the work of social scientists like Goffman (1956) who investigated the construction of identity in everyday social interactions. Since then, social interactions have noticeably transformed with the advent of social media. These platforms allow users to construct their own identities by selecting the finest features of their offline selves and transferring and amplifying their identities online (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Bloggers and content providers, also known as influencers, are frequently used in studies as a persuasive illustration of how an online identity can be created and developed for an audience (Abidin, 2016; Titton, 2015). This paper attempts to further this literature on influencer identity through the discursive psychology lens.

Senft (2013) defines social media influencers as a kind of micro-celebrity. They use social media to promote themselves in a way that appeals to and engages a wide audience of followers (Khamis et al., 2016). Now most popular on Instagram, the online roots of most influencers can be traced to blog platforms in 2005, spreading to other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat (Abidin, 2016). There are many types of influencers, and they can be classified by the number of followers and the type of content– beauty, fashion, food, etc. These influences can include musicians, aspiring artists, fashion enthusiasts, fitness instructors, close friends of celebrities, and school children (Abidin, 2016; Crain, 2018). Based on the number of followers, influencers can be divided into three categories: micro-, meso-, and macro-influencers. Micro-influencers are ordinary people who have become popular on Instagram and often have dozens to hundreds of followers (up to 10,000) (Domingues Aguiar and Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Hatton, 2018; Pedroni, 2016). Meso-influencers have tens of thousands to millions of followers and are frequently well-known across the country, as internet celebrities (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Pedroni, 2016). They aren't as well-known as macro-influencers (also known as mega-influencers), who are frequently globally well-known personalities with more than ten million followers (Hatton, 2018; Pedroni, 2016).

The terms followers and following as well as Instagram's interface of one-directional connections suggest a relationship mimicking that of a celebrity and a fan (Marwick, 2015). Marwick and boyd (2011) read the online audience as a fan base, where internet celebrities must sustain themselves by the creation of a thoughtful self-presentation that is consumed by others. The influencers rely on an imagined representation of their followers as they cannot possibly know every single one of them (Litt,

2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, they often are aware of the reasons why people follow them, and they also check to see if people have liked every new post that they share (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). Yet, the capacity for sharing and virality ultimately translates into a potentially unlimited audience for material shared online (Lovink, 2013; Senft and Baym, 2015). However, there is a limited understanding of what the influencer identity is; how the identity is constructed, translated, and presented to the real and imagined audience.

1.1 Theoretical Framework: Self-presentation and Impression Management

As the distinctions between creators and consumers of content got blurred with technological transformations, it led to the emergence of bloggers and influencers as content creators (Bruns, 2009; Jenkins, 2016). Pictures and autobiographical information are used to produce and display different versions of the self during the content development process (Marwick, 2013; McCosker and Darcy, 2013). Online content creators promote themselves as their own personal brands by exhibiting their meticulously crafted identities (Abidin, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Marwick, 2015). This is referred to as "impression management", the practice of attempting to make a positive impression by unconsciously and consciously influencing how others see you through your portrayal (Sukmayadi and Yahya, 2019). Using the metaphor of a play, Goffman (1956) described the person managing self-presentation as an actor. This actor plays in a scene on the front stage, managing what the audience sees. Thus, photos on Instagram tend to portray an appropriate image of the real personality to the followers (Tashmin, 2016). In other words, it can be assumed the content that influencers publish online is the front-stage where they portray the desired characters or roles, while their self-reality is kept on the backstage (Sukmayadi and Yahya, 2019).

Thus, online identity involves self-presentation and its management (Goddard and Geesin, 2016). People tend to post the most attractive versions of themselves online (Siibak, 2010). Self-presentation on social media requires manufacturing performances as well as editing them (Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011). As internet users spend more time on Instagram, they place less emphasis on connecting with other people and more on personal identity and self-promotion, by posting photos which are not only just images but also the finest selfies and photos of special events, trips, and parties (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Influencers attract their following by showcasing what is behind-the-scenes of their personal lives for others to model, and this persona has to inhabit the crevices of what the

followers perceive to be private and public (Abidin, 2016). More crucially, in order to maintain a persona that conveys relatability, influencers negotiate projected impressions of themselves in the digital and physical worlds (Abidin, 2016). In other words, privacy is no longer a personal solace and withdrawal from public attention. Rather, it is turned into a commodity in order to benefit towards high-status influencer careers (Abidin, 2016). Throughout the process of online self-presentation, this carefully constructed impression or image is thus maintained, managed, and negotiated, keeping in mind the imagined audience/ followers.

While Goffman (1956) has focused on the individual performer to conceptualize strategic interaction and self-presentation in terms of the backstage and frontstage, contemporary researchers have focused on the uses of digital media to adopt similar frameworks of public and private selves (Abidin, 2016). In fact, Marshall (2014) has argued that the interaction of people with the media has resulted in an increasingly generalized publicization of the self. van Dijck (2013) also stated that there has been increased publicity of private information with the advent of social media. People share intimate stories about their family, travel, and other experiences on social media profiles (Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013). Influencers, then, are an extension of this intimate storytelling where their public profiles display their private lifestyles. Thus, self-presentation includes actively curating a collection of private life that is presented publicly, as part of the impression management. Much of this is done through the use of relevant, meaningful, and suitable language that becomes representative of the presented identity.

1.2   Language, Reality, and Identity

Language is a fundamental resource for socially constructed reality as well as mediation of that reality. Discourse plays an important role in the processes that go towards making up new categories of people and new ways for people to be brought into being (Hacking, 1986: 223). The birth of influencers is a direct result of the language of Instagram and the avenues that it has created. The language and everyday experience of carrying out the influencer role is thus intrinsically linked. Words like followers, filters, and posts denote shared meanings and widely accepted assumptions of latent reality. Within the tradition of discursive psychology, language is stated to be pivotal in constituting realities (Potter, 2003). It views identity as a continuous process accomplished via social interaction (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998), particularly language and communication. Users of language engage in talk as members of a variety of social groups who establish identities through discourse (van Dijk, 1997a). These identities are

the result of a complicated and conflicting interplay of discourses rather than being permanent or stable (Garsten and Grey, 1997).

In this study, we discuss how influencers themselves understand and use language as a means to construct and present their identities, and the factors that help shape this process of self-presentation.

2 THE PRESENT STUDY

Many scholars have studied influencers and their self-branding, authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Scolere et al., 2018), advertorials (Abidin, 2016), the relationship with the audience and their professionalization (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). Concepts like identity construction, digital identity, self-presentation, impression management, narcissism, online behaviour have also been explored (Young, 2006; Davies, 2007; Piazza, 2009; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Veletsianos, 2013; Feher, 2015). Despite considerable work on digital identities from the social psychological lens, the influencer population is understudied. Our work stands as pioneering research in the context of social and discursive psychology, identity, and influencer literature. As an identity born online, common words and expressions can provide the shared understanding and insights into the norms and values adopted (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004) by influencers as part of that identity. This study aims to understand this influencer identity as well as its manifestations by looking at the popular words and phrases that enable the existence of the Instagram influencer. Secondly, we use discursive analysis to examine how individuals who identify as influencers use the language of the platform (Instagram) to shape their self-presentations, negotiate their private and public selves as well as maintain and manage their impressions online. This concentrated emphasis derives from present-day social psychology, which focuses on strategic self-presentation as a means of impression management (Choi, Williams and Kim, 2020). Rooting itself in discursive psychology– instead of assuming the category of the influencer as an object of research in this study– discourse analysis helps unpack this idea by shedding light on the processes involved in identity construction and its consequences (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Discursive studies of identity thus challenge many of the traditional assumptions of psychological research by showing how social resources construct individual identity (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and that, the individual is a fractured and ambiguous construction that depends on context and interactions with others for its self-definition and meaning, as opposed to being unified and preexistent (Wetherell et al., 2012). This framework is particularly useful in analysing Instagram influencer identity, which is

relatively recent, constantly evolving and hardly structured given how technology, social media and digital platforms change over time.

Lastly, we add to emerging literature on digital identities by focusing on a relatively understudied context of Indian Instagram influencers. India is the largest consumer of Instagram (Statista, 2022). Yet, despite being a part of our everyday life, research on influencers in India is limited. In a culture like India's where even places of worship have been constructed for celebrities (Mahanta and Sangameshwaran, 2010), the social influence of influencers is bound to be on the rise as they are regular people unlike mainstream celebrities and their followers perceive them with a lens of affinity and low parasocial distance (Agnihotri and Bhattacharya, 2020). This builds a case for the large influence this identity has on the followers, while also serving as an aspirational identity that followers want to take up due to the popularity it garners which can't be easily actualized elsewhere (Razdan, 2021; Vaidya, 2020). We would, however, want to emphasize that despite the Indian context, the findings can be generalized beyond physical spaces and national borders, much like the Instagram influencer phenomenon (Backaler, 2018).

3 METHOD

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study included 8 Indian Instagram influencers, 6 identifying as females and 2 identifying as males. All the participants belonged to the category of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencers, had a verified account and more than 30,000 followers. Their age ranged from 20-30 years. The study's influencers were classified as meso-influencers since they were widely recognised nationally and had 10,000 to 1 million followers (Domingues Aguiar and Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Pedroni, 2016). Informed consent was taken from all the participants prior to data collection. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms have been used (Table 1).

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to reach out to pre-identified potential participants. 194 potential participants were approached via email and the criteria for shortlisting them was the influencer category they belonged to and a following of more than 10,000 followers. Since image and impression management and self-presentation are important theoretical concepts explored in this study, fashion and beauty influencers were deemed as the most suitable fit. Moreover, as per the Influencer Marketing Report India (2021), the sphere is dominated by fashion, lifestyle, and beauty influencers and 95% of Indian influencers lean

toward Instagram. Hence, they form a large population and become the interest of this study. However, given the busy schedule, demands of their profession, the ongoing pandemic, and the time-consuming nature of the proposed interviews, the final 8 participants were included in the sample. A suitable sample size has been attained when the same stories, themes, and concerns continue to emerge from the interviewees (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Thus, the researcher didn't feel the need to go beyond the sample size of 8.

Table 1. Participant Details

Initials	Gender	Age	Instagram Bio	Instagram Account Category	Location	Profession
DC	Female	29	Award winning content creator; Luxury Brand Consultant	Public Figure	India; Dubai	Luxury Brand Consultant; Magazine Founder
MP	Female	26	Bling and Pink; Leaving a bit of a sparkle everywhere	Public Figure	Hyderabad; London	Fashion and Lifestyle Content Creator
SG	Female	23	Elevating everyday dressing artistically	Digital Creator	Delhi; London	Student
SD	Female	22	High street and Luxe Blend; Personal Style Blogger	Blogger	Mumbai	Student
RK	Female	21	Follow for daily confidence tips; College Lookbooks; Skin and Hair care hacks	-	Delhi	Student
CS	Female	30	Fashion. Beauty. Travel	Digital Creator	Mumbai	Journalist
SR	Male	26	Lifestyle. Luxury. Fashion	Digital Creator	Delhi	Lawyer
S	Male		Creating my world in this beautiful universe; Fashion, Beauty, etc.	Digital Creator	Goa	Fashion Designer

3.2   Tools and Procedure

A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was used to interview participants. In most cases, 3 interviews were conducted per participant, with each interview being around 40-50 minutes long. In the case of 2 participants, 2 hour-long interviews were sufficient. All the interviews were telephonic in nature and were audio-recorded and then transcribed. A total of 225 pages made up the textual transcription. The data collection took place from November–December 2020 and January–February 2021 and was conducted by a single interviewer to ensure consistency and coherency.

McCracken's (1988) long interview technique was employed, which allowed the researcher to "step into another person's mind, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken, 1988: 85). This strategy helped to immerse in the culture and norms of the participants to get unique insights that help interpret the data (Creswell and Clark, 2004; McCracken, 1988). While the participants were speaking, questions were added based on the issues they were discussing (McCracken, 1988). Probes were used wherever required and were based on themes on knowing their experience of having a public account, their understanding of different terms used on Instagram, the importance of having followers, among others. All the interviews were conducted in English and a manual audio-to-text transcription followed after each interview. The transcription process was undertaken by the researcher and 3 research assistants, where 6-8 interviews were transcribed by each of them.

The researchers would like to acknowledge their position as a researcher, an Instagram user, and a follower. However, we upheld the importance of a non-evaluative and unbiased stance and proceeded with utmost rigour at every step of this study. The research proceeded in an exploratory manner to understand the identity and psychological underpinnings of such constant visual expression of oneself on Instagram. The study was approved as part of the principal author's research thesis by the Institutional Review Board of her university.

3.3   Analytical Framework

Discourse analysis examines language in use in terms of *construction* and *function*, i.e., language is considered a means of constructing reality (Georgaca and Avdi, 2012). It also involves looking at the effects of discourses on, for instance, how we experience ourselves and relate to each other. Discourses are framed, maintained, and passed through language (Georgaca and Avdi, 2012). A given vocabulary allows the speaker to express his or her thoughts and the maintenance of larger societal, cultural,

and political institutions that have empowered him/her with the givens of language (Georgaca and Avdi, 2012). In this context, Instagram as an institution has borrowed certain elements from the pre-existing language and added newer meanings and nuances to its usage, including the creation of 'Influencer'. Thus, in order to understand the realities created and shaped by social media, discourse analysis seemed an appropriate analytical strategy.

Keeping with suggested steps for discourse analysis (Billig, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins and Potter, 2008; Parker, 1992; Potter, 2003; Georgaca and Avdi, 2012), the analysis began with transcription, followed by several close readings and an initial low-inference coding. Low-inference coding includes going through the content several times and tagging relevant sections of text with extremely literal labels and descriptions (Ziskin, 2019). This process primarily included low-inference thematic codes, such as followers, influencers, filters, etc. for instances in which the topic concerns followers, influencers, or photos and use of the term filters. The aim of this step was to develop thorough knowledge of the full corpus of documented data, which culminated in the identification and selection of important sections of data to focus on for further analysis. It led to the selection of several data points rather than just a few important sections. The subsequent parts of the analysis were focused on a significant but focused and manageable portion of the data (Ziskin, 2019).

The next step followed a more focused and inductive coding, where specific and rather detailed codes were assigned to the material selected after the first step. These focused codes were given after taking a note of the patterns and exceptions that were seen across the different interviews that were conducted (Ziskin, 2019). This procedure culminated in the final step, i.e., the naming or the construction of the discourse, wherein the different focused codes inductively formed a pattern and thereby, the discourse. The discursive statements for each discourse are included in the next section of the paper, for the reader to understand the grounding of the discourse in extracts (Georgaca and Avdi, 2012).

4   ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to understand the Instagram-specific popular words and phrases actively used by influencers to present and construct identities. The discourses surrounding the same are elaborated below.

4.1 #Influencer: Defining an aesthetic identity

The participants emphasised that being an influencer is their exclusive Instagram identity and should not be mixed with their other identities or their profession. This identity is also verified by Instagram by adding a blue tick in front of their name as a marker of credibility. The verification feature adds to their exclusivity on Instagram, by indicating to their followers their only real digital identity and cautioning them from fake influencers who simply copy their photos. A participant reported:

> "This is my passion and social media culture created me. People know me because of this, so definitely being an influencer is my identity in the digital sphere. People try to imitate me and make a similar account, so now Instagram has also verified me. Followers now know I'm the original one."

Participants operate by virtue of what is termed as the "instagrammable aesthetic" (Caldeira, 2020), where routine aspects of life look good on Instagram such as breakfasts, coffees, outfits of the day (Manovich, 2017: 73). Participants reported that aesthetic plates of food, coffees, pastel nails, coloured eyeliners, and exclusive cocktails are necessary aspects of the influencer lifestyle that are projected on Instagram posts and stories. This aesthetic lifestyle is what separates the influencer identity from the other public accounts on Instagram. Despite having a commercial angle to it, they see their being as a cultural phenomenon that exists because of social media and call it a passion rather than a profession. The passion is for showing one's style, clothes, places visited, food tried, and makeup routines. Brand promotions are only seen as additional monetary gains to an otherwise passionate activity that influencers would have carried on, nonetheless.

Influence per say has been an intangible concept, but for influencers it is concrete. The influencer identity resides in an Instagram profile of posts, videos, hashtags, and followers. This identity is a digital jewel which can be stolen and needs to be password protected and verified with blue ticks. Thus, there will be no influencer without these aspects of the platform which have given rise to and created this identity. Based on the notions of the influencer as discussed by the participants, the most suitable academic definition of the influencer is the one proposed by Hurley (2019) in her study on female Gulf-Arab social media influencers. Hurley has defined influencer as a "vocational practice, occurring on Instagram and centering around self-presentations and identity performances as a means to self-brand, communicate lifestyles, and advertise products. While this type of Instagram influencing is commercially orientated, it converges within a framework of social and cultural phenomena" (Hurley, 2019: 3).

Hurley's (2019) focus on communication of lifestyle, self-branding and self-presentation highlight the key tenets of the Instagram identity. The lifestyle is communicated by means of staging an instagrammable aesthetic lifestyle as indicated by our participants, achieved by meticulous style, staging, lighting, and editing (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 5). The expression of this lifestyle involves self-presentation, linking it to self-branding online (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013, 2015).

However, for our participants, an influencer is a word imposed by the marketing and PR industry and the term preferred by them is content creator. It was interesting to note that in the bio section of their Instagram profile, most participants have described themselves as digital creators or content creators:

> "Influencer is an Instagram specific word given for PR. I like to create content that I believe in and that I resonate with and put out something which genuinely helps the followers. For that reason, I am a content creator. I do not want to call myself an influencer."

4.2   Handle(ing) Names and Identities

Instagram allows users to name their profiles in a way that they do not necessarily have to put their actual name. The chosen name follows the @ symbol and often influencers use their handle name as a descriptor of the nature of their content. For instance, the words such as 'style', 'beauty', 'fashion', 'girl', among others are often found in the handle names of beauty and fashion bloggers. In most cases, these handle names on Instagram have been a continuation of the blog names that our participants started with when they used to write blogs. The handle name is considered a marker of the online identity that splits itself from the offline identity, as described by the participants:

> "@XYZFashionGirl, the one you see on Instagram and MP in real life are two identities of my life. So what I'm showcasing is the real me too, but that's not everything about my life. My private identity separate from the influencer identity also exists."

In her seminal work, psychologist Sherry Turkle (1995) had argued that identities are reconstructed when people enter virtual networks via their screens, and several scholars have confirmed the same (Hu et. al, 2015; Hu et. al, 2017; Jackson and Luchner, 2018; Ditchfield, 2020). The usernames are the central aspects of identity that inform who owns the profile. All social media platforms demand names and identities to be stated, as they further inform the content (van der Nagel, 2017). Participants have described their handle names as a pen name, their own brand, or a title for their content,

with an emphasis on differentiating it from their non-virtual self. These Instagram handles act as professional spaces where the influencers put up content and posts, thereby building a brand out of their own self:

> "The goal is not to show me. It is to show @BeautyMan, the brand that caters to men's beauty content. It is a character that I play. It's very difficult to be that guy 24 hours. It is not a disorder, but we work like that. @BeautyMan is the identity RKl takes on Instagram."

Thus, the discursive power of @handlenames creates a psychological possibility for the participants to create a new identity that is specific to Instagram. Such an identity and its manifestations are limited to the digital space, and it is signalled to the followers by the medium of the handle name. Changes in this identity are made possible by the feature that allows one to adopt a new handle name. The way brands undergo rebranding, participants can create a new name for themselves and accordingly create new content on their profiles. The name one is assigned at birth largely remains the identity of a person throughout their lives; but the advent of social media has created possibilities to curate a new name and identity that can always be modified, updated, or changed altogether. Interestingly, such an identity operates on the screen regardless of what may be the physical and psychological reality of the non-digital identity operating in blood and flesh.

4.3   Telling a 'Story' to the 'Audience'

On Instagram, stories are seconds-long photos or videos which offer glimpses into the daily lives of our participants and disappear after 24-hours. Stories are quick updates usually about what they are eating, where they are visiting, or who they have met. While the 'posts' are of a permanent and formal nature and often represent carefully planned photos posted after a proper shoot, 'stories' are seen as more casual and often include daily updates. Participants viewed posts as serving the purpose of drawing followers and promoting brands, and stories for engaging with and forming a personal connection with the audience. As explained by one of the interviewees:

> "Instagram lets you tell the story without being pushy. We're not selling anything, but subconsciously, you've entered the minds of your audience. They can't buy everything you sell, but they want to see you every day."

Influencers tend to share stories of their private everyday lives to maintain an authentic image online (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Whitmer, 2019). In a way, they take their audience to the backstage of their influencer life by

showing their "getting ready routines" (Huo, 2018). Such snippets of the personal backstage (Goffman, 1956) create the illusion of intimate sharing (Marwick, 2013) that makes the influencer appear intimate and relatable to followers (Marwick, 2013). Responding to, acknowledging, and publicly appreciating the audience establishes a deep bond with them (Ashton and Patel, 2018). Our participants saw stories as more intimate and personal as compared to the manufactured posts since they allowed one-on-one interactions with the audience by the medium of 'ask me anything' or 'AMA', polls, and 'send suggestions'. Above all, stories are a medium to merely communicate their presence when they don't have any new posts or content to share. One of the participants said:

> "It's like a talk show. I simply tell them that I'm having a coffee or doing a workout and then I ask them to give me suggestions on clothes. In my stories I also show the behind-the-scenes version of my shoots. They should know that I am there. Existing."

The traditional meaning attached to the word 'audience' has been the viewers of an event or show. For our participants, these audiences are captured in terms of the number of views that they get on their stories. The Instagram interface offers the numeric display of likes and comments on a post, but for stories, it is the number of people who have viewed it with an 'eye' symbol. Interestingly, these views also disappear after 24-hours highlighting the temporary nature of stories. In the context of stories, the preferred word for followers becomes audience. As put succinctly by a participant:

> "After building a number of followers, you need to maintain an audience. Stories give you the space to be casual because the audience forgets them tomorrow. The posts are always on the profile and every new and old follower will see them. You can't lose out on followers by showing normal things"

Thus, these different features and words create different psychological subjectivities for our participant, allowing as well as forcing them to show a separate reality in the posts/stories and for the followers/audience. The shifting of balance between carefully manufactured posts and casual everyday stories manifests a split in their identity. In a way then, intimacy is also performed as different facets of the influencer identity commodify in separate ways. On one hand, the performance is for brands to attract followers and on the other, it is to maintain a personal relationship with the audience.

In the psychoanalytic sphere, Lacan (1993) has argued that our sense of self is split between the ego and the subject. Plugging this into the

equation of Instagram, the ego is the pictures and stories that are edited and posted, while the subject is the influencer in real-time who decides the post which is the most desirable (Calkin, 2015). The photos that are never posted are the ones seen as not being validated or desired by the followers (Calkin, 2015), and presenting only the influencer part of one's identity to the 'Big Others' or the larger Instagram society (Lacan, 1993). It has been argued that the conventional distinctions between the private/public spheres of online/offline life are being challenged by social media (Enli and Thumim, 2012); however, future research can look at how an online/online split manifests itself as in the case of influencers.

4.4   Under the Follower's Gaze

The meaning attached to a follower is a person who follows or supports a person or belief. While the word has always existed in dictionaries, its present-day connotation is a person one has on their Instagram who can see, like and comment on their photos. For our participants, focusing on who their follower is, or who they would like them to be, affects the choices they make in their own self-presentation. As stated by one of the participants:

> "You can't be an influencer without having followers. Like celebrities have the paparazzi following them, we have followers watching us 24/7. We have to look aspirational for them, otherwise they won't follow us if we don't look good in our posts. The online persona has to be maintained."

Simultaneously, our participants also take on a follower role when they follow other influencers, brands, and Instagram profiles. After all, they are Instagram users first and became influencers later. According to Goffman (1956), both the audience and the actors can interchangeably and concurrently play their respective parts. In an industry where the worth of influencers is measured via their followers, there is a constant pressure to present oneself in the best way. Influencers determine what to share as their following increases, because they can better predict what the followers will enjoy (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). A participant reported:

> "Posts are always gonna be there, so they have to look perfect. If your posts look imperfect, then what makes you an influencer? Sometimes if the picture doesn't come good five times, I will take it ten times, right? I have to only post the best. The followers only want that, as it can make or break you as an influencer"

Such a position is unsurprising, when compared to Foucault's (1975) dissection of the conceptual nineteenth century prison, the panopticon. Foucault's conclusion that we change our behaviour when we are, or think we are, under the surveillance of others can be applied to the social media context where a potentially unlimited audience views our online self-presentation. The term 'lifestreaming' has been coined by Marwick (2013: 207) to describe the act of seeing "oneself through the gaze of others" and editing this "behavior as needed to maintain [one's] desired self-presentation" (Marwick, 2013: 207). Participants across interviews have stressed that the kind of clothes worn, the poses, makeup, camera angle– are all decided keeping in mind what the follower wants to see. The presence of this gaze manifests itself through the number of followers and likes, kind of comments they give, their replies on stories, and the demands for a particular kind of content via direct messages or DMs.

The social media era has previously been theorized as existing within the paradigm of the 'selfie gaze' (Magasic, 2016), where selfie is taken with the presence of an audience in mind: posing, searching for the best side, and deleting less appealing drafts whilst questing for an ideal image. In light of this, the participants can be seen as operating in the context of the term coined in this study– 'Follower's gaze'– where all their actions are based on the cognizance of their online followers. Participants have reported that they had to discontinue promoting expensive luxury brands, wear less revealing clothes and work up on natural makeup looks as these were the demands of the followers. Moreover, even at private lunches with friends or family, they admitted to having the followers constantly present at the back of their mind and clicking photos of their food to share it with them later. Thus, while the word influencer is loaded with the power to influence others, in the Instagram setting it is the follower who has the real power to guide the behaviour of the influencer as they operate under the proposed 'follower's gaze'.

4.5   The #Filter and #NoFilter Selves

In the context of Instagram, filters refer to pre-existing edits that one can apply to their photos to enhance the features, colours, and lighting. On a platform dominated by visual content, editing becomes an essential part of curating the best profile. For our participants, editing photos are a demand of the job:

> "Editing and filters are like using makeup. We need to make sure our feed is aesthetically pleasant. If someone comes to our profile and if it's all random pictures, they might skip it. But if it's aesthetically pleasing, they will feel like 'oh wow' and follow us instantly."

However, a trend increasingly being followed by influencers is posting #NoFilter photos every once in a while. This hashtag is particularly used with posts that have no filters and editing and show the photo without any alterations. It is a way of showing the real self:

> "They see me without makeup, no hair done, no fancy clothes. They know that I look like this in real life. That's what differentiates influencers from celebrities. A mix of real and filtered is a strategic way to maintain followers. In order to tell what is real you use #NoFilter."

The shift between filtered and #NoFilter images for them represent a shift between the real and the influencer self. However, this should not be seen as a shift but rather a consciously managed move of the same influencer identity. At one level, though the #NoFilter version may seem like a case of self-disclosure, it is actually a conscious way of self-presentation in order to maintain an authentic image. It can be inferred that influencers use an overlap of self-presentation and self-disclosure to create their desired image in front of their followers. However, self-disclosure and self-presentation are contradictory (Johnson, 1981; Choi and Bazarova, 2020). Self-disclosure involves communicating facts about oneself regardless of the impression created; whereas self-presentation involves communication designed to project a desirable public representation of the self, which may be true or false depending on what would convey a desired public self-image (Johnson, 1981). People may communicate true information about themselves in pursuit to advance a favourable public image of themselves, which is not always indicative of self-disclosure (Schlosser, 2019). In this case, posting #NoFilter photos reflect self-disclosure with the purpose of self-presentation. Such impression management clearly distinguishes making information public from publicizing information (Marwick, 2013) – it is the extent of the intentional dissemination as opposed to merely existing in the public domain that highlights the information to the target audience. The photos are intentionally tagged as #NoFilter to make it publicly known to maintain the authenticity of the influencer image. Thus, the dichotomy between the public and private, real, and unreal, virtual and nonvirtual is blurred as our participants create an altogether new reality on their Instagram handles, that is carefully curated to attract and maintain their network of followers. Instead, one may see it as a circular loop where one feeds into the other, in a rather contradictory manner– the filtered self attracts the followers who then stay on only if they see the no filter self at regular intervals.

The findings suggest a tension between influencers identifying their online space as a form of identity expression and exploration, but also needing to protect this aspect of their identities by careful strategies of self-

presentation, self-disclosure, self-objectification, and branding (Abidin, 2016; Hurley, 2019; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). This indicates that the binary between virtual and non-virtual is blurred, as the virtual is an edited story for the followers to view, with strategic glimpses into the non-virtual.

The discourses discussed in our analysis highlight that influencer is a password protected aesthetic identity presented through self-branding. The 'handle names' segment the influencer brand from the physical identity and facilitate an online identity reconstruction, whereas 'stories' and 'posts' manifest a split for the influencer's 'followers' and engaged 'audience'. Moreover, the '#NoFilter' self is also situated in a careful self-presentation paradigm similar to the 'filtered' one. Thus, new dimensions have been added to common words like 'stories', 'audience', 'filter', 'followers' that have hence created the 'influencer.'

The study is limited by some situational constraints. In light of the pandemic, telephonic interviews were conducted limiting visual or non-verbal cues (Aquilino, 1994) Accompanying influencers on their shoots, getting a glimpse into their photo editing practices or having access to their PR events could have served as rich sources of data to situate the discourses in their lived experiences. Also, the sample was homogenous in terms of influencer content and category. There were also themes that fall outside the scope of the study, though they certainly warrant future research. First, a mixed-methods approach can be used in terms of digital ethnography, where the researcher should 'follow' the influencers on Instagram and capture the interplay of these discourses and see how similar or different they are, as reported in the interviews. Moreover, findings from the present study can be quantified into a scale or a survey that can be used to reach out to more influencers, across categories and countries as a way of converging evidence. Lastly, the discourse on online trolling of influencers may be explored, as it was briefly hinted at by a few female participants. This study has opened avenues for social psychological research in the realm of influencers and concepts like identity split online and follower's gaze mandates future research.

5   CONCLUSION

The aim of our study was to examine how individuals who identify as influencers use the language of the Instagram platform to shape their self-presentations, negotiate their private and public selves as well as maintain and manage their impressions online. Using discourse analysis, we examined the unique possibilities and occurrences on Instagram. Our findings reveal that the Instagram influencer identity is contextually and specifically curated in a way that uses traditional psychological

mechanisms like self-presentation, identity reconstruction, impressions management– but through novel strategies.

They highlight the different negotiations, conflicts, and resolutions made to perform this identity, such as balancing private and public, use of filters, being conscious of the followers, etc. (Enli and Thumim, 2013; Abidin, 2016; Hurley, 2019). These first-hand perspectives of influencers provide a rich insight into their psyche and help us in navigating the rapidly expanding landscape of digital platforms like Instagram. Importantly, our findings add to the social psychological literature on identity construction and performance in a digital world. By focussing on aspects like controlled impression management for consumers of Instagram — where it's important for them to understand that even something presented as casual/real/natural is part of impression management— and how that can mediate imitation and effects on perceptions, especially for young consumers who often accept these realities as de facto. Moreover, while scholars have focused on social media and its effects and outcomes on its consumers (Young, 2006; Davies, 2007; Piazza, 2009; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Veletsianos, 2013; Feher, 2015), here we have shifted the focus on influencers who are young consumers themselves. Rather than just being affected by the consequences of their social media consumption, they are also reshaping and creating their identity.

While the influencer industry is often portrayed as something mysterious happening behind the scenes, the concept itself is nothing more than a product of the medium through which it is taking place and be seen as a form of self-expression that has its own challenges, creativities, and achievements.

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