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How Consumers Consume Social Media Influence

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has examined the efficacy of influencer marketing and how social media influencers (SMIs) produce influence through strategically manufacturing authenticity and relatability. Less clear, however, is what benefits consumers derive from influencers and how they incorporate influencer content into their own identity projects. In other words, advertisers and influencers do not know how consumers actually "consume" influence. The current research addresses this gap through developing a novel perspective on influencer marketing that highlights how consumers actively incorporate influencer content into their own practice performances. Based on a market ethnography of millennial and gen Z beauty consumers, this research uncovers six distinct actions through which consumers consume influence. Findings also challenge and update another core assumption of influencer marketing: that consumers generally perceive influencers to be similar to them. Altogether, this research introduces the Influencer Marketing Dartboard as a conceptual and managerial tool to better leverage influencers for marketing. Three contributions are offered that advance the influencer marketing and practice theory literatures: a deeper understanding of how companies can effectively utilize SMIs, a clearer differentiation between SMIs and celebrity endorsers, and insights into how mediated practices facilitate consumers' identity projects.

> I like really in-depth videos. I could spend for thirty minutes watching how someone does their eyebrows. I know that sounds ridiculous, but there's a lot of different products out, a lot of different techniques out, and your eyebrows are your face! [. . .] It's just my pastime, you know. Literally, sometimes I'm eating, and I want to watch a tutorial. It's just what I do. (Andrea)

Social media influencers (SMIs) have become a crucial part of contemporary marketing. Global spending on influencer marketing is skyrocketing, from around $2 billion in 2017 to an estimated $15 billion by 2022, and some companies spend up to 75% of their overall marketing budgets on influencers (HBS 2019). These numbers are impressive but do not begin to capture the enthusiasm that many consumers have for influencers. For Andrea, the first quote of this article, influencers are central to her leisure time and her identity as a confident young woman. Her voice and other consumer voices collected in this study exemplify the dazzling complexity of the influencer phenomenon: Influencers share information (Vrontis et al. 2021), define what is in style (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), offer emotional support (Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018), create intimacy (Berryman and Kavka 2017), help consumers feel connected (Escalas and Bettman 2017), and boost consumers' self-worth (Cocker and Cronin 2017).

Marketers need guidance on how to best leverage influencers in ways that provide value to consumers and brands (Voorveld 2019). To that end, a growing body of research has examined how consumers become influencers (Gannon and Prothero 2018; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), how influencers manufacture authenticity (Berryman and Kavka 2017; Ferchaud et al. 2018; Gannon and Prothero 2016; Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018), and how brands can structure their relationships with influencers (Nascimento, Campos, and Suarez 2020). These studies illuminate one side of the phenomenon—how influencers "produce" influence—but do not explain how consumers "consume" influence. That is, existing studies have provided no comprehensive account of what consumers actually do with the influencer content they watch, what benefits they derive from it, or how they incorporate influencer content into their

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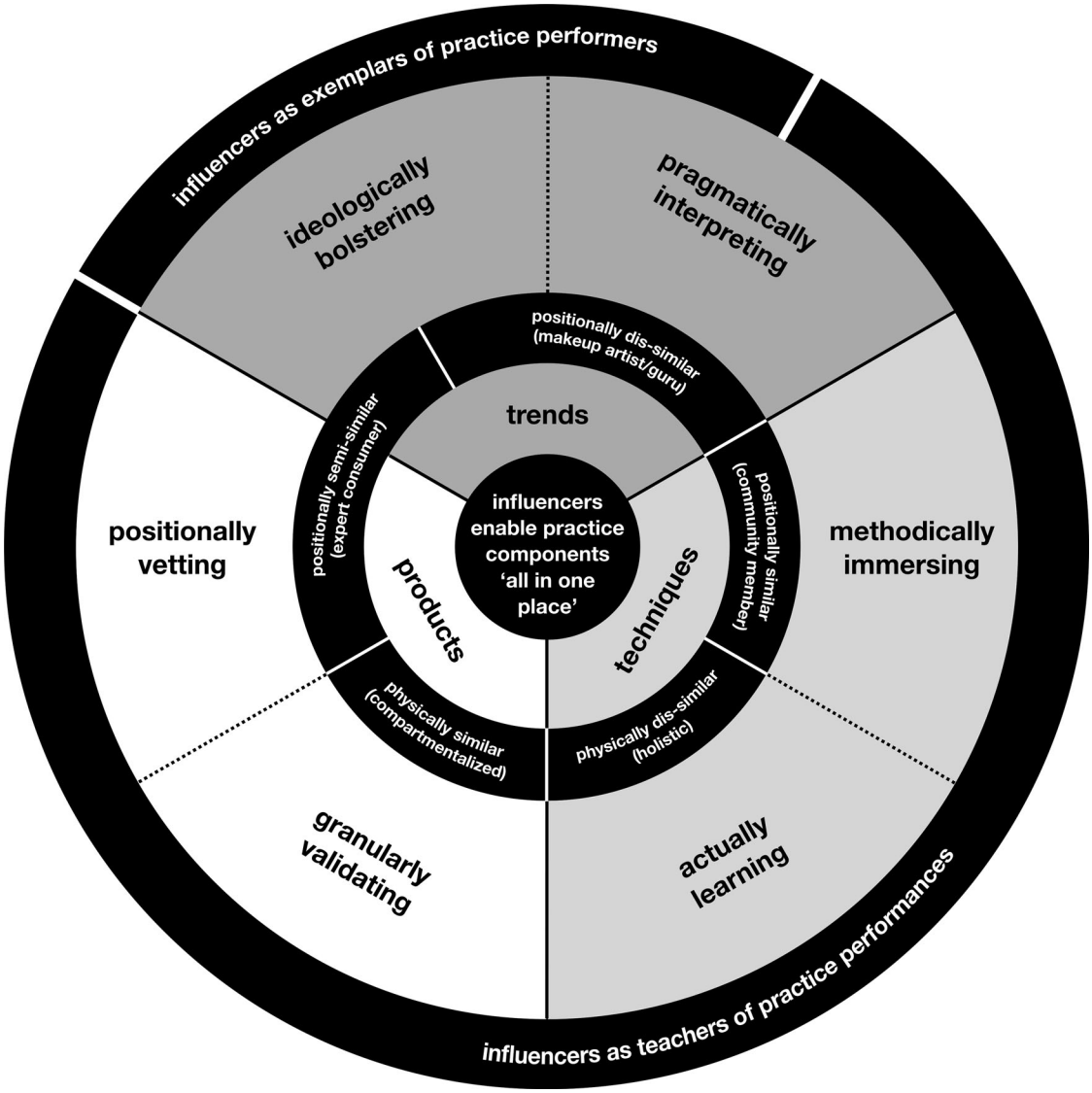

Figure 1. The influencer marketing dartboard.

own consumption and identity projects. Knowing these answers would help brand managers increase their return on influencer ad spend.

Prior research identifies perceived credibility, similarity, relatability, and parasocial relationships as reasons for why influencers are effective (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2017; Lee and Watkins 2016; Lou 2021; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). However, this research does not explain how influencer content unfolds its effect on the consumers' side. The reason for this oversight is that all these studies tacitly accept a prevalent assumption: that influence is passively absorbed by consumers, even when such assertion seems at odds with contemporary celebrations of active consumers and cocreation (e.g., Dahlen and Rosengren 2016; Scholz and Smith 2019). Combining foundational articles on celebrity endorsement (McCracken 1989) and consumer culture theory (Holt 1995) with recent research on practice theory (Akaka and Schau 2019), the current article develops a novel perspective on influencer marketing that challenges this assumption: It explores how SMIs facilitate consumers' immersion into integrative practices (e.g., wearing makeup, being fashionable, and other ongoing consumption projects), and through what specific actions consumers integrate influencer content into their own practice performances.

These questions are empirically examined through an ethnographic study of late millennials/early gen Z beauty consumers. Findings are summarized by the Influencer Marketing Dartboard (see Figure 1), which doubles as a managerial tool to improve influencer marketing campaigns. The dartboard shows how consumers integrate influencer content into their own practice performances through six distinct actions: positionally vetting, granularly validating, actually

learning, methodically immersing, pragmatically interpreting, and ideologically bolstering. In addition, the findings challenge and update another foundational assumption: that consumers generally perceive influencers to be similar to them (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013).

Altogether, the current article answers calls for advancing our understanding of influencer marketing (Araujo et al. 2020; Dahlen and Rosengren 2016; Voorveld 2019) by uncovering the multifaceted ways of how and why consumers consume influence. These insights make three contributions: They show how companies can effectively utilize SMIs, more clearly differentiate between SMIs and celebrity endorsers, and identify two distinct mechanisms through which mediated practices facilitate consumers' identity projects.

Social Media Influence

SMIs are individuals who, through producing original content that publicly displays their expertise and/or taste, have amassed a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers and experts (Lou 2021; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). Given their origins as "ordinary" consumers, influencers are generally conceptualized as similar to everyday consumers and, hence, more authentic than models and celebrities who are traditionally featured in advertising (e.g., McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Voorveld 2019). Bloggers, YouTubers, and "Instafamous" people have been found to outperform their more traditional counterparts (e.g., magazine articles, celebrity endorsers) because consumers feel more closely connected to them and perceive them to be more credible and relatable (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2019).

This efficacy of SMIs is often explained via the concept of parasocial relationships (e.g., Ferchaud et al. 2018; Vrontis et al. 2021). Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships in which consumers develop a feeling of familiarity and even friendship with media figures (Horton and Wohl 1956). For example, Lee and Watkins (2016) suggest that viewers develop parasocial relationships through repeated exposure to a vlogger and, over time, "will start to see the vlogger as a trusted source of information and seek out their advice" (p. 5754). Escalas and Bettman (2017) locate consumers' identity construction endeavors as the foundations for why parasocial relationships impact brand attitudes and purchase decisions. Following McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer perspective on celebrity endorsement, Escalas and Bettman (2017) conceptualize consumers as identity seekers and SMIs as sources of symbolic meanings (rather than simply product information): Influencers transfer meanings onto the brand through their endorsements, and consumers can appropriate desired meanings "by using brands associated with the celebrity to construct and communicate their own self-concepts" (p. 299).

A sizable body of research details how influencers strategically foster parasocial relationships to produce their influence over consumers (e.g., Berryman and Kavka 2017; Ferchaud et al. 2018; Nascimento, Campos, and Suarez 2020). Noting the paradox that influencers become less similar to ordinary consumers as their following grows, McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) find that fashion bloggers employ several tactics to preserve their authenticity. Likewise, Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore (2018) report that YouTube influencers engage in various forms of emotional labor to maintain emotional bonds with their audience, and Gannon and Prothero (2016) show how beauty bloggers use selfies to build authenticity. Other tactical maneuvers include creating the illusion of a true conversation (Ferchaud et al. 2018) and constructing approachable identities, such as a "big sister" (Berryman and Kavka 2017). These actions collapse the distance between influencer and consumer, which the authors claim (but do not empirically demonstrate) reinforces the influencer's authority, credibility, and relatability in the eyes of consumers (Berryman and Kavka 2017; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013).

To summarize, SMIs are characterized as a trusted and authentic source of information—due to their perceived credibility, accessibility, similarity, and relatability—that consumers can draw on to support their identity construction endeavors. Prior research has also detailed the various actions through which influencers strategically build and maintain perceptions of similarity and relatability. However, it is less clear how social media influence unfolds its effect on the consumer's side. It is not enough to simply receive influencer content; consumers must integrate it with their own consumption and identity projects for it to be effective (McCracken 1989). In short, while the production of social media influence has been well explored, the concrete actions through which consumers actually consume influence have received much less attention.

Existing research typically assumes that consumers passively absorb influence. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) suggest that the credibility of an influencer becomes associated with a brand in the form of a halo effect but do not offer any explanation for how consumers incorporate the influencer's advice or fame into their own consumption projects. Other studies likewise measure the effect of influencers without examining the distinct actions through which consumers integrate influencers' content into their own lives. For example, relating to influencers is assumed to happen automatically through the passing of time (Lee and Watkins 2016), and symbolic meaning transfer is assumed to occur through simple association (Escalas and Bettman 2017; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2019). As McCracken (1989) points out, however, meaning transfer is not an automatic process: "It is not enough for the consumer merely to own an object to take possession of its meanings, or to incorporate these meanings into the self. The meanings of the object do not merely lift off the object and enter into the consumer's concept of self and world" (p. 317). Consumers "must claim the meanings and then work with them" (p. 317) to incorporate them into their own identity projects. Answering the question of how consumers incorporate social media influence into their own consumption and identity projects thus requires a more nuanced understanding of how consumers consume.

How Consumers Consume

In his article titled "How Consumers Consume" Holt (1995) introduces a practice theoretical approach in which "consuming" is conceptualized as an integral part of more complex, integrative practices that constitute "particular domains of social life" (Schatzki 1996, p. 98). An integrative practice such as "watching a baseball game" or "wearing makeup," according to Reckwitz (2002), encompasses the domain-specific, routinized ways "in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood" (p. 250). Thus, rather than isolating "product purchase" as its focal interest, practice theory offers a more holistic approach that draws attention to three broad categories of practice components: tacit knowledge and understandings (i.e., meanings), practical skills and abilities (i.e., competencies), and materialities (i.e., objects) that are involved in the production of everyday life (Arsel and Bean 2013; Schatzki 1996).

Consumers are conceptualized in this lens as practitioners who seek to improve their practice performances by learning how to use objects and how to perform bodily actions in socially sanctioned ways (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). Through continued engagement with a practice, consumers can unlock desired meanings that are associated with material objects (Arsel and Bean 2013), form social connections (Gannon and Prothero 2018), and "develop a sense of self, learn, grow, and change" (Akaka and Schau 2019, p. 500). Practice theory thus offers a rich conceptual framework to analyze how consumers "work with" (McCracken 1989, p. 317) and integrate influencer content into their own consumption experiences.

Prior research has uncovered several generic actions that enable consumers' performances of integrated practices. Akaka and Schau (2019) argue that consumers continuously engage in a practice through the following four actions: copying others who are engaged in the practice (i.e., imitating), improving their capabilities of performing a practice (i.e., improving), envisioning their engagement with the practice (i.e., imagining), and negotiating institutional or ideological tensions (i.e., reconciling). Holt (1995) describes two similar and one additional action through which consumers integrate an object's symbolic properties into their self-concepts: Consumers immerse themselves in a practice by thinking and acting like a practitioner (i.e., assimilating), engage in actual or imaginary actions to feel more involved in the practice (i.e., producing), and assert their individuality while engaging in a practice (i.e., personalizing). Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) provide additional insights by discussing three actions through which consumers hone their practice performances: Consumers internalize institutional standards and taste regimes (i.e., institutional benchmarking), engage in systematic sampling and folk experimentation to increase their cultural competence (i.e., autodidactics), and seek support from more experienced practitioners to reduce uncertainty regarding their practice performance (i.e., cooperative scaffolding).

These generic actions can serve as building blocks to better understand how consumers leverage the socially mediated practices (Gannon and Prothero 2016) of influencers into their own practice performances. The current research thus explores the following research questions: How do SMIs facilitate consumers' immersion into integrative practices? And through what actions do consumers integrate influencer content into their own practice performances?

Table 1. Overview of informants.

Name	Ethnicity	Age	Year in college	Makeup style	Makeup level	Makeup frequency
Andrea	Hispanic	23	Just graduated	More natural; if it's nighttime, I like to go more dramatic	Advanced	Daily
Anna	Caucasian	21	3rd year college	Neutral, barely there	Novice	Only special occasions
Bailey	Caucasian	19	2nd year college	Casual, barely there	Novice	Only special occasions
Cynthia	Caucasian	22	Just graduated, newly a communications intern	No-makeup makeup, very simple	Intermediate	Daily
Chloe	Assyrian	21	3rd year college	Simple, natural	Novice	Only special occasions
Diana	Korean/Caucasian	21	Just graduated, seeking a PR position	Light, fresh	Advanced	Daily
Fiona	Vietnamese	20	3rd year college	Natural, but not actually natural	Intermediate	Daily
Holly	Caucasian	21	Just graduated, now fitness center manager	Fitnessy, laidback	Novice	Only special occasions
Kacey	Caucasian	23	Graduated a year ago, microbiology lab assistant	Clean-looking makeup, something that's a little bit interesting but isn't super overpowering	Advanced	Only special occasions
Lydia	Caucasian	21	3rd year college	Plain, vanilla	Novice	Frequently
Lisa	Caucasian	21	3rd year college	Natural-looking	Novice	Only special occasions
Maddison	Caucasian	21	Just graduated, preparing for law school	Seminatural	Advanced	Daily
Paige	Caucasian	22	4th year college	Simple but fun, with expressive details	Advanced	Daily
Remy	Persian	21	3rd year college	Half the week natural, half the week doing it up	Advanced	Frequently
Sarah	Caucasian	22	4th year college	Natural look	Novice	Frequently
Violet	Caucasian	19	2nd year college	Natural, like I'm not wearing as much as I am	Advanced	Daily

Method

These questions are examined through an ethnographic study of beauty consumers. A particular focus is put on makeup, given its public visibility and dominance within the influencer phenomenon; however, other beauty topics (e.g., skin care) were also considered during data collection. The study focuses on YouTube influencers because their long-form content was expected to be most suitable for facilitating all three components of the beauty practice. However, other social media channels (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest) were also considered.

Two undergraduate research assistants supported data collection and analysis. Both received substantial training in qualitative research methods through a full-credit course and additional training as part of their research assistantship position. One female research assistant (fourth year, 21 years old), who was heavily engaged in the makeup practice and beauty influencers, provided grounding into the focal phenomenon (Sherry 2006) for the male author and the second male research assistant (third year, 20 years old), who were naive about makeup consumption at the outset of this study. Similar to earlier studies (e.g., Sherry 2006), collaborating with student workers improved the quality of the research design without compromising the study's methodological rigor, as discussed in more detail in the next section.

Data and Analysis

Six data sources were combined to capture the complexities of beauty consumption and the SMI phenomenon. The primary data set consists of 16 in-depth interviews with female beauty consumers, ages 19 to 23 years old (median age: 21 years; see Table 1).

Table 2. Overview of findings.

Practice component	Actions through which consumers consume influence[a]	Implications for how influencers facilitate consumers' immersion into practice[b]	Expanded understanding of influencers' similarity[c]
Finding products: Two ways in which consumers select influencers to inform their practice performances	*Positionally vetting:* Consumers select influencers based on their perceived independence from brands, expertise, and usefulness of content (e.g., free of bias).	Information about product attributes and quality enables consumers to engage in *institutional benchmarking* and *vicarious systematic sampling*, thus claiming the role of a well-prepared and responsible consumer. In addition to conveying information, influencers build consumers' vocabulary, thus enabling consumers to think and speak like makeup practitioners (i.e., *assimilating*).	Consumers select for influencers who are *positionally semisimilar expert consumers:* Perceived as once-ordinary consumers like them, rather than agents of a brand, who through their continued practice engagement amassed considerable product knowledge and are very confident in their makeup practice.
	Granularly validating: Consumers select influencers based on their physical similarity to validate how the material properties of a product fit their own particular needs. Successful selection is enabled by compartmentalizing one particular aspect of their body (e.g., skin type, but not skin tone).	Consumers engage in *mediated cooperative scaffolding*, even though communications is one-way, by aligning physical properties between themselves and influencers. This enables consumers to take charge of their practice performance and demonstrate their competence, even though constituting elements are outside of their control (i.e., *producing*).	Consumers select for influencers who are *physically similar* with regard to a specific bodily attribute. Similarity is *compartmentalized* to this particular aspect.
Mastering techniques: Two modes through which consumers learn from . . .	*Actually learning:* Consumers invest focused time and energy to learn new techniques or improve their existing techniques through imitating and replicating an influencer's practice performances. Aimed at reducing feelings of being overwhelmed; however, consumers are only partly successful because the necessary translations/ adaptations result in a fragmented and piecemeal experience.	Consumers engage in *imitating* and deliberate attempts of *improving* their performances to deepen their practice immersion. However, higher complexity of learning techniques (compared to finding products) limits effectiveness of *mediated cooperative scaffolding* for practice immersion, as no reassurance is given through one-way communication that would reduce consumers' uncertainty regarding their own practice performances.	Consumers cannot compartmentalize one particular physical aspect when selecting influencers for learning complex techniques. Influencers' overall physical attributes are rarely a perfect match, which makes them *physically dissimilar* in a *holistic* sense.
. . . influencer content (especially tutorials but also related content)	*Methodically immersing:* Consumers watch influencer content for entertainment purposes. Repeated low-attention exposure deepens embodied knowledge and thus enables consumers to refine and hone their repertoire of techniques.	Building of embodied knowledge provides consumers with confidence in their practice performances. Furthermore, consumers *assimilate* into the social world of beauty through recreational watching and construing themselves as part of the makeup community via forming parasocial relationships with influencers. This enhances consumers' perception that they are significantly involved in the makeup practice (i.e., *producing/imagining*).	Consumers construe influencers as *positionally similar*, as fellow *community members.*
Appropriating trends: Two forms of inspiration consumers draw from influencers	*Pragmatically interpreting:* Consumers use influencers' style performances to inspire their own look but feel the need to modify (tone down) performances that are perceived as too over the top to fit into their everyday life. Need for translation into their own life context reduces consumers' ability to experiment with their looks with confidence.	Consumers *personalize* makeup practice by modifying influencers' performances, driven by the necessity to *adapt* makeup practice to the institutional norms that govern their everyday, mundane lives. Disconnect between influencers' and consumers' institutional arrangements limits the extent to which influencers help consumers *imagine* themselves as makeup practitioners.	Consumers construe influencers as *positionally dissimilar*—as *makeup artists and gurus* who live different lives from their own and are inescapably separate from their own life experience.

(*continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Practice component	Actions through which consumers consume influence[a]	Implications for how influencers facilitate consumers' immersion into practice[b]	Expanded understanding of influencers' similarity[c]
	Ideologically bolstering: Consumers use influencers' expressive displays of styles to embrace makeup culture for empowerment, thus claiming identity benefits and avoiding self-victimization. Inspiration occurs on a diffuse, ideological level, which legitimizes consumers' desire to use makeup as a confidence booster.	Influencers help consumers *reconcile* opposing ideologies, which enables consumers to further engage with a practice. Influencers' stylized and sometimes explicitly ideological performances provide consumers with resources for *identity construction* and allows them to judge the suitability of market-mediated identities for their own lives.	Consumers view influencers as *positionally similar (formerly ordinary) consumers* and nowadays *positionally dissimilar makeup gurus.* Influencers' successful trajectory provides aspirational value to consumers.

[a]Italicized words identify actions through which consumers integrate influencer content into their own performances; see outer shaded sectors in Figure 1.
[b]Italicized words link this study's findings to terms from prior literature (Akaka and Schau 2019; Holt 1995; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017); see How Consumers Consume section. Some terms (e.g., vicarious systematic sampling, mediated cooperative scaffolding) are adapted to fit the current context.
[c]Italicized words refer to refined and emerging conceptualizations of whether consumers perceive influencers as similar; see inner black ring in figure.

Informants were born between 1994 (i.e., late millennials) and 1998 (i.e., early gen Z). Thus, they were in middle school when beauty influencers first emerged and saw beauty vlogging take off during their formative years in high school and college. This sampling frame was intentional because it ensured that informants were "influencer natives." The goal was to equally sample for novice, intermediate, and advanced makeup users to generate variance within the interviews. Recruitment stopped once saturation was reached and no new concepts emerged from the interviews.

Semistructured interviews commenced with general discussions about informants' beauty practices before moving into more specific questions about influencers and other media. Interviews were supported by an interview guide that was constructed a priori based on the literature and preliminary fieldwork and adjusted as new insights emerged. Research assistants joined the interviews in a supportive function. This procedure created a welcoming atmosphere for informants, who were very forthcoming with their narratives. The author, being a male interviewer, added further positive effects, as informants explained their beauty and makeup practices to a "naive outsider." These dynamics were conducive to creating phenomenological dialogues and allowed me to probe how informants leveraged influencers for the various components of their own beauty practices (i.e., objects, competencies, and meanings; transformed for the specific research context into products, techniques, and trends). All interviews were audio recorded (average length: 1.25 hours) and transcribed verbatim, resulting in a total of 418 pages of transcripts (1.5 spaced, size 12 font).

Two additional data sets were collected as part of the interviews. Thirteen informants created a collage about what beauty meant to them. Each collage served as a prompt to dive deeper into informants' narratives and was analyzed alongside the transcribed interview text. I stopped doing collages in later interviews because I did not see additional insights emerging from them. Nine informants provided photographs of their "personal looks" after the interview, which served as holistic visual cues during data analysis.

Three supplemental data sets provided immersion into the context and supported data analysis. The research team visited local beauty stores six times before collecting interview data to sensitize ourselves to the research context. Individual field notes (total length of 51 pages, 1.5 spaced) were discussed in team meetings to establish the interview guide. A fifth data source, 53 photos taken during these visits, were also included in this discussion. As part of our immersion phase, we watched videos from 10 influencers and discussed their Instagram accounts to gain contextual understandings of the beauty influencer phenomenon. Some influencer videos were revisited during data analysis and coded in terms of how they related to dynamics that emerged from the interviews.

An initial round of open coding was performed by all members of the research team to identify common patterns and possible themes in the data (Zayer and Coleman 2015). Through dialectical tacking, which was led by me and facilitated by student collaborators' deep personal knowledge of informants, we identified convergent themes that served as the basis for subsequent rounds of analysis. At this stage, I continued the data analysis alone and performed axial coding to identify relationships between the previously identified

themes. I engaged in several rounds of iteratively moving back and forth between data and the conceptual framework until the final set of most salient themes emerged.

Findings

Figure 1 presents an overview of the findings. Starting at the center and reading from the inside toward the outside, it establishes that influencers enable all three components of consumers' beauty practices: finding products, mastering techniques for using them, and being in the know of trends that circulate within the community of practice (Gannon and Prothero 2018). The following quote demonstrates this versatility of influencer content: "I like being in the know of what's trendy. By watching YouTube videos, I feel like I can get that and also learn something about different products or how to put it on, all in one place" (Lisa).

The key question is how Lisa and other informants incorporate influencers' discussions and displays into their own beauty performances. Following the tripartite model of practices (Arsel and Bean 2013), Figure 1 is split into three differently shaded sectors: finding products, mastering techniques, and appropriating trends. For each sector, two different actions emerged from the data through which consumers incorporate influencers' expertise and taste into their own performances (see subsectors in Figure 1 and first two columns of Table 2): Positionally vetting and granularly validating represent two different ways in which consumers select influencers to inform their practice performances; actually learning and methodically immersing are two modes through which consumers use influencer content to refine their techniques; and pragmatically interpreting and ideologically bolstering describe two different forms of inspiration consumers draw from influencers. It is through these six actions that consumers leverage influencer content for their practice immersion (see third column of Table 2).

Another emerging finding that helped organize data analysis was to differentiate between various types of positional and physical similarity, semisimilarity, and dissimilarity (see inner black ring in Figure 1). While prior research highlights similarity with consumers as a key characteristic of influencers (e.g., Voorveld 2019), the current analysis finds that similarity is much more complex than previously acknowledged. In line with prior research, informants in this study perceive influencers as positionally semisimilar expert consumers (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013) and positionally similar members of the broader community of practice (Gannon and Prothero 2018). Yet informants also perceived influencers as positionally dissimilar makeup artists and gurus whose lives are inescapably different from their own (e.g., more glamorous). In addition to such positional comparisons, physical similarity and dissimilarity—compartmentalized into individual bodily features and at a holistic level—emerged as meaningful ways in which consumers view influencers. Recognizing these complex nuances of similarity (see fourth column in Table 2), in conjunction with the previous identified generic actions for practice immersion, helps analytically distinguish the six actions that are discussed further in this article. Finally, the outer black ring in Figure 1 outlines two different ways in which influencers' mediated practices (Gannon and Prothero 2016) facilitate consumers' identity projects (see Discussion).

Finding Products

Consumers apply two different strategies to select what influencers they permit to inform their consumption projects. Both emphasize selecting influencers who are similar; however, the first is about selecting influencers who share a semisimilar position as expert consumers, whereas the second is about selecting influencers based on physical similarity.

Positionally Vetting

Consumers vet influencers in terms of their independence from brands, expertise, and usefulness of their content. Informants are well aware that "a lot of [influencers] get paid by brands to endorse them" (Paige) and are selective in whom they follow: Those who "aren't going to say anything negative, [. . .] are constantly wearing one brand, [. . .] or [. . .] are constantly posting about that brand" (Paige) are discounted as too biased. On the flip side, influencers who provide in-depth information, present balanced arguments, and engage in systematic sampling or folk experimentations (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017) are sought out, regardless of whether they are sponsored. Paige looks for influencers who "give you the real breakdown of how it works; what's good and what's bad about it." In other words, she selects influencers whom she sees as expert consumers (i.e., positionally semisimilar) rather than agents of the brand or fellow ordinary consumers.

This corroborates earlier research (e.g., Lou 2021) that showed consumers are quite accepting of influencers pitching products and brands. However, while earlier research linked this phenomenon to

characteristics of the influencer as a source, for example, by highlighting how consumers build emotional connections with influencers (Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), the current study also emphasizes content-level effects: Influencers must earn this leeway through producing in-depth content that is perceived as free of bias. Cynthia, for example, looks for depth of information to determine whether she can trust an influencer:

> They go into so much detail about everything! And they've also got every ingredient listed, and how to use it [. . .] They rave about it. But they back it up with, "Here's what it does because of these ingredients." . . . She's a licensed esthetician, so she knows. I really like that. [. . .] I feel like I've done my research. I'm like "Okay, I'm an informed consumer. I'll go make my purchase now." (Cynthia)

One of the most valued types of content are folk experimentations and systematic samplings (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017) in the form of "dupe videos" in which influencers compare expensive products with cheaper alternatives side by side. Influencer Samantha Ravndahl, for example, points out how people with oily skin might not be as happy with the less expensive product as other consumers. Informants value this type of content because it enables them to find "a totally reasonable alternative" when they "don't have the money to buy the nice thing" (Kacey).

Together, these findings emphasize that consumers search for expertise and knowledge leadership, rather than just emotional connection and kinship, when dealing with the specific task of finding products. Influencers help navigate the multitude of products that many informants describe as "overwhelming" (e.g., Lisa). By providing institutional benchmarks and vicarious acts of systematic sampling, influencers enable informants to claim the role of well-prepared and responsible consumers. Furthermore, by discussing differences between various skin types and how the interaction between skin types and a product's formula impacts performance, influencers build consumers' makeup vocabulary. Even when no purchase is made, influencers thus facilitate practice assimilation (Holt 1995) through enabling consumers to think and speak like makeup practitioners.

Granularly Validating

Prior research has typically conceptualized influencers' similarity with consumers in terms of shared social positions (e.g., McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). Physical attributes, if considered at all, are mainly confined to broadly construed physical attractiveness (e.g., Lee and Watkins 2016). The current research adds nuance by showing how consumers select influencers who share very specific physical features (e.g., skin tone or eye shape) to validate how the material properties of a product will fit their own needs.

Anna, for example, watched an influencer talking about how a shampoo works well with her "really fine" hair. Anna immediately realized the similarity to her own hair and has been a loyal customer since then. Informants visually assess influencers, sales associates, and even regular consumers on their physical similarity when seeking out product information. In the quote that follows, Paige evaluates the influencer not based on overall similarity or attractiveness but specifically in terms of how much the influencer's skin type aligns with her own:

> Something that is a big deal is if you have dry or oily skin, and some products just don't work if you have one or the other. I try and do . . . most of the influencers will have some sort of video about their skin routine where they'll talk about [their skin]. So I try and watch that one and see "Am I like that?" . . . Just to see if I can compare how the product might go on their skin as to how it might go on mine. (Paige)

Paige engages in a mediated (Gannon and Prothero 2016) form of cooperative scaffolding (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017): Rather than interacting with more knowledgeable others directly, she leverages influencer content to align relevant physical attributes in a careful selection process. These deliberate actions highlight a powerful mechanism through which influencers facilitate consumers' practice immersion beyond just conveying product information. By actively and specifically aligning the physical properties between themselves and others, consumers engage in producing practices (Holt 1995) that allow them to take charge of their practice performance, even as the constituting elements (i.e., the mass-produced product and the influencer content) lie entirely outside their control. Consumers feel empowered in their beauty practice because they can carefully manage influence through minutely compartmentalizing physical similarity across specific body parts and time periods: Upon asking if there was an influencer who perfectly matches her skin, Paige explains that she follows "this one Danish girl" whose skin type is "pretty close" to her own and that if this particular influencer "likes a skin product" she tends "to think [she] would like it" too. However, Paige goes on to explain that the Danish influencer's hair is different, that Paige herself gets more tanned in California during the summer months, and that her skin gets "very dry in the

winter." By concluding that "it's really hard to say that there is just one [influencer]" and highlighting her own seasonal and location-specific adjustments, Paige demonstrates her competence as a discerning makeup practitioner. Thus, even though consumers have little chance of interacting with the influencer or directing the content, they have coconstructive power over their influencer experience through these selective actions that are under their control.

While selecting influencers based on physical similarity is a moving target, it is an achievable one because finding products is a relatively narrow task. By compartmentalizing one particular aspect of their bodies at a certain time, consumers can find a specific influencer who granularly validates the suitability of a product. The same cannot be said for more complex aspects of consumers' beauty practices, such as mastering makeup techniques.

Mastering Techniques

Consumers have a strong interest in seeing "*how* [influencers are] using the makeup, not just *what* products they're using" (Lisa). This study finds two different modes through which consumers learn from makeup tutorials and related content: *Actually learning* describes how consumers invest focused time and energy to learn and improve new or challenging techniques, whereas *methodically immersing* describes how consumers pick up details and assimilate into the social world of beauty through casually watching influencers for entertainment. These two modes can be summarized as an anxiously focused, frequently frustrating, pause-and-rewind style versus a reassuringly defocused, incrementally effective, play-and-unwind style of consuming social media influence.

Actually Learning

Consumers invest a lot of time imitating and replicating influencers' practice performances. They deliberately follow tutorials "step by step" (Sarah) and sometimes even press pause every few seconds to follow instructions. Virtually all informants consume influencer content via such focused activities. More experienced users, like Maddison, may have relied on this mode more heavily in the past and nowadays rather watch "for fun" and to immerse themselves in beauty culture (see Methodically Immersing section). Nevertheless, they also adopt the more focused actually learning approach when a particular need arises. In the quote that follows, Maddison draws the distinction between the two different modes of learning techniques ("purposefully seeking out to learn" versus watching "for fun") and confirms that she heavily engages in actually learning. She has to do this because makeup is a constantly evolving practice. Catching up with new or returning trends through actually learning from basic tutorials is necessary to retain and deepen her practice immersion:

> I definitely do a lot less purposely seeking out to learn these days. Mostly because I watch a tutorial now for fun. [. . .] I will look up things like "contouring" for actually learning because even though I can do it, I don't feel like I have it completely down. I'll randomly be inspired to want to it better, and then look one up. Oh, "brows" actually, when they came back in style recently, I definitely looked up tutorials for them. Because I wanted to be better. Oh, and for eyeshadow I was *binge* watching basic eyeshadow tutorials, rather than the fun ones that inspired me, because I was like, . . . How do I do this? (Maddison)

Consumers seek out influencers who are physically similar to support their deliberate attempts at mastering new or difficult techniques. However, in contrast to the previous theme, in which consumers were able to validate a product's suitability by isolating a particular physical property (e.g., skin type) and selecting an influencer who matches that property (i.e., physically similar in a compartmentalized sense; see inner black ring in Figure 1), learning a technique is a more complex undertaking. Several factors (e.g., facial structure, skin tone, skill level, personal style of the influencer) usually must be traded off against one another. As a consequence, actually learning a technique is rarely facilitated by finding one influencer who provides a perfect match (i.e., physically dissimilar in a holistic sense; see inner black ring in Figure 1):

> The thing with YouTube, no one is going to have all the same features as you. I found one that has a similar eye shape but a different skin type. So the way she does her eyes are going to suit me, but the way she does [her look] and the products she uses on her face aren't what I should be using. And at the same time skill levels vary. A YouTuber that looks nothing like me might be completely amazing at makeup and I'll learn more from her than someone who looks just like me but isn't that good at it. (Andrea)

Andrea's account demonstrates that consumers have a rather fragmented and piecemeal experience when they try to utilize influencer content—even detailed tutorials—for actually learning a technique. Consumers must translate influencers' demonstrations to their own faces, which is "really hard because everyone's jawline" (Violet) and other facial features are different. Because the outcome of their

reenactments "never looks exactly the same because you can't do the exact motions they did" (Kacey), consumers' attempts to improve their practice performances through these focused actions are only partly successful. This underwhelming outcome of actually learning tends to be frustrating. Lisa, for example, does not feel reassured that she successfully translated an influencer's technique into her own practice performance:

> The tutorials teach me how to do certain things. Like contouring—that's super complicated, and you have to put all of these colors in different places and I never really know how to do it right. [. . .] It's sometimes hard to match what's someone is doing in a YouTube tutorial, . . . but it's still entertaining. (Lisa)

In short, despite the popularity of tutorial content, attempting to extend their own techniques via actually learning is surprisingly dissatisfying for consumers because it is accompanied by worries and insecurities.

Methodically Immersing

The last part of Lisa's previous quote—"but it's still entertaining"—points to the second way by which informants consume makeup tutorials. Instead of actively learning through focused attention, this play-and-unwind mode characterizes a more relaxed way of learning techniques in which consumers watch influencers for entertainment. Fiona's quote locates the fun and entertainment of influencer content in displays of personality and the sharing of gossip that are reminiscent of reality TV:

> I feel like I'll watch makeup videos just for the . . . the entertainment of it I guess. 'Cause I'm not necessarily going to put on bright blue eyeshadow, but it's fun to go and see their technique and then watch how they would do it. Even though I wouldn't necessarily use that on myself. So yeah, I kind of go for personality and humor, if they're fun to watch in general. [. . .] I feel like it's like a *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* . . . but for like makeup vlogging! [Laughs] It's kind of like reality TV, but with [makeup] incorporated in it. . . . So I kind of pick up on techniques, or if I like the brush they use, I'll go and buy that. But in terms of playing around, I'll stick to the same general technique, kind of. 'Cause I do smoky eyes, and that's like it. I don't do much of the other fancy stuff. (Fiona)

While this style of consuming influencer content may seem frivolous, Fiona's quote unveils a powerful way by which this play-and-unwind style of consuming influence helps consumers increase their competence as makeup practitioners. Fiona explains how she has her "go-to looks" and "stick[s] to the same general technique." Thus, even though she does not watch influencer content with the intention and attention to directly imitate influencers' ways of creating their looks, she nevertheless "pick[s] up on techniques" and makes subtle changes to how she applies makeup. Chloe, who for years watched makeup videos to "help [her] fall asleep," likewise explains that she "didn't have to practice anymore because [she] had seen it so many times, the same way, over and over and over." These two narratives demonstrate how repeated low-attention exposure deepens consumers' embodied knowledge (Reckwitz 2002) of applying makeup and thus their practice immersion. While small changes in embodied knowledge might initially go unnoticed, they can over time result in sizable improvements in consumers' competence as beauty practitioners.

In addition, methodically immersing facilitates practice immersion because consumers can assimilate (Holt 1995) into the social world of beauty through low-key actions like following gossip. These findings add to recent research on the relationship between influencers and followers (Cocker and Cronin 2017; Lou 2021) by pointing out that parasocial relationships with influencers fulfill a deeper purpose for consumers, beyond simply experiencing dyadic social bonds (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2017). These connections—"no matter how tenuous or even fictional" (Holt 1995, p. 7)—enable consumers to produce positional similarity with influencers via shared community membership (i.e., positionally similar/community member in Figure 1), which bolsters consumers' identities as makeup practitioners.

Appropriating Trends

SMIs connect consumers to an ever-changing cultural repertoire of makeup trends. They "provide inspiration because there are new looks coming out all the time" (Andrea) and offer a "big picture of what's in style or what's kind of cool" (Lexi). As shown by prior research (e.g., Cocker and Cronin 2017; Lou 2021; Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018), influencers are thus sources of inspiration. However, details on how exactly consumers are inspired by influencers have been surprisingly sparse. Fiona's quote in the previous section suggests that inspiration is a more complex phenomenon than commonly understood: Even though she enjoys videos in which influencers display bold new trends, Fiona is "not necessarily going to put on bright blue eyeshadow." This section uncovers two different forms of inspiration: The first is an appropriation of makeup trends through

pragmatically interpreting influencers' looks for one's own makeup performance (i.e., inspiration for one's look), whereas the second constitutes a more abstract process of ideologically bolstering one's performance against insecurities that arise from conflicting makeup discourses (i.e., inspiration to embrace makeup for empowerment).

Pragmatically Interpreting

Popular influencers claim taste leadership through displaying bold styles (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). Informants frequently indicate that influencers' performances, while being fun and inspiring, are too over the top for their own looks: They "steal elements of [influencers'] looks because it's too extreme to replicate all" and tone-down influencers "bold looks" by doing "less of it" (Lisa). These modifications highlight informants' concerns about crossing a "line where you pass to makeup that you'd wear for prom," which would conflict with their desire to display looks that are suitable for "professional kind of events" (Violet). Even Paige, who displays some of the boldest looks in this study, "translates" styles that she thinks are better suited for the "runway" or a "photo shoot" and reinterprets them "for the everyday." This shows that informants are highly aware that influencers are governed by different institutional norms, which requires consumers to modify their engagement with influencers' makeup practices to avoid identity misalignment (Akaka and Schau 2019).

Admiring is thus distinct from emulating. While adventurous performances prompt favorable audience reactions in comment sections (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), they make it harder for everyday consumers to leverage influencers' displays for their own practice performances. Even though informants frequently praise influencers for providing inspiration and explicitly state that they want to experiment with bolder styles, the positional dissimilarity of "makeup gurus" (see inner black ring in Figure 1) deters them from closely emulating influencers' performances. Consumers "don't think [they] could pull it off" (Andrea) and long for seeing images of "regular people" so they "know it's possible to achieve the look without being a professional" (Anna). Concerns over lacking skills aside, the more important issue for informants is to not overstep their "line" by displaying a look that is deemed incongruent with their inner selves, as Diana's quote illustrates:

> When I think of purple eyeshadow or blue eyeshadow, or pink, I think of . . . like runway show, or performance! You work at Sephora! But that's not really my style. It's not really me. [. . .] Like, I wouldn't wear that to work. And I probably wouldn't wear it out with friends. (Diana)

Other consumers and friends who live similar lives are seen as equally as or even more impactful for deciding what makeup trends to appropriate. Violet, for example, draws more on her friends when she is "trying to define that line." In sum, influencers' impact on consumers' actual appropriation of trends seems to be lower than what one might expect. However, that does not mean that influencers' expressive displays are wasted, because they offer another type of inspiration.

Ideologically Bolstering

Consumers' beauty practices are situated within ideological tensions between competing cultural discourses that must be negotiated for constructing favorable identities (Scholz and Smith 2019). Makeup can be a confidence booster for working in professional environments or interacting with other people (i.e., makeup-as-empowerment ideology). Kacey, for example, utilizes makeup as an "armor" in challenging situations, such as when competing against others during dance contests. On the flip side, informants are also keenly aware that wearing makeup can carry negative connotations in society (i.e., makeup-as-oppression ideology). Anna verbalizes—and struggles with how much she adopts for herself—the familiar critique that people wear makeup because they are crippled by insecurities and victims of unrealistic beauty ideals:

> A lot of girls that I know of do contouring. [. . .] It's so much, and you get further and further away from . . . the face that you were born with. I mean, at a certain point, there's a line for me. Like, it's a lot. . . . But I don't mean it in a judgmental way either. I don't judge people who do it. But . . . but I do. I just think that there are some trends that are insane[. . . .] I mean, it's all up to the person, but my best friend from back home and my cousin both have this issue where they cannot leave the house, even to go to the gas station, without wearing makeup. They've gotten to this point where they depend on it. [. . .] Like if it's crippling to not have it, for me that's really sad. (Anna)

Informants must straddle these competing cultural discourses as they engage in their own beauty practices (Akaka and Schau 2019). Diana, an advanced and daily user, cherishes the boost in confidence she gains from fake eyelashes. She calls it a "makeover" but quickly adds that it is "not so much where you're totally transforming your face." Even as Diana

embraces the celebratory discourse that construes makeup as empowerment, she safeguards herself against an anticipated and internalized makeup-as-oppression critique by pointing out that she's still the same person underneath: "You're a new person. The same person, but you're better."

Influencers help consumers straddle these competing cultural discourses by bolstering the makeup-as-empowerment ideology against negative stereotypes, perceived judgment, and one's own personal history. Influencers' avant-garde makeup performances are seen as "empowering women to try new things and be different" (Diana). And the more flamboyant that influencers' performances are, the more they serve as a poster child for the makeup-as-empowerment ideology. Maddison explicitly draws out the connection between bold makeup and empowerment by emphasizing—rightly or wrongly—that the influencer creates her look "just for herself," not to please others. And because, implicitly, Maddison also uses makeup as "a girl power thing," she reaps identity benefits by embracing the makeup-as-empowerment ideology for herself: "You know, it's sort of like a girl power thing. 'Look at the way this girl can make herself look incredible. Just for herself, you know.' Sometimes they'll be like, 'I'm just doing this tutorial sitting around my house!'" (Maddison).

Influencers at times directly legitimize the makeup-as-empowerment ideology. In her most popular video (42-plus million views and 900,000 likes), influencer Nikkie delivers a manifesto on the "power of makeup" in which she encourages her followers to embrace the empowering effect of makeup and reject the makeup-as-oppression critique. She starts the video with these words:

> I'm here today to show you the power of makeup. I've been noticing a lot lately that girls have been almost ashamed to say that they love makeup. Because nowadays, when you say you love makeup, you either do it because you wanna look good for boys, you do it because you're insecure, or you do it because you don't love yourself. I feel like in a way, lately, it's almost a crime to love doing your makeup. (*Nikkie Tutorials*)

The video continues with Nikkie celebrating how makeup allows her to "look Photoshopped" in real life, thus clashing with another social critique. While she briefly acknowledges that makeup should not be used to cover up insecurities, the entire video venerates makeup for its self-transformational power and unapologetically connects heavy use of makeup to self-empowerment. In other words, Nikkie claims the makeup-as-empowerment ideology for herself and for everybody who wants it, thus helping consumers reconcile ideological tensions and further immerse into makeup practice (Akaka and Schau 2019).

Nikkie's and other influencers' performances of self-expressive empowerment are viewed by consumers from a position of both semisimilarity and dissimilarity (see inner black ring in Figure 1). The idea that influencers started out as ordinary consumers has become part of modern-day folklore. Informants thus see influencers not only as today's dissimilar gurus who confidently embrace the makeup-as-empowerment ideology but also as formerly similar consumers who started out like them and are just a few steps ahead in their makeup journey. Influencers' extreme confidence offers an appealing future self. Watching bold and self-expressive performances may not result in actual replications (see Pragmatically Interpreting) but nevertheless inspires consumers, just on a more diffuse, ideological level: Vicariously consuming influencers' bold and expressive styles inspires informants to embrace "the power of makeup" as their lead ideology, thus legitimizing their desire to use makeup as a confidence booster and reducing worries about being judged. This analysis extends our understanding of what inspiration influencers provide. In addition to providing style leadership (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), influencers serve as role models for how to fight off societal pressures.

Discussion

This research advances our understanding of influencer marketing by shifting perspectives from how influence is produced to how consumers actually consume social media influence. It challenges the underlying assumption that influence is passively absorbed (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Escalas and Bettman 2017; Lee and Watkins 2016; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2019) and utilizes practice theory to uncover six actions through which consumers actively integrate influencer content into their consumption and identity projects (see Figure 1): Consumers examine products through positionally vetting and granularly validating, increase their skills through actually learning from tutorials and methodically immersing themselves into makeup culture, and draw inspiration from influencers through pragmatically interpreting makeup trends and ideologically bolstering their own use of makeup. Detailing these actions answers recent calls to explore consumer dynamics within influencer marketing (Araujo et al. 2020; Dahlen and Rosengren 2016; Voorveld 2019). In particular, by focusing "on

the audiences" (Gannon and Prothero 2018, p. 23) and their actions, rather than influencers' attributes or activities, the current research makes the following three contributions: It provides insights into how companies can effectively utilize influencers, more clearly differentiates between SMIs and celebrity endorsers (McCracken 1989), and explores how mediated practices (Gannon and Prothero 2016) facilitate consumers' identity projects (Akaka and Schau 2019).

First, this study answers calls for "more cross-fertilization of theories and ideas from various disciplines" to better understand how influencers "impact on consumers and how they can be effectively utilized by companies" (Vrontis et al. 2021, p. 13). Prior research often identifies source effects such as perceived similarity, credibility, popularity, and attractiveness to explain why influencers are effective (e.g., Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2019; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Voorveld 2019). Examining influencer effectiveness solely via these general source effects mutes the active ways in which consumers engage with influencers and therefore does not fully illuminate what benefits consumers derive from them. For example, attractiveness is usually construed in broad terms such as overall physical attractiveness (Lee and Watkins 2016); yet the current study shows that physical properties at a granular level are also important because consumers actively seek out influencers with specific physical features to evaluate products (see Granularly Validating). Furthermore, and in contrast to established thinking (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), even perceived dissimilarity can have positive effects. For example, "influencer flamboyancy" is probably seen as a dissimilar attribute by most; yet it signals a level of confidence that helps consumers negotiate ideological undercurrents that complicate their consumption projects (see Ideologically Bolstering). Recognizing such nuances can guide marketers' selection of influencers for their communications programs.

This study also expands an understanding of what benefits consumer derive from different types of influencer content. While survey-based research shows that consumers value influencer content that signals expertise (Ki and Kim 2019), examining how consumers actually engage with influencers provides a more detailed understanding of what constitutes high-quality content. For example, influencers can offer valuable product information through performing systematic sampling (see Positionally Vetting) and discussing a product's material properties in relation to their own bodies (see Granularly Validating). Furthermore, the current study differentiates between two ways in which influencers provide taste leadership (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013): Displaying looks that are suited for the everyday is useful because they can be more easily emulated (see Pragmatically Interpreting), whereas more expressive avant-garde looks benefit consumers by providing moral support for using makeup as a confidence booster (see Ideologically Bolstering). Finally, while actually learning from tutorials is a straightforward benefit, this study also outlines the utility of consuming gossip because it enables consumers to gain membership in the makeup community (see Methodically Immersing). Recognizing these various functions that influencer content serves in consumers' lives can help marketers and influencers calibrate their content strategies.

Future research is needed to explore how a practice theoretical approach to influencer marketing can inform other industries. For example, compartmentalizing physical attributes of influencers may help assess the suitability of products within bodily consumption contexts (e.g., health, fashion) but may be less important when products are not ingested into, applied onto, or worn on the body (e.g., electronics). Another important question is whether a practice theoretical lens is useful for contexts that require less embodied participation or are less aestheticized (e.g., financial instruments). Nevertheless, the basic elements of practices that govern consumers' everyday lives (Schatzki 1996; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) should still apply, and influencers could, for example, ideologically bolster heavy use of credit cards as a sign of financial responsibility rather than recklessness. What specific functions influencer content fulfills in any given consumption context, however, requires its own empirical investigation.

A second contribution is a clearer differentiation between influencers and celebrity endorsers that helps explain the success of influencer marketing. Voorveld (2019) suggests that "social media influencers should be systematically compared with other forms of endorsers [. . .] such as celebrities" and that future research should "investigate what determines whether people perceive social media influencers as too commercial" (p. 21). Both ideas are connected via the similarity argument: Prior research typically conceptualizes SMIs as more similar to everyday consumers, compared with celebrity endorsers, and points out that commercialization may threaten this basis of their appeal (e.g., Cocker and Cronin 2017; Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Voorveld 2019). Yet consumers

seem to be quite accepting of sponsored influencer content (Lou 2021; Vrontis et al. 2021) in contrast to more conventional celebrities, whose endorsements are often discounted (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017). Prior research suggests that the reason for this might be social bonds (Escalas and Bettman 2017; Ferchaud et al. 2018; Gannon and Prothero 2016), as consumers have been found to tolerate sponsored posts (Lou 2021) and even defend influencers from criticism over their commercial activities (Mardon, Molesworth, and Grigore 2018) because of previously established relationships. However, because parasocial relationships are also formed with more traditional celebrities (Horton and Wohl 1956), the existence of social bonds alone cannot explain why consumers tend to tolerate influencers' commercial activities.

The practice theoretical lens on influencer marketing that is developed here offers an alternative explanation that does not rely on the similarity argument: Compared to celebrity endorsers, SMIs have a much more direct impact on consumers' practice immersion. McCracken (1989) describes celebrity endorsements as a three-stage process. A celebrity first takes on a particular configuration of cultural meanings through his or her public career. These meanings are then transferred from the celebrity onto a product through the endorsement. Finally, consumers appropriate these cultural meanings into their own identities by accepting "that the meanings in the celebrity (by dint of long and fond acquaintance) are in the product" (p. 316). The celebrity here furnishes consumers' identity projects only indirectly through transferring his or her symbolic qualities onto products, which then become resources for consumers' self-constructions.

By contrast, influencers play a much more direct role in consumers' identity projects because they help consumers immerse themselves in and continuously engage with the practice (Akaka and Schau 2019). Influencers help consumers acquire cultural competence in their practice performances (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017) by building their vocabulary (see Positionally Vetting) and improving their techniques (see Actually Learning), provide communal identity value (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009) by socializing consumers into makeup culture (see Methodically Immersing), and legitimize consumers' use of makeup through perpetrating ideologies that cast makeup in a positive light (see Ideologically Bolstering). Furthermore, consumers actively take charge of their influencer experience by carefully screening influencers for brand-introduced biases (see Positionally Vetting), aligning physical properties (see Granularly Validating), and modifying influencers' makeup looks to fit their institutional constraints (see Pragmatically Interpreting). These actions are not merely reactive cross-validations of information (Lou 2021) but part of an active and ongoing integration of influencer content with one's own bodily and institutional needs. Even though this skillful and personalized consumption of influencer content is a one-sided engagement, rather than a mutual engagement with other practitioners (Gannon and Prothero 2018; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017), it nevertheless enables consumers to demonstrate that they are discerning and experienced practitioners.

These direct ways through which influencers help consumers claim their identities as involved practitioners seem to be less vulnerable to commercial contamination than the purely symbolic value that is provided by celebrity endorsements. Future research could experimentally test this proposition by manipulating the extent to which endorsements rely on the symbolic power of the celebrity (i.e., simply suggesting "the essential similarity between the celebrity and the product"; McCracken 1989, p. 316) versus more directly support consumers' practices (e.g., through having celebrities provide tutorials).

Finally, the current research contributes to our understanding of mediated practices (Gannon and Prothero 2016). Prior research emphasizes the utility of practice theory to understand how consumers construct their identities (Akaka and Schau 2019). However, Gannon and Prothero (2016) rightly point out that practice theory research has generally "omitted the central role of online media in sharing know-how" and call for a better understanding of such "mediated practices" (p. 1874).

The current study shows that influencers' mediated practices facilitate consumers' own practice immersion in two different ways (see outer black ring in Figure 1): First, mediated practices help consumers improve their practice performances. This is a similar dynamic to how consumers (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017) and influencers (Gannon and Prothero 2018) help each other through mutual engagement and support; however, the one-sided engagement explored here requires less investment in terms of consumers' time, effort, or money. Influencers as "teachers of practice performances" offer product knowledge in concentrated and distilled form (see Positionally Vetting and Granularly Validating), enable consumers to advance their practical skills and cultural competencies without risking major missteps (see Actually Learning) or even paying

much attention (see Methodically Immersing), and provide easily accessible inspiration (see Pragmatically Interpreting). Because practice theory aims to illuminate the production of everyday life (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), recognizing how even low-effort activities (e.g., casually watching an influencer for gossip) foster practice immersion is an important addition to earlier research (e.g., Maciel and Wallendorf 2017), which explored more time-intensive activities that are more difficult to fit into consumers' daily schedules.

Second, influencers' mediated practices can help consumers decide what integrative practice they should newly adopt. Influencers' performances crystalize a practice into a recognizable entity that can be viewed, understood, and examined from the outside (i.e., influencers as exemplars of practice performers in Figure 1). While influencers-as-teachers give consumers manuals for performing an integrated practice (Arsel and Bean 2013), influencers-as-exemplars provide vivid archetypes that consumers can gaze at to evaluate how an integrated practice aligns with their own identity projects. For example, seeing influencers as exemplars of a particular makeup practice (e.g., very bold looks) enables consumers to decide whether this particular articulation fits their own self-concepts (see Pragmatically Interpreting), and influencers' embrace of the "power of makeup" helps consumers recognize and negotiate the otherwise unspoken institutional norms and expectations that govern their lives (see Ideologically Bolstering).

Conceptualizing influencers as exemplars of practice performers advances our understanding of the link between practices and identity projects (Akaka and Schau 2019). Prior research has explored how consumers construct identities through continuous practice engagement (e.g., Holt 1995; Maciel and Wallendorf 2017; Schatzki 1996; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), but it is less clear how consumers choose the integrative practices in which they immerse themselves. For example, Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) examined how aficionados who were already "intensively involved in the focal phenomenon" (p. 729) improved their cultural competence, and Arsel and Bean (2013) interviewed regular contributors to an online community to explore how institutional taste regimes orchestrate their practice. In each case, the focus is on already-committed practitioners, which leaves unexplored how consumers get interested in regularly performing any integrated practice in the first place. Influencers as exemplars of practice performers fill this gap because they help consumers judge from afar the extent to which an integrated practice may align with desired identities and overarching life goals.

Together, these findings demonstrate the value of examining the evolving digital ecosystem through more holistic perspectives that explore what consumers actually do when utilizing emerging technologies for their consumption projects. Future research can leverage practice theory to examine the broader identity implications and use patterns of other technologies, such as augmented reality or voice assistants, to illuminate what value consumers seek from these emerging engagement arenas (Araujo et al. 2020).

Managerial Implications

Brand managers and SMIs can utilize this research to improve their influencer marketing campaigns and increase their appeal to consumers, respectively. The key for both stakeholders is to consider Figure 1 as a dartboard and play a game of :around the clock," in which the objective is to hit every segment (e.g., positional vetting, granularly validating). Influencers can fine-tune their content so it caters to specific actions through which consumers consume influence. For example, when creating tutorials with step-by-step instructions, influencers should downplay the need to "do it as exactly as possible" to relieve consumers from anxieties that arise from the fragmented experience while actually learning.

For brand managers, the Influencer Marketing Dartboard offers an alternative to traditional customer journey mappings, with the two benefits that it is specifically attuned to influencer marketing and that it offers a consumption-centric rather than marketing-centric perspective (Akaka and Schau 2019). Of course, the Influencer Marketing Dartboard needs to be customized for industries that cater to other integrated practices. However, the three basic practice components and consumers' generic actions that enable practice engagement have been established and applied across numerous contexts, including baseball (Holt 1995), craft beer consumption (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017), surfing (Akaka and Schau 2019), and home decor (Arsel and Bean 2013). To quip: The dartboard's color might change as one crawls from pub to pub, but its underlying structure and the rules of play developed here remain the same.

Brand managers should arrange their influencer marketing strategy to hit all segments with content from multiple influencers. Different segments help consumers achieve different things in their practice:

For example, videos displaying down-to-earth makeup looks help consumers pragmatically interpret trends but are less suited to fight off internalized critiques against using makeup. Brand managers should therefore specify what type of content they want influencers to produce. To be clear, this study does not advocate for telling influencers what to say, as such managerial control would undermine the effectiveness of influencer content. Rather, it argues to specify what aspects of the dartboard influencers should keep in mind when creating content. Furthermore, the nuanced understanding of how consumers construe influencers' similarity should encourage managers to select many different micro-influencers—rather than one or a few macro-influencers—based on their physical attributes (e.g., skin type). This would enable a larger number of consumers to granularly validate the suitability of products for their own bodies. Given that influencers are in the unique position to help consumers validate products' material properties at a distance, brand managers should request and monitor for this type of content.

The current study also identifies two relative weaknesses of influencer marketing: Influencers provide a rather fragmented experience when consumers try to actually learn techniques, and influencers are often too bold in their styles for consumers to emulate their looks (see Pragmatically Interpreting). Brand managers should therefore integrate influencer marketing with complementary marketing activities to help consumers with these two aspects of their practice immersion. For example, offering an augmented reality app (Scholz and Smith 2016) may help with actually learning because seeing a makeup look displayed on one's own face may counteract the fragmented experience that arises when consumers translate influencers' instructions onto their own faces. Stimulating consumer-generated content (Voorveld 2019) may help consumers with pragmatically interpreting, because the looks of fellow consumers are more easily incorporated into one's own context. Future research that examines these issues separately and, especially, in comparison with influencer marketing would help advertisers to better integrate SMIs into the ever-expanding set of engagement arenas that are available for brand communications (Araujo et al. 2020).

Conclusion

Given consumers' enthusiasm for influencers and the rising importance of influencer marketing, it is vital that brand managers embrace the complexity of the phenomenon. At the core, this requires a more nuanced understanding of how consumers consume influence. By utilizing the Influencer Marketing Dartboard as a conceptual and managerial tool for this task, marketers can better serve their customers and increase their brands' return on influencer ad spend.

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