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All The Internet's A Stage: The Performance of Authenticity by Instagram Wellness Influencers

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ALL THE INTERNET'S A STAGE:

THE PERFORMANCE OF AUTHENTICITY BY INSTAGRAM WELLNESS

INFLUENCERS

by

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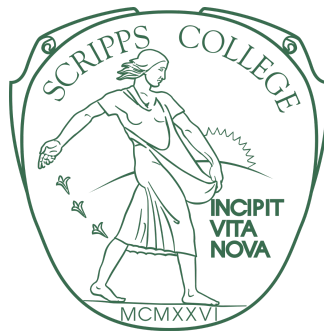
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Abstract

This paper conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven influencers to examine the techniques they use to promote authenticity in content creation. The analysis identified two main techniques: (1) creating content in batches during designated "content days" and (2) incorporating mental health into their online persona. It is important to note that because sharing vulnerable information is a deliberate part of an influencer's strategy, personal mental health content should not be regarded as more authentic than other content. Additionally, the study briefly explores how a lack of boundaries can lead to ambiguity between personal identity and one's online persona. Further research is required to determine if these findings are consistent across personal niches, or if these findings are specific to the wellness niche.

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I.   Introduction

Content creators have become increasingly popular; a survey by HigherVisibility reports that 1 in 4 Generation Z surveyed "plan to become social media influencers," and 1 in 5 Gen Z would "quit their job to become a social media influencer" (2022). With the rising desire from the newest generation to turn content creation into a job, it is increasingly important to understand the impact of sharing your identity and experiences online.

Social media influencers can be broadly defined as individuals with a public social media account revolving around a specific subject ("niche"). Depending on the size of the following, an influencer can be classified as a micro, macro, or mega influencer -- see Appendix III for this classification. Influencers toe the line of being a celebrity and a regular person, existing in a subsect of fame commonly referred to as 'microcelebrity.' Ruiz-Gomez (2019) defines influencers as digital content creators with "a mindset and a set of practices that include crafting a digital persona for public consumption" (18). Influencers are not to be mistaken with celebrities; an influencer's fame is mostly restricted to their social media presence, whereas a celebrity has other engagements including movies or music.

Social identity can be understood as both ascribed (identity traits you were born with) and acquired (identity traits you have more autonomy over) identities. A subcultural identity fits under the umbrella of acquired identities: it is any group of people that differentiates itself from the rest of society, whilst simultaneously providing their members with unspoken rules about behaviour, clothing, and interests.

The coronavirus pandemic has witnessed an emergence of consumption-based identity subcultures--clothing and lifestyle changes that have been popularised by mainstream media.

Now, engaging in healthy habits aren't considered 'just habits,' they encompass a new type of identity. "That Girl," a term coined by the users of the social media application TikTok, is a phrase used to denote individuals who place their health at the forefront of their lives[1]. Laura Pitcher, a writer for Vice Media's culture and lifestyle magazine i-D, describes the identity as "encompassing a life based on mainstream notions of wellness" (2021). Explained by Urban Dictionary, "'That Girl' is a girl [or an individual of any gender] that gets up at 5am, meditates, drinks smoothies, showers every day, journal[s], eat[s] only healthy food, goes to [the] gym every day, and is successful in many ways" (2021). Someone who is wellness-conscious can identify as "that girl" on top of the traditional intersectional identities they already hold.

Existing literature covers self-branding (Khamis et al 2016; van Driel and Dumitrica 2020), influencer culture (Wellman 2020; Hendry 2021), and the wellness space on social media specifically (Bak and Priniski 2020; Gerstenecker 2021). Most of the literature exists in a media studies or marketing space and focuses on how everyday people or potential brands perceive content creators. This paper will be focused on the reverse: through interviews and case studies, I want to explore how "that girl" and wellness content creators understand and brand their identity 'authentically.'

Authenticity is a constructed phenomenon where, through their presentation, an individual is perceived as trustworthy by others. A piece in Fashion Network explains that "influencers are facing a backlash due to out-of-touch content," and micro-influencers "will continue to grow their following as they feel more relatable to their niche audiences" (Halliday, 2023). Since the wellness subculture encompasses mental wellbeing, success in this niche is dependent on

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[1] While the wellness niche on Instagram and the "that girl" acquired identity aren't necessarily interchangeable, there are many overlapping traits. This paper will be using these phrases to reference the same concept.

influencers sharing both their highs and lows. An influencer in this subculture who solely shares 'aspirational' content (i.e. only positives) will be seen as less authentic compared to their counterparts. Therefore, the exploration of authenticity in this paper is regarding how much of the self an influencer will share in the name of 'being authentic.'

This paper will utilise a qualitative research method to understand how individuals navigate their online presentation, especially with the goal of authenticity in mind. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven content creators whose followings on Instagram range from 4,000 to 275,000 at the time of writing, this paper attempts to understand what common techniques influencers use to promote authenticity in content creation and identity presentation.

The main findings of my paper demonstrate that mental health, a backstage piece of information, is presented in the front stage as a strategy to cultivate the feeling of authenticity for the audience. This paper also discusses content creation in relation to work and labour, as well as the consequences on the individual when the front and backstage are blurred.

Disclosure Statement

The author is a fellow 'influencer' and expert in the wellness social media space. At the time of publishing, my account has over 100,000 followers. With all qualitative research, there is a potential for bias based on observer positionality. However, just as ethnographers use personal relationships with participants to gain insight into their chosen group, my own positionality as a participant observer allows me to gain insight into this topic as well. Since I am not approaching this topic as an outsider, I myself am engaging in these practices, my awareness of the observed social behaviour is an asset throughout the research process.

II.   Literature Review

This literature review will address the sociological side of identity formation and presentation in an effort to understand how popular Instagram influencers in the wellness niche navigate their online identity presentation. To better understand the rise of wellness influencers, this literature review will first discuss Goffman's theory of identity presentation and identity subcultures before transitioning to discuss the interaction between social media and identity. Lastly, tensions of authentic identity presentation on social media will be examined.

To simplify the literature review and the research question as a whole, identity formation (or how the self is curated) will not be covered. This paper primarily aims to discuss how identity is presented to others in an online space, and how select social media influencers make decisions about their identity presentation.

A. Identity Presentation

In his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), sociologist Erving Goffman analyses interpersonal interactions and proposes a 'self-presentation theory.' Goffman theorises that individuals 'perform' in order to project a curated identity to an 'audience.' Since social interactions are shaped by interpersonal evaluations, it is critical to understand how an individuals' presentation affects what other people think of them (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2015).

Goffman uses theatrical terms to help explain identity presentation: the crux of his theory is the separation between the *front-stage* and the *backstage* behaviour. The 'front' refers to any part of an individuals' performance that functions as identity management (Goffman 1959,

13). Key aspects of the front include the *setting*, or the environment, in which the performance of identity takes place, and the *expressive equipment,* or objects, which the performer interacts with (14). While there is potential for contradictory settings and equipment--if, for example, a performer attempts to trick the audience into thinking they are more well-off than they actually are, they might use high-status items to perform this identity while still living in a lower-income neighbourhood--the audience expects consistency and coherence between these aspects of identity performance (16). If an actor is tasked with face-to-face interaction, he puts on an *expressive mask* which is meant to deceive the audience.

The existence of a *front-stage* implies a *backstage*; Goffman describes the backstage as a place "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (69). In this environment, "the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (70).

B. Social Media and Identity

Goffman's theory of self-identity presentation can be easily applied to social media: the *front-stage* is the online profile and the *backstage* is the offline self. In recent years, online environments including social media have provided individuals with the space to perform and present different identities; another deceptive 'mask' of sorts which functions similarly to face-to-face interaction. The internet, and image-sharing social media specifically, offer a unique ability for individuals to control their self-presentation. Now, online profiles can embellish one facet of an individuals' identity: for example if you like to crochet, you can create an online profile dedicated to the hobby of crocheting. In this way, identity presentation is more fluid than ever before.

Ascribed versus Acquired Identities

To fully understand how self-presentation can be manipulated on social media, we must first understand what kind of identity *can* be easily manipulated. Social identity theory separates group categorizations into two sections: attributes that were determined at birth, and attributes that are more fluid in nature (Huddy, 2001). The former is called 'ascribed' identities and refer to groups and identities that are 'fixed,' including sex, appearance, race, and familial socioeconomic status[2]. The latter is called 'acquired' identities, and refers to identities that are flexible by choice, and are defined as 'who you think you are' (Huddy, 2001). The ability for individuals to define themselves in acquired identities--or identity subcultures--has increased with the popularity of social networking sites.

Identity Subcultures

Identity and image-creation can be based on lifestyle and habits (Dunn, 2008, p. 129). Identity has shifted from a 'project' for one to discover towards a formation based on a strong element of 'choice,' and the notion that one can constantly reinvent oneself (Dunn, 2008, p. 161). In this sense, identity is fluid, and more people are leaning into the presentation of acquired identities. As mentioned previously, the transition towards a consumption-based society has seen a rise of acquired identities: highly popularised and short-lived sets of characteristics that individuals can participate in through a consumption-based process (Berberick and McAllister, 2016). The "vsco girl," "e-girl," and, more recently, "that girl" identities all represent identity presentations popularised on social media. Individuals have the ability to participate in identity presentation through consumption; anyone can become "that girl" if they wear the corresponding articles of clothing (matching workout sets, athleisure, etc), say the correct phrases ("I'm manifesting…"), and replicate a certain lifestyle

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[2] Socioeconomic status is both an ascribed and an acquired identity. The household that an individual is born into has a certain socioeconomic status; however, interlevel mobility is possible. Said differently, the socioeconomic status that one has in their adult life may or may not be the same status they were born into.

(pilates, green smoothies, perfectly made bed, etc). This fits into Goffman's framework of self-presentation: certain objects are *expressive equipment* and certain scenarios are *settings* in which "that girl" is known to be in (Goffman 1959, 14). The "that girl" identity hinges not only on the physical presentation of self but also on the habits and lifestyle they personify, making social media-based identity trends the perfect example of acquired identities (Huddy, 2001).

Since acquired identities are fluid by nature, membership in these identities are often up to the discretion of current members (the 'in-group'). Dupont (2016) explores how skateboarders perform their 'authentic' skate identity on Instagram. He concludes that "social media practices act as identity claims, which are confirmed or denied by other skaters" and continually evaluates what 'authenticity' means in the skateboarding scene (Dupont, 2016). From this article, Dupont gathers that membership in an identity subculture, or acquired identity, needs to be legitamized by other members of the identity (Dupont, 2016). This conclusion contrasts what Wellman (2020) concludes in the bodybuilding subculture: "influencers are not [seen as] authentic members of the subculture" by other members. Legitimate membership in an identity subculture as a social media influencer seems to be dependent on the unwritten rules of each acquired identity.

"That Girl" and the Wellness Identity

Acquired identity trends, including "that girl," is a subculture on the internet representing an aspirational identity. The identity itself hinges on the process of becoming the 'best version' of yourself, and of transforming into a singular, idealised self that is prevalent on social media. However, it is not enough to hold this identity, one must display it on social media conspicuously for all to see.

While some individuals embellish their online self, Baker (2009) theorises that the offline self informs the creation and performance of the online self, which then reinforms the offline self. In this concept of blended identity, the presentation of self on social media applications can first be performative, but eventually line up with, and inform, the offline self (Baker, 2009; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Using this framing and Goffman's self-presentation theory, I argue that those who identify as "that girl" first begin with the intrinsic motivation to change their life (offline/backstage self) and showcase their process on social media (online/mask). The process of displaying their transformation then further informs their offline self, and reinforces the image and understanding of self as "that girl," or the best version of themselves. Once the process of transformation is undertaken, most actions become habitual and individuals take on the ascribed identity of being wellness focused.

C. Authenticity

A key trait of the "that girl" identity presentation is the relationship between the online and offline self: the person presented online is believed to be how the person is offline as well; in other words, the online presentation of self is 'authentic' to who the offline self is. In sociology, authenticity is defined as how closely an individual's behaviours, appearance, and self reflect their subjective sense of identity. Since the act of "being authentic" is personal and difficult to quantify, sociologists use the social construction of authenticity to address the relational aspect of authenticity (Grazian, 2018; Maares et al, 2020). Said differently, is an individual perceived as being 'real' by others -- is their performance of authenticity working? (Grazian, 2018).

Goffman's framework suggests that individuals engage in image management and work to display themselves in a positive light. However, in an effort to cultivate an 'authentic' image, individuals will selectively show both positive *and* negative attributes. The struggle of authentic presentation is applicable to everyone, as no one wants to be labeled as 'fake' or 'inauthentic' by their peers. The tension of authentic presentation is magnified for content creators, especially those who claim a 'real' image online. When authenticity is a part of an influencer's self-brand content pillars, strategies are needed to perform this image online. On social media, authenticity can be defined as users "displaying one's hidden life" or, in the words of Goffman, their *backstage* image (Maares et al, 2020).

Current literature examines the relationship between authenticity and influencers, specifically in the context of marketing. Hendry et al's case study of health and fitness influencer Ashy Bines reveals that "an influencer's success in gaining and keeping audience attention also relies on their engendering authenticity, or perception of authenticity. Whether or not an influencer *is* authentic is not the point; authenticity is not an essential characteristic" (Hendry et al, 2021; original emphasis). Lee and Eastin (2021) created a measurement scale for perceived authenticity of social media influencers (PASMIs) which rank influencers on five dimensions: sincerity, truthful endorsement, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. The key takeaway from the literature is the *perception* of authenticity, as one can never truly be authentic when filtering and posting their life online.

Authenticity Online

Djafarova and Trofimenko's study on the credibility of microcelebrities (2018) concluded that self-presentation theory is of utmost importance when evaluating the impact of brand endorsements on Instagram. While this study deals with marketing communications, their

findings about authentic presentation will guide my research. Through in-depth interviews, the researchers found that influencers will post photographs and videos that showcase themselves in a positive light, even if this content is not a reflection of their personal identity. These images are successful because their Instagram audience craves aspirational images and content (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2018).

This curated identity is corroborated by Bak and Priniski (2020) and Gerstenecker (2021)'s content analysis research. Both studies examined health and wellness posts on Instagram for themes, key words, and promotional content. All of the authors provided tables with common themes and phrases, including mental wellbeing, happiness, fitness, and motivation (Bak and Priniski, 2020; Gerstenecker, 2021). The similar representations of health and wellness on Instagram allude to an existence of (1) an identity subculture or acquired identity, and (2) a preferred way to portray membership of this identity on social media. Because "that girl" is perceived to be an aspirational identity, many influencers have begun to post about their personal mental health struggles in an effort to humanize their persona.

Tensions of Authenticity

Through the case study of health and gym influencer Ashy Bines, researchers Hendry et al (2021) identified three key tensions of authenticity which affect how influencers navigate identity presentation on social media:

1. Be consistent but also embrace transformation
2. Be raw and relatable but still aspirational
3. Personal experience is your guide but always defer to institutional experience

The second tension between relatable and aspirational content is also identified as a tension in Bailey et al's (2020) content analysis study. Bailey et al concluded that the "ideal self" and

the "authentic self" are two different facets of the same identity, and social media users face a tension between which self to prioritize. However, is there such a thing as an "authentic self" online like Bailey et al describes? Abidin (2018) argues that authenticity is "more of a performative ecology and parasocial strategy with its own bona fide genre and self-presentation elements."

This study is primarily interested in the strategies, if any, used to cultivate an 'authentic' identity presentation on social media. Erving Goffman's work on the presentation of self will be used as a frame to understand these strategies in more detail. The conclusions drawn in this study are similar to the previous literature (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Matheson and Sedgwick, 2021), and contribute to the ongoing conversation of impression management in the online world by focusing on the wellness and mental health niches of Instagram.

III. Method

This paper will use open-ended semi-structured interviews to explore how wellness influencers navigate authentic identity presentation on Instagram. In total, seven participants completed seperate 60 minute interviews with the principal investigator from February 20th to March 2nd, 2023. All interview questions are included in Appendix II of this paper.

    A. <u>Participants</u>

Participants ("influencers") were selected and recruited based on their public Instagram profiles. All participants met the following five criteria; the first four criteria points being relevant to the influencer themself and the last criteria point being relevant to the selected sample method:

1. Influencers are consistently posting about their mental wellbeing on Instagram.

2. Influencers post visually aesthetic pictures which include one or more 'that girl' products (product types pulled from an article by The Tab titled ["Only a true TikTok 'that girl' has at least 47/53 of these items"](#)).

3. Influencers have a following or community surrounding wellness.

4. Influencers define themselves as being a member of the wellness space.

5. The principal researcher has been following the Influencer for at least six months prior to recruitment.

Of the eleven influencers pre-selected, seven influencers agreed to be interviewed. Since the wellness influencer space is dominated by white women, the pre-selected influencers span the broadest range of ethnic identities and genders possible. All participants were notified in the initial outreach message, in the informed consent form, and again verbally, that their names and account handles may be included in the final paper at their own discretion.

The following list are the full names, handles, locations, and follower counts of participants contacted in alphabetical order, with a star to denote if they were included in this study. Two of the listed participants have been asked to remain anonymous, so pseudonyms will be used and their handles are not included:

- Alicia Knebel (@aliciaknebel, 91k), Germany

- *Cami Nwokedi (@wellbycami, 6k), USA

- *Elentay Alcock (@elentay, 4k), UK

- *Hardi Bui (@growithardi, 113k), Finland

- *Linda Sun (@lindasunyt, 279k), Canada

- *Maeva Faour (@maevafaour, 145k), Canada

- Maximilian Warum (@maximilianwarum, 69k), Austria

- Nico Rauchenwald (@nicorauchenwald, 213k), Austria

- *Sadie (79k), Canada,

- *Sawyer (78k), USA

- Sonya (@activecactus, 160k), Canada

B. <u>Procedure</u>

Participants were recruited through Instagram Direct Messages (DMs). Once an interest in participating in the study was expressed, a time for the virtual interview was scheduled using a Calendly link. A selective sampling methodology was utilized, as all participants are experts in the field of interest. As mentioned above, there were five qualifications for research participants. Interviews lasted, on average, 60 minutes and were recorded. The interview footage was reviewed and analysed by hand.

C. <u>Interview Protocol</u>

Participants were first asked questions about their start in content creation, then their attitudes and thought process behind posting sensitive content on Instagram. Specific questions asked included, "How do you choose what to post and what to keep private? Do you feel pressure to present yourself a certain way on social media? How do you navigate a work-life balance?" The interview ended with questions about their future projects. A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix I at the end of this paper.

A careful systematic analysis of the interviews was conducted by hand. Through watching the interviews twice each, four emerging themes were prevelant:

1. Self-presentation and impression management

2. Division of the persona and the self

3. Authenticity performance

4. Content creation in relation to work and labour

After all themes under each topic were identified, they were compared across interview transcripts for similarities. All the findings from each interview have been collected and provided below -- for privacy reasons, the interview transcripts are not included in the final paper.

An additional stage of data analysis which explored relationships between these categories led to the emergence of the core argument: the use of backstage information in the front stage as a performance strategy. This information cultivates a feeling of authenticity between the influencer and the audience; however, this blurring of stages has both intended and unintended consequences for the influencer. This line of analysis is explored below.

IV. Data and Results

Participant Profiles

First Name	Handle	Follower Count	Self-described niche
Cami	@wellbycami	6k	"Mindset, fitness, finance"
Elentay	@elentay	4k	"Fitness and wellness"
Hardi	@growithardi	113k	"Young people (18-30 years old) who are struggling with balance and productivity"
Linda	@lindasunyt	279k	"Food freedom, ED recovery, and body image"
Maeva	@maevafaour	145k	"Helping young woman feel powerful confident by sharing lifestyle and mindset content"
Sadie	-	79k	"Wellness, lifestyle, self care"
Sawyer	-	78k	"Mental health, self love, body image, ED recovery"

A. <u>Self-Presentation and Impression Management</u>

An individual entering an interaction with others will always try to control the image or impression of self that is imprinted onto the other person. Using Goffman's concept of self-presentation and appearance as a frame, the online space acts as the front stage performance and individuals will make choices to manage this self-image online.

In the context of Instagram influencers, there is a distinction between their offline presentation (real life self, backstage) and online presentation (online self, front stage). Although the participants explained that they generally attempted to reproduce their offline self on Instagram, most participants highlighted aspects of their personality -- specifically parts that fit into their self described 'niche' -- in their online identity. (Some common content for generic wellness bloggers include: workout routine, daily habits, what they eat in a day, clothing, and skincare.)

Crafting a 'Relatable' Persona

Hardi, a recent Instagram influencer who has amassed over 100,000 followers in a year, has created a relatable yet aspirational persona on social media. She says:

> *"We are not very aesthetic girls, we are very realistic so people find the content relatable. We try to be honest with ourselves but also honest with our audience on social media so people aren't seeing the perfect picture of our life and feel overwhelmed."*

When analysing her answer, the key terms are 'realistic' and 'relatable.' By showcasing a non-aestheticized version, Hardi believes that she is "honest with [her] audience on social media." She goes on to explain that there is some divide between who she is offline versus who she is online; however, for the most part, she believes that she "bring[s] the other side of that picture, being *authentic*."

Maeva, another recent success story in the wellness space, explains that her goal for her platform is to share as much of her life as possible.

> *"I never think that people only expect to see the good."*

By showing all aspects of her life, she is being vulnerable with her audience and cultivating a feeling of authenticity. Maeva's content often includes videos and photos of her crying before quickly cutting to a stream of aesthetic videos with a motivational quote overlaid throughout the video. She explained that her primary goal with these types of posts is to "communicate to others that it's okay to be upset and it's normal to cry;" however, she explains that she ultimately aims for relatability. When asked about how she makes decisions on what she shares, Maeva replies that she asks herself three questions:

> *"Is it going to help people feel less alone? And is it going to help people relate to me more? Is it going to help people feel more connected to me?"*

The first question suggests a desire to normalize mental health struggles on social media -- a very admirable and noble reason for her vulnerbility. She goes on to use the phrases "relate to me" and "connect to me," indicating that her motive for these posts is to craft a relatable persona in an effort to fuel connection between her and her audience.

Linda is primarily a Youtuber but, as a result of her Youtube fame, has amassed over 278,000 Instagram followers as well. Her online persona focuses on eating disorder (ED) recovery and body image, two things she herself has struggled with over the years. Centering her content on what she eats in a day and her workout routines, Linda explains that the constant need to film has taken a toll on her own mental health. She explains,

> *"It's hard to have people look up to you as if you have it all figured out when in reality, you're struggling also and then you feel like you can't be struggling because people expect you to be this perfect human who has it all figured out"*

Linda didn't let her internal struggles show until very recently, when she revealed publicly on her Instagram stories that she is currently solo travelling around Southeast Asia. The way she chose to present this information is still in line with her vulnerable yet aspirational persona:

she only reveals that she is traveling, and not that she has chosen to "drop out of nutrition and finish [her] degree in business" like she revealed to me privately in the interview.

One of the tensions of authenticity Hendry et al references is to "be raw and relatable but still aspirational." What Hardi, Maeva, and Linda all have in common is showcasing a select aspect of their life but pretending that it's the whole truth. For Hardi, this means utilizing non-aestheticized clips, Maeva intertwines videos of her crying throughout her content, and Linda selectively reveals her real life; all three influencers showcase just enough of their backstage life for them to convince audience members that they're seeing it all.

Work and Labour: "Content Days"

The ability to share one's life online is not a spontaneous decision; work must occur for the front stage persona to look seamless. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman uses the analogy of the radio host to explain this strategy. To sound "genuinely informal, spontaneous, and relaxed" while in the front stage, the radio host will "design his script with painstaking care" to emulate the "pace of everyday talk" (Goffman, 20). In a similar framework, when asked about an average day in their life, five of the seven creators mentioned specific days or times in which they pre-plan and film their content.

Even with time blocked out to create lifestyle content, some influencers mentioned an inability to "leave content mode." Maeva is a full time content creator with two days a week she deems as "content days." By focusing all of her content creation on two specific days, she explains:

> "I give myself days to film [content] so the other days I can enjoy [my life]."

On 'content days,' Maeva explains how she will batch film content by changing outfits to represent different days. She will then pre-edit short videos to be posted throughout the week. Using Goffman's theory of impression management, Maeva's persona works better *because* there is a backstage, or certain time in her life, where she doesn't have to think about her presentation.

Another influencer, Cami, uses a different strategy when creating daily content. She is a microinfluencer on Instagram and budding TikTok creator whose content focuses on financial and physical wellness. When asked about an average day in her life, Cami explains that she will "film as much content as possible from 7am to 9am everyday," including short talking videos, 'get ready with me for the gym,' and sequences of her making breakfast. She is able to stay consistent *because* she creates content that "aligns with [her] day to day life." Like Maeva, some video content is pre-planned, and Cami discloses that she uses scripts for most of her TikTok talking videos. However, since her online persona revolves around her everyday routines, she does not need to prefilm or batch create content; what you see her post is most likely what she did that day.

Maeva and Cami reveal two different approaches to creating content: Maeva prefilms multiple 'mornings' in one day and pre-edits a week's worth of content while Cami films and uploads her routines that day, every day. What both strategies have in common is the labourious amount of backstage work that goes into making these videos look seamless. For Maeva, she changes in and out of clothing to replicate multiple days. For Cami, she has pre-existing knowledge of the best angles and equipment set up which she repeats each morning. The backstage labor required to make the front stage persona look seamless is often overlooked by the audience--and this works in an influencer's favour.

B. <u>Blurring of Backstage and Front Stage</u>

Another common strategy used to cultivate authenticity is also a unique aspect of the wellness niche: posting content relating to mental health. Two influencers self-described mental health and/or ED recovery as a niche for their account. A quick content analysis of the remaining influencers' nine recent Instagram posts[3] (excluding pinned posts) reveal that an additional three influencers referenced their mental health or mental state. The use of vulnerability seems to be another performance strategy to cultivate authenticity and convince their audience that their image is the "real" version of them, not a persona.

'Authenticity' Performance

Maares et al (2019) references the concept of 'authenticity labor' on social media. The process is defined as individuals performing and presenting genuineness to an audience. Of the seven influencers interviewed, five used the phrase 'authentic' in their interviews. When asked to define this term, the dominant phrases include "showing the real life view," having their content feel like "facetiming a friend," and giving "the same energy as who I am in person." Showing all parts of their life, especially struggles with their own personal mental health, seems to be a common strategy used by influencers to present authenticity online. Most influencers believe that this range of content allows their audience to feel connected to them.

Linda, one of the influencers interviewed, saw extreme success in the social media sphere over the COVID-19 pandemic when she began posting about her personal journey with her eating disorder recovery and body image issues. As mentioned above, her YouTube channel has over 800,000 subscribers. Linda often receives comments on Instagram thanking her for

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[3] This content analysis was conducted on April 15th, 2023. It looked for influencers who used phrases like "I've been feeling…" or "mental health" to name a few.

"showing the true meaning of health" and being a "comfort person" on the internet[4]. When asked if she felt pressured to present herself a certain way on the internet, Linda replies:

> *"I'm so carefully curated, it's insane how much I edit myself, it's insane how I put together a storyline, it's insane how much time and editing and all of the stuff that I do… it's all a lie. There's truth in it, buried deep, but it's all surface level. Like no one knows me. No one actually knows their favourite content creator."*

The last sentence, "no one actually knows their favourite content creator," refers to the ultimate tension of authenticity: "despite the often genuine desire on the part of members of the influencer industry to 'be true,' their work requires them to rely on a paradoxical version of authenticity -- 'realness' that exists only in perception" (Hund, 2023, 60).

Because everything an influencer posts on Instagram is a conscious process, there is no way authenticity can ever be authentic. Even the act of posting about mental health struggles is a deliberate choice on the part of influencers in an effort to be perceived as relatable. Sawyer mentions that it is "so messed up that [she has] a folder of crying photos in [her] phone," that her first response in a time of mental crisis is to pick up the camera and record. While there is value in sharing mental health struggles online, especially in a conscious effort to destigmatize mental health, this type of content should not be seen as more 'authentic' than others. Everything posted online is a curated presentation of a persona that must be constantly performed by the influencer.

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[4] These quotes were taken from the following two comment sections: (1) "what I eat in a day as a nutrition student" reel on Instagram, posted February 11th, 2023 [at the time of writing, this is her 5th most recent piece of content] and (2) "what I eat in a day to stay happy and healthy" reel on Instagram, posted January 29th 2023 [at the time of writing, this is her 7th most recent piece of content].

Division of the Persona and the Self

When one's online persona and offline persona is blurred to such a high degree, there are negative consequences. In order to mitigate these consequences, two influencers expressed the existence of a "second account" used specifically for their family and friends. Instagram allows users to be signed into multiple accounts at the same time, up to five accounts at once. With the existence of a 'main' account and a 'second' account, Linda and Sawyer hope to differentiate their online influencer persona and who they are to their friends.

However, of the seven influencers interviewed, Linda and Sawyer were the only two to express feelings of ambiguity between their two identities. (While there may be no relationship between the existence of a second account and a disconnect between person and persona, it is worth mentioning and a point of further research.)

Sawyer, a self love and ED recovery influencer, explains that her "brain doesn't leave content mode." When asked about a typical day in her life, she explains that she "wake[s] up and immediately checks social media, then [she will] film throughout the day, and [the hours of] 8:30pm to midnight is all about social media."

Linda corrobarates this feeling, explaining that to her, "creating content is another organ." She goes on to explain that her 'social media account' has boxed her real-life self in,

> *"It's not who I want to be but it's who everyone else wants me to be and I felt so stuck. I transferred into nutrition [from business] because I felt the need for everything in my life to fit into this box, which is food."*

When Linda began creating content on Youtube, she posted a variety of topics including fashion and lifestyle, but only her 'What I Eat In A Day' videos did well with the algorithm.

The more she posted about food and body image, the more her channel and online persona grew. In the above quote, she expresses that being a food and ED influencer is "not who [she] want[s] to be but it's who everyone else wants [her] to be." In an ideal world, Linda's online persona would include more than just her struggle with body image and her recovery journey. However, because Linda's persona is not as well-rounded as who she is in real life, she feels a disconnect from her core identity.

An unintended consequence to the sharing of backstage information in the front stage is the consequent ambiguity of identity. As a result, Linda is in the middle of taking a few months off of social media with no clear plans to return. She explained to me that because her entire worth is so inexplicitly tied to her social media metrics, she needs to obtain a stronger sense of identity that is separate from her Youtube and Instagram success. Furthermore, Linda's therapists are "worried about [her] because it's unhealthy to hyperfixate on these two topics, especially given [her] background." Similarly, Sawyer hopes that because she's growing as a human being, her account and subsequent niche/online persona will also grow with her.

V. Conclusion

As we continue to live our lives online, it's important to be critical of the content we see on social media. Instagram wellness influencers specifically are regular individuals who showcase their lives online and, in an effort to be perceived as authentic, may divulge more information than other influencers in different niches. This paper set out to apply Goffman's framework of identity presentation to the wellness niche to understand what strategies are utilized by influencers. All seven influencers employed either one of two strategies to cultivate a feeling of authenticity in their content: (1) backstage work, or "content days," are utilized to streamline the content creation process and (2) the use of mental health as a key part of one's online persona. An unintended consequence of these strategies is a feeling of ambiguity within one's offline identity; when the online self and offline self are too closely related, influencers struggle to understand their personal identity.

This paper argues that crying videos and personal mental health stories should not be seen as 'more authentic' than other types of content, as the influencer is consciously trying to share backstage information as a part of their strategy. These findings are consistent with previous literature on the topics of identity, influencers, and authenticity.

This research primarily focused on uncovering strategies influencers use to foster the feeling of authenticity and connection with their audience. In this process, this research uncovered a highly impactful unintended consequence of utilizing strategies. Further research is needed to determine if the existence of a second account is an effective strategy to separate a person from their online persona, or if it is a source of more identity ambiguity. In addition, as mentioned in the literature review, authenticity is understood differently in different identity subcultures (niches). Further research can test whether the two strategies used to craft

authenticity in the wellness niche hold in different niches, or with different influencers in the same niche. Some limitations to these conclusions include the limited sample size of participants, the selected sample method of choosing participants, and the observer positionality. Ultimately, this paper invites further conversation in this subject with relation to media studies, psychology, and sociology.

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VII. Appendicies

Appendix I: Informed Consent

This is the verbatim text provided to participants prior to their interview. This text was provided via Qualtrics, a TLS encrypted website, and was available for participants to review throughout the entire research process.

This project is being conducted by Katie Eu as part of a senior thesis at Scripps College. The following disclosure is made to give you an opportunity to decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this research study.

You are being asked to participate because you are a social media 'influencer' who has an account on Instagram relating to your mental health or personal wellness journey.

Voluntary Participation and Right of Refusal:
To participate in this study, you must be 18 years or older. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may discontinue and withdraw your consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty.

Background Information and Procedures: The purpose of the study is to interview leaders in the wellness space on social media. You will be asked 10-15 questions, and I expect that you will be in this research study for approximately 60 minutes.

Benefits in participating: There are no direct benefits to the participant.

Risks in participating: There are substantial risks associated with participation in this study because I may be using identifiable data. As a participant, you are free to end the study at any time without consequences. Since your responses will be identifiable, there are two main risks I have identified: *Loss of trust:* If there is a breach in confidentiality, there may be a loss of trust between me and you, my participant. *Negative impacts on personal brand:* There is a potential that what is being said could have negative impacts on both your and my personal brands. However, if during the interview you say something you don't want me to include in the transcription or final paper, please feel free to let me know and I will honour that request.

Compensation: Participants will not be provided with compensation for their time.

Confidentiality: You can opt-in to being identifiable in the final project.
If you do opt-in: I will be using identifiable data, which means your name and account will be referenced and published in the final paper.
If you prefer to remain anonymous: Your data will be de-identified (i.e. your name, locations, and other potentially identifying factors in the interview will be altered using pseudonyms or removed altogether) prior to the analysis and coding phase.

You will be placed in a unique password protected Zoom room. I will also be recording the Zoom call for transcription accuracy purposes only, and I will alert you when I begin recording the call. Measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality of participant responses; however, some direct quotes may be used in the final project. Your recordings and transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected external hard drive. Only the researcher (Katie Eu) and her faculty advisor (Professor Nicholas Kacher) will have access to this drive. It will remain in Katie's posession at all times.

Use of Results: The results of this research will be used as a part of Katie Eu's senior thesis and the write up will be uploaded to Scholarship@Claremont in accordance with the Scripps College Senior Thesis guidelines. (Scholarship@Claremont is an online repository of write-ups of scholarly studies conducted at the Claremont Colleges).

Contacts: In the event of emotional distress, please contact the following institutions:
Mental Health America 24-hour Crisis Center: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
Crisis Text Line: text MHA to 741741

For any further questions or concerns, please contact:
Katie Eu (primary investigator): keu5271@scrippscollege.edu
Nicholas Kacher (faculty advisor): nkacher@scrippscollege.edu

This research study has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). You have the right to contact the Scripps College IRB directly at irb@scrippscollege.edu.

Statement of Consent: I have fully read the above disclaimer and consent to take part in this research. I acknowledge that I have read all of the explanations about the study above and agree to continue with the study.

REQUIRED:
A: I am voluntarily consenting to participate in the following study.
B: I do not consent. I would like to withdraw my participation in this study.

NOT REQUIRED:
C: Click here if you consent to be identifiable in the results of this research project. Please remember that identifiability comes with some risk, including potential risk to your brand. Please review the 'Risks in Participating,' 'Confidentiality,' and 'Use of Results' sections carefully before making your decision. This decision can be changed at any time.

[Participant Signature Line and Date provided here]

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. Can you confirm your full name and country of residence for me?

START:
1. How did you start creating content on social media?
2. Tell me what an average day looks like for you.
3. Can you describe your social media 'niche' in a few words?

BUILD UP:

Sadie:

> I know you're shifting away from aesthetic outfit and lifestyle content to be more relatable and every-day. Can you talk about the thought process behind that?

Sawyer:

> You're posting a lot of poetry and cinematic content now, which is different from the types of content you used to post. How did you decide to incorporate this kind of content on your account?

Cami:

> I love how you incorporate financial wellness in your content. Can you speak more on your decision to do so?

Elentay:

> Have you always been interested in the wellness space or did this interest come about when you began studying biomedicine and nutrition? How does your knowledge from education and your personal training certification impact your content, if at all?

Linda:

> Your primary social media platform is Youtube, not Instagram. Can you speak to how you juggle creating for both platforms?

Hardi:

> You're best known for completing project 50 twice and posting reels about your experience. What is it like creating so many reels about your daily life? You also blew up because of these reels -- can you speak to your experience as a creator with such a massive platform?

Maeva:

> You have a newsletter and a podcast in addition to posting on Instagram. What motivated you to start both of these? How do you differentiate what subjects to discuss on these 3 platforms?

1. Do you identify with the term "influencer"?

TOUGHEST QUESTIONS:
1. How do you choose what to post and what to keep private?

2. Do you feel pressure to present yourself a certain way on Instagram?
3. What impact has being an Instagram 'influencer' had on your daily life?

SMALLER TARGET QUESTIONS:
1. How does your life as a content creator affect your everyday life?
2. How do you navigate a work-life balance?
3. Do you set boundaries with social media?

END:
1. What's your favourite part about doing what you do?
2. Do you have any future projects in the works?
3. Bragging time! What's the coolest opportunity you've gotten because of social media?
4. Is there anything I didn't ask about that you would like to add?

Appendix III: Social Media Influencer Classifications (Gomez, 2019)

Classification of influencer status based on size, regardless of platform used or format (Hatton, 2018; Bernazzani, 2018, Bullock, 2018)			Size of audience
Micro influencers	The largest group of influencers	They are considered to have the highest engagement with followers (Markerly, 2015)	Up to 99K
Macro influencers	Silver (Youtube)	Also called Power middle users (Chen, 2013)	From 100K to 500K followers
	Macro (advanced level)	Must be very professional and consistent (Booth & Matic, 2011)	Over 500 followers and up to 1 Million
Mega influencers	Gold (Youtube Creator Academy, 2018)	They have become extremely well-recognized authorities in a certain topic through strategic self-branding	Over 1 million
Considered Social Media Celebrities A-listers	Diamond (Youtube Creator Academy, 2018)	Elite of social media influencers that can command mass media size audiences (Hou, 2018)	Over 10 million