Scripps Senior Theses   Scripps Student Scholarship

2024

Redefined Influence: An Exploration of Social Media and User Agency

Sydney Ghobadian

REDEFINED INFLUENCE:

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND USER AGENCY

By

SYDNEY GHOBADIAN

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS SENIOR THESIS IN HUMANITIES

PROFESSOR PEREZ DE MENDIOLA

PROFESSOR AISENBERG

April 25, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the constant support of Professor Perez de Mendiola who was an indispensable source of knowledge and encouragement throughout my thesis journey. Her care for her students is unmatched and she has truly changed how I see myself as a person, student, writer, and thinker for the better. So, thank you Professor Perez de Mendiola- and I'm very grateful you never had to "lay down the law".

Thank you Professor Aisenberg for encouraging me to continue with my idea even when I presented to you as an untethered brainstorm. Your passion for and dedication to the humanities department and your desire to see students succeed does not go unnoticed. Thank you for sticking with me!

Thanks to my family for never letting me feel alone on this adventure called college. Thank you to my grandma for always telling me "education, education, education" and reminding me to believe in myself.

My heart especially goes out to my **Mom**.

Mom, thank you for making me look at Scripps four years ago- without you, I wouldn't be here. You said once in a passing conversation that you worked as hard as you did to see us, me and Spencer, succeed and receive a great education- you did it. This thesis and my time at Scripps represent all that I have been able to do because of YOU. You are a FORCE if I have ever seen one. You truly walked (as a strong woman) so I could run. Thank you, Mom, forever and always.

Also, graduating from the same consortium of schools as you is pretty awesome- now we can both say "When I went to the Claremont Colleges…"

ABSTRACT

In recent decades we have seen the expansion of media to realms unimagined- where human interaction comes with the touch of your finger. With this accessibility comes uncharted territory and persisting questions: How do we engage with the media? How does it dictate our actions? What is true and who do I trust? In this exploration, I weave the relationship between social media and emotions with the long-standing marriage between media and capitalist agenda to understand the power of media and how we as a society can use it to evoke change and reclaim control over our actions.

Introduction

Instagram has a monthly visitor rate of 2,000 million and TikTok, 1,562 million. These two platforms are those highlighted in this paper. They are two of the world's highest leading in usage. They both offer a space for users to share their lives and engage with other users via photos and videos. While of relatively equal popularity, they differ in structure. Instagram tailors its feed to suit users' preferences, activities, and connections, ensuring a personalized experience. On the other hand, TikTok enables users to craft and share videos enriched with music, filters, and effects.

Influencers are an important part of these social networks' geographies. The idea of influencers is generally understood as part of an "influencer culture through the branded images they use to represent themselves reveal social trends and characteristics of our internet-mediated era. By creating a branded identity through the aestheticization of everyday life, influencers produce commodities that, although non-physical themselves, profoundly affect our tangible, material reality".

I aim to focus on the power of influencers to share messages and knowledge of importance and relevance. This potency should be exercised for purposes beyond their usual mercantile and "branding" purpose. I would like to posit that there is no cut-and-dry distinction between who is an influencer and who is not.   The idea that an influencer culture is limited to "the branded images they use to represent themselves reveals social trends and characteristics of our internet-mediated era" is a common misconception I seek to disprove in this thesis. In what

follows, I will explore the powers of social media, through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, by delving into various "influences" it can have and the potentially positive changes it can generate.

This dichotomy between types of influencers is what I focus on within this essay. Social media is a powerful entity that bears the words of many. It can evoke major change and the type of change being advocated for is in our hands.

Chapter One: What is an Influencer?

The notion of influence is defined in many ways and I would like to provide three of the most common definitions. Different dictionaries define influence differently. The **Oxford Dictionary** defines it as this:

"1. uncountable, countable] the effect that somebody/something has on the way a person thinks or behaves or on the way that something works or develops

2.uncountable] the power that somebody/something has to make somebody/something behave in a particular way

3.countable] a person or thing that affects the way a person behaves and thinks"

While the **Cambridge Dictionary** defines it as,

"1. the power to have an effect on people or things, or a person or thing that is able to do this

2.to affect or change how someone or something develops, behaves, or thinks

3.the power to have an effect on people or things, or someone or something having such power"

Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition of influence states:

"1:the power or capacity of causing an effect in indirect or intangible ways: SWAY

2: the act or power of producing an effect without apparent exertion of force or direct exercise of command

3: corrupt interference with authority for personal gain

4: one that exerts influence

5: an emanation of spiritual or moral force

6: an ethereal fluid held to flow from the stars and to affect the actions of humans

7: an emanation of occult power held to derive from stars"

Amongst all three definitions, there is a common theme of power. The power of one person over another, or something with the ability of influencing someones actions. Taking these definitions as a point of departure, I am interested in unpacking what it means to "influence" via social media and the role of the person or entity doing the influencing. It is worth noting that "influencer marketed has existed in the modern era since the 1930s, but in truth, it could be traced back to ancient Rome when gladiators endorsed products. However, the word "influencer" only entered the modern lexicon in the past decade and was only officially added to the English dictionary last year."

Put into Google's search engine an influencer is: "a person or thing that influences another". The most viewed definition is: "someone in your niche or industry with sway over your target audience".

An influencer is someone who has a social media platform and creates videos and posts encouraging their viewers to buy a certain hairbrush, makeup product, or article of clothing. An influencer is an educator, someone who is using their social media platforms to spread awareness and knowledge on a certain issue, topic, or belief. An influencer is someone who is simply influential. It tends to be the case that people with a higher follower count on Instagram or

TikTok are put in front of you on the apps more often. Because of this, it gives rise to those people being chosen by brands to be the spokesperson to share a product. Influencers are the most impactful way for brands to get their products to consumers and drive revenue. If we think about it, when we were kids if our friend from school tried broccoli and said it was good we would probably go home and say "Hey! I want to try broccoli. It seems cool" just because our cool 5th-grade friend did it first. Influencers are our cool virtual adult friend who tries things first, and they can indeed be brave depending on what they seek to influence one about.

Influencers all share similar qualities; they are relatable, and come across as authentic and trustworthy. These traits are what make someone generally influential. You follow the person that you feel is authentic to who you perceive they are or who seems genuine in the information they share with you. These characteristics also break the claim that an influencer must have many followers. There is no doubt that in the case of an influencer whose main stick is to market brands and increase consumerism, we see that their following tends to be high. However, I claim that an influencer can have any number of followers and still be influential in someone's life if they project legitimacy, and feel relatable, genuine, and valiant to the individual following. These people exist everywhere yet social media can spread their stories to audiences who are far and wide as well.

There is no influencer without a follower, and we should equally delve into what to "follow" means as it is crucial in framing how individuals procure a following. I will be looking at generally what it means to "follow", and in the context of a social media following or the number of people that engage with your platforms and content.

The **Merriam-Webster Dictionary** defines follow in a multitude of ways:

"Follow

1: to go, proceed, or come after

2: to engage in as a calling or way of life : PURSUE

3: to be or act in accordance with

4: to accept as authority : OBEY

5: to seek to attain

6: to cause to be followed

7: to copy after : IMITATE

8: to attend closely to : keep abreast of

9: to subscribe to the feed of (someone or something) especially on social media"

"To accept as authority", "to copy after", and "to subscribe to the feed of (someone or something) especially on social media." These definitions perfectly outline how I use the word follow throughout my thesis.

In a similar vein, a follower is defined by **Merriam-Webster Dictionary** as:

"one that imitates another

 one that follows the opinions or teachings of another

one who subscribes to a feed, especially on social media"

Following is subjective as it is based on what one chooses to follow being the differentiator. To follow objectively means to "to be or act in accordance with" and "to attend closely to: keep abreast of" but who an individual chooses as their leader is individualistic.

So many influencers can engage in the same form of influencing yet target different audiences. One influencer may be more attractive to you than another and much has to do with the perspectives of the person engaging with the influencer, what they like and don't like, how they live their life, and if it's similar to one another. My favorite influencer will not be the same as the next person, bringing to light another layer of influencing: relatability.

In a **Stanford** study conducted by Do Yuon Kim and Hye-Young Kim entitled " Trust me, trust me not: A nuanced view of influencer marketing on social media," the importance of homophily in the growth of influencer and viewer relationships was observed alongside trust and authenticity. In their essay "The homophily principle in social network analysis: A survey," Khanam, K.Z., Srivastava, G. & Mago, V defined Homophily as:

"The tendency for people to seek out or be drawn to others who are similar to themselves. The people's networks tend to be more homogeneous than heterogeneous such that the communication between similar people occurs more frequently than with dissimilar people"(71).

Do Yuon Kim and Hye-Young Kim noted that "perceived similarity creates positive intergroup feelings and reduces uncertainty." (Kim and Kim 225) For example, I am obsessive about

sustainable, non-toxic skincare. I am always searching for the next best cream. So, being a social media user, I tend to follow people who value sustainability and love skincare, because they excite me and I feel a shared concern and curiosity about non-toxic product use. If they try a product and have positive reviews, I am ten times more likely to purchase the product. Similarly, my mom has always been a runner. Every day at five am she is up and starting her run. Even as part of a generation that grew up without much social media as we know it today, she is a user and has influencers she loves. Courtney Dewalter is one, an ultramarathon star. My mom follows her religiously and has started wearing specific-length shorts to do what Courtney does or claims to do.

In their results, Kim and Kim's study found that "Homophily is also crucial to building trust" (229), connecting the two critical characteristics of an influencer: relatability and trustworthiness.

What it mean to trust and be trusted

In her study entitled "Trust", Carolyn McLeod examines how humans and society define trust. She emphasizes work from multiple philosophers who theorize how and whom we deem trustworthy.

"Trusting requires that we can, (1) be vulnerable to others—vulnerable to betrayal in particular; (2) rely on others to be competent to do what we wish to trust them to do; and (3) rely on them to be willing to do it" (Trust in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

The point of how trust is so intimately linked to not being betrayed by another is important. Most people I know fear being betrayed. Whether it is the worry of being left, taken advantage of, or being let down, humans fear someone else making them sad, in the simplest of terms. Therefore, trust is knowing that it is unlikely that someone will make you feel sad, hurt, or betrayed. There is hesitancy from the trustor(i.e the one trusting) to allow themselves to be vulnerable because when trusting someone or something you, undoubtedly, are opening the door for mistrust, "but trust also involves the risk that people we trust will not pull through for us, for if there were some guarantee they would pull through, then we would not need to trust them"(Trust in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). We cannot have something without the possibility of not having it at all and the same goes for trust. This is why it is such a crucial aspect of human-human relationships and to understand what it means to trust or be trusted fully we must look at the theories presented.

Carolyn McLeod also highlights the work of Russell Hardin and Margaret Urban Walker. Hardin takes on a motive-based theory of trust, encapsulated interests view, which describes trustworthiness as a means of self-interest: Russell Hardin says that "trustworthy people are motivated by their interest to maintain the relationship they have with the trustor, which in turn encourages them to encapsulate the interests of that person in their interests" (Trust in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Walker, on the other hand, counters such claim stating that: " trustworthiness is compatible with having many different kinds of motives, including, among others, goodwill, "pride in one's role", "fear of penalties for poor performance", and "an impersonal sense of obligation" (Trust in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Walker emphasizes the importance of actions over motive explaining that "what accounts for whether someone is trustworthy in her view is whether they act as they should, not whether they are motivated in a certain way"(Trust in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Both theories are pivotal in not only expanding the conversation around trust but also are pertinent in the context of my thesis. Influencers can be evidence of both Hardin and Walker's theories depending on the genre of their content. One is not better than the other in terms of the motive for trust, but rather they both exemplify how emotional these virtual relationships can be and the way they function with trust as a pillar; trust is one of the most vital elements for a well-functioning dynamic.

We can look at a give-and-take interaction by reaching more into the realm of influencing and the trust that accompanies the relationship between follower and influencer. McLeod reminds us, "Yet this person may also have to be willing for certain reasons or as a result of having a certain kind of motive for acting (e.g., they care about the trustor)"(Trust in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), referring to the trustee. For the viewer, you are receiving entertainment and information all while satisfying the desire to watch this person in their everyday life. Whereas the influencer is receiving compensation in two forms: payment and followers. Yet both trust one another to keep engaging by either the creation of or interaction with content. However, the compensation depends on the nature of the influencer. Some create with the motive to educate and receive the gratification of sharing important information and stories as reason for their actions. This being said, both share a joint and mutual trustworthiness between themselves and their devotees.

Expanding on this idea of reciprocal relationships, where both parties involved are receiving something from the dynamic Kim and Kim surveyed several people to gauge their feelings towards influencers. Their intention was to evaluate what is of the utmost importance to create and maintain a relationship, finding that trust is a vital relationship quality. In the case of this study, reciprocity is the mutual exchange of interest. Meaning, a viewers with their likes, comments, or shares can express interest which in turn makes the influencer want to post more content for the viewers. This back and forth is noted as "those who engage in a reciprocal relationship can establish a high level of trust, affective regard, and behavioral commitment" (Kim and Kim 224). As noted earlier, there is an element of self-interest from the viewer, "trust in the influencer assures followers that their relationship with the influencer will affect them positively. As a result, followers seek to maintain this relationship and become loyal to the influencer" (225). Understandably, the viewer desires personal benefit from the interaction because to them the influencer is a figure rather than a real-life friend. It is important to understand this aspect of the relationship, the "transactional" one. There is personal gain that feeds the continuation of the relationship and the basis of that is trust, trust in the influencer to continue to post content that positively affects them.

Closely linked to trust is an influencer's level of authenticity. With their ability to spread important information quickly, social media platforms also can allow the flow and transference of fake news. It can be both political news and fabricated opinions regarding products. With the increase of influencer marketing, companies have hoped on the train and began to develop ways to drive consumerism even higher through using paid influencer marketing. This is the practice

of paying an influencer to pitch your product to their viewers which can cause inauthentic opinions and reviews. Kim and Kim further explained that "in social media marketing, authenticity corresponds to the genuine intention of the influencer given they can post and recommend any product/service for external compensation"(225). Compensation is a huge aspect of becoming an influencer for a majority of people which only increases the chance they are not being honest. This has been an issue for viewers. In this study, however, it is argued that "authenticity can be determined by "whether the practitioner is willing to openly, publicly, and personally be identified as the persuader"(225). Firsthand testimonials are what sway the consumer. Therefore, it is imperative for the relationship that an influencer be honest and true to themselves when advocating for a brand, product, or cause.

Many layers build the power held by influencers in our society today. The emotional component within the dynamic between influencer and consumer/viewer is a crucial one.

Dictating Emotions

As humans, we have a strong association with our emotions. They are our guiding force, and they influence many of our actions. If we are feeling sad we cry, if we are feeling angry we scream, if we are feeling happy we smile. It is how we create relationships when there is an emotion-driven foundation. Kim and Kim remind us that "based on their emotions, people form or reject social connections, and develop, maintain, or avoid their commitments to social structures" (226). We need to keep in mind that we are only human and we cannot easily rid ourselves of our innate emotional states.

Raphael Odoom's study, "Brand hate experiences and the role of social media influencers in altering consumer emotions" published by the *Journal of Brand Management* regarding the power of influencers on consumers juxtaposes the positive and negative emotions toward a brand that can develop from the way influencers speak about the product:

"These followers can potentially evolve into prospective customers for brands or even transition into brand loyalists for existing customers. Consequently, it is conceivable that influencers' personas and content on social media may either mitigate (through positive associations) or exacerbate (through negative associations) the repercussions of hate emotions expressed by social media followers towards brands"(3).

These associations and the feelings they elicit often stem from our subconscious as we are unaware of what thoughts or desires cause us to act in a certain way. It isn't until after the fact that we take the time to reflect and associate emotion with action. Kathleen M Woodward's writing in her work *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* focuses on emotion and the subconscious. Woodward cogently captures how social structures have infiltrated subjectivity in our media-heavy society highlighting how emotions are no longer independent of influence.

Woodward builds on the work of Peter Stearns and Christopher Bollas who both draw the connection between increased consumerism and lack of individualism. The intext citation

captures Stearn's belief that: "...expanding consumer culture required the suppression of the emotions and the cultivation of impersonality" (Woodward 16). Based on Stearns's thoughts, Bollas named this cultural phenomenon "the normatic illness"(16) defining it as, "a person who suffers from normatic illness as betraying a lack of subjectivity—in particular, a lack of self-regarding feelings"(16). I draw back to these quotes because they support, in part, what I am claiming the outcome of influencer culture and consumerism to be: the subconscious following of a leader is based on a shared parasocial emotional connection.

Our interactions with influences are subconscious in the sense that we feel a desire to buy the product they are using and more often than not we do purchase the item, but what we fail to recognize at that moment is that we feel a sense of trust and relatability towards that person on our phone. There is a blinding trust that what they say is true and a connection that feels real and reciprocated. With technology and media being so prevalent in our lives, in every form, and specifically social media we have created an emotional connection between ourselves and social media apps and therefore the people who are ruling these apps, influencers. With this rise in usage and development of applications along with the reliance on these figures, we increasingly follow the inability to look inward and be interiority.

On the contrary, while the recognition of the less appreciative and discussed parts of influencer culture is crucial, it is imperative to expose the beneficial layers that are also the makeup of this "relationship." As noted previously, the definition of an influencer is vast and there are many positive aspects to influencing. Social media was going to take off whether people wanted it to or not so we had to figure out how to navigate it. To put emphasis on and

exacerbate the positive elements, diminish the qualities that feed "normatic illness" and the

decimation of individuality and subjectivity is also important.

Chapter Two: Mediating the Social Against "Normatic Illness."

Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are disseminating wildly and furiously. The most effective way they are doing this is through the videos and photos uploaded and shared by influencers.

These influencers can also be "educators" as influential users of Instagram who have conjured a high following and are posting about political, social, and humanitarian issues for example. These people should be counted and understood as influencers. They are "authentically" and directly sharing information with their viewers.

Bisan Owda or @wizard_bisan1, is a powerful and knowledgeable woman from Palestine. She has been documenting the recent atrocities occurring within Palestine for the past five-plus months.

For the past several months we have witnessed the displacement and murder of too many people. Those in Gaza have been fighting for their lives and Bisan has used her Instagram account to share the stories of so many herself included. I use Instagram often and as the most recent war between Palestine and Israel began her content gained more traction and my Instagram algorithm, filled with posts about Palestine, put her at the top of my feed (stream of posts). I had seen so many posts of words detailing the horror and photos of the disheartening reality, but Bisan Owda was the first person I saw on Instagram living that reality day in and day out.
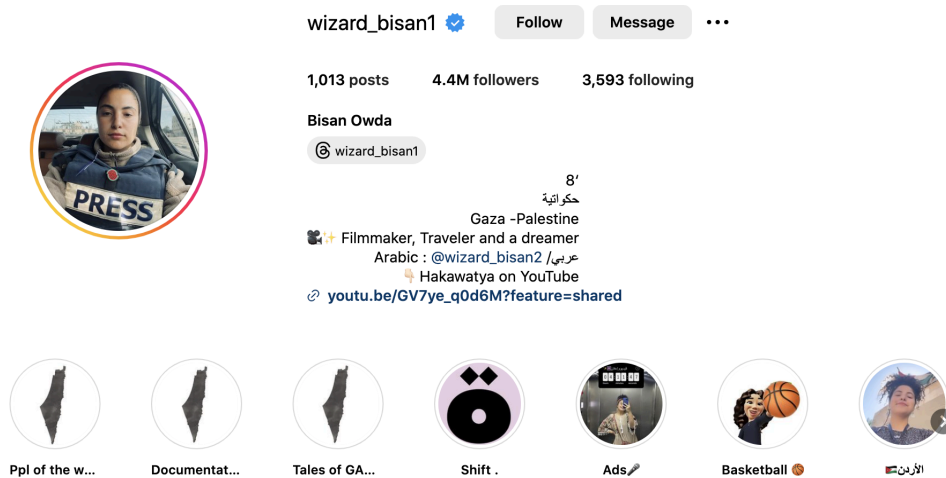
The image above is a screenshot of Bisan Owda's Instagram profile. Here you can see how many followers she has, her other channels (social media platforms), and her interests. Also, you can see her profile picture which is an image of her face in the circular frame. Beneath this information, other images contain various photos and videos that she has saved in story format. Story format means that the content she saves to these various circles shown above will remain there and only be seen if tapped. Preceding these saved stories are where her posts are, as seen below:

What was most striking were the scenes Oweda captured through her posts. They are

honest, unfiltered, raw, and painful in the most beautiful way. I understand the use of the word

beautiful may feel ignorant and misused, however, there is beauty in what she is doing; she is

capturing the starvation, destruction of homes and lives, the abomination of a generation. She is

publicly shaming the inhumane treatment of Palestinian people while educating people on what

is happening. Owda has always been a filmmaker and as this new war began her following has

only grown. Using her filmmaker's skills she has effectively shared information engaging

viewers; She has become one of the most influential voices on Instagram.

Bisan Owda documents happiness in the middle of utter tragicness. One video she made

was surrounding one flower. A flower specific and important to Palestine - the Hannoun. The

Hannoun symbolizes passion and strength for the Palestinian people. Hannoun in Arabic means

"passionate" and they have further it to represent the blood loss in the war. Knowing this, Owda

takes her followers to the one Hannoun that has grown out of the greenery amid a genocide with a warplane in the background of the video; life is simultaneously beautiful and tragic. In the video, Owda shows herself walking to the flower and touching it gently, not wanting to harm it and exuding kindness. The video pans to her face where we see a smile with the background of gray sky and noises of planes and chaos, but she finds calm. As important as it is to show the destruction of Palestine and the Palestinian people it is of equal importance to show the life and share more about the culture which Bisan Owda does well. This varied representation of life for people in Palestine right now makes her videos feel authentic and truthful. These are screenshots of the video or Instagram reel (a video posted on Instagram) of Owda sharing the flower she loves.

Owda's videos tend to be unrelatable to the majority of people viewing them because those people either don't live in Palestine or don't have family in Gaza, so videos like these where she is a human experiencing nature and sharing her gratitude make her relatable to viewers. Relatability is a crucial aspect of influence, there must be a point that connects to you, a way you could relate yourself to the person on your phone, in the video. Also, the smallness of this red flower (the color of blood) growing near grass and a big piece of wood captures humility and strength. The flower looks so small in comparison to the patch of green that surrounds it. It is symbolic of the Palestinian people and their occupied land. This flower is the embodiment of what everyone is trying to dismiss: the power and strength of the Palestinian people. That amidst all the chaos and destruction they remain strong and united just as the flower remains bright and standing.

Of equal significance are her videos capturing what is happening in Gaza, to the people. There are countless videos worthy of specifying, but all depict the endless pain and suffering of the Palestinian people at the hands of so many. From the lack of food and fatal starvation to the active bombing and murders, Owda is sure to speak to it all in full honesty. I want to share still images taken from the videos posted by her to show the content she is putting on social media. The images below are a compilation of many videos she has posted. What is most striking about these videos is their authenticity through everyday life doings and their simplicity and commonality of action. In these images for example Owda takes her followers through a camp of displaced Palestinians in real time.
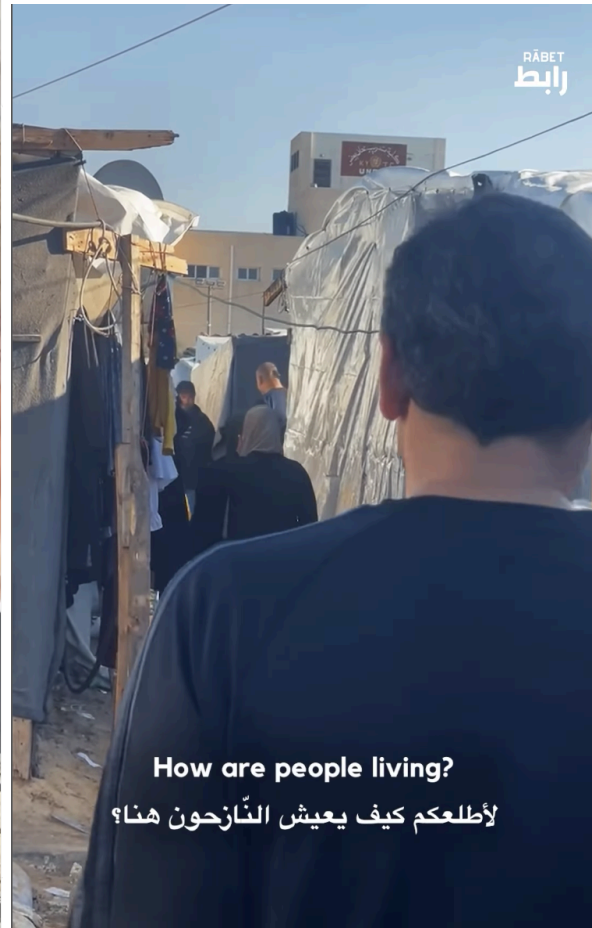
She truly captures all realities present within Palestine which is so unique to her platform. The overarching theme is justice for Palestine, but underneath Owda shares the food she eats, the places she sleeps, the people she is with, the stories of mothers and children, and shares updates on what is happening in Gaza.

In the images above we see a woman doing her laundry, which she says takes thirty minutes and she does every day. Beside we see an image of the camp where they are living. The video takes you through the camp's paths, between tents and under drying clothes. It is a peak

into the reality of these people and an opening to create a relationship with not only Bisan Owda but the community being killed and pushed out of their homes as they have for so many years. Owda speaks from her heart intending to speak her mind and stand up for what she believes in free from external influence.

Bisan Owda: Polarization & Popularity

As a polarizing figure in war documentation media, what drives Bisan Owda's mass following? It is telling that someone who openly shares their beliefs surrounding a polarizing topic can retain such a following. Or simply the fact that Bisan Owda is a Palestinian female, a type of person that many have anger towards. However, Owda continues to spread awareness of what it is like to be living in Palestine right now.

In the earlier parts of this explorative thesis, I introduced Kim and Kim's study on Trust which examined various facets of truth and its applicability to relationships defined by social media. I point to how trust partly relies on authenticity contingent on "whether the practitioner is willing to openly, publicly, and personally be identified as the persuader"(Kim and Kim 225). Bisan Owda does not shy away from the title of educational influencer, she is actively maintaining such a presence in hopes of persuading viewers to advocate for the war on Gaza and those affected. The image below speaks volumes in the absence of words. The miles of wreckage that sits behind Bisan Owda (center of image), is a fraction of what Israeli forces have destroyed.

Beside this image, Owda wrote a heartfelt, informative, and pointed message as the caption
which can be observed here:

wizard_bisan1 ✔ They say that tomorrow is Eid, summer is gone, winter has arrived, then New Year, then summer again, Ramadan and Eid, and I stumble every day in a whole world designed from my nightmares.

There are a thousand soldiers and a thousand shells between me and my home.
Between my family and friends are countries, all of them scattered around the world.

Whenever the army withdrew from a place, I ran to find anything I knew, from my real world, far from the world of nightmares. Before the genocide, I had walked in the Gaza Strip, inch by inch, memorizing it by heart. I told its entire stories, as I am a storyteller, but every time I arrived After the accursed army, I find that it has stripped the color, life, spirit, and memories from everything.
Those devils have turned the buildings into sand and the sand into powder and dust. They have crushed everything, trees, people, and stone. Is there anything in the world more cruel to a storyteller than destroying her stories and her memory?

Am I fed up? No, we have a verse in Arabic that says:
" my country and if it Opressed me is dear to me....
And my family, even if they grieve against me, are honorable."
(بلادي وإن جارت عليّ عزيزةٌ ... وأهلي وإن ضنوا علي كرامٌ)
I am a Palestinian, and I carry within me a lot of sadness, grief, anger, and revenge, but I carry stubbornness mixed with the soil of the village to which I originate, in northern Gaza, and my stubbornness tells me: Gaza is the most beautiful place on earth, and the most deserving of life.

We will rebuild it, even if it took 100 years, that is why we were created. Inshallah every year will my land be mine, my sea be mine, and my sky be mine.
Eid Mubarak..

The importance of images is equal to that of text. Because of the features available through Instagram's platform, there are even more ways to get your point across and reach people. Images by their lonesome can evoke emotion and action, and the addition of written words can add an educational aspect critical to the intention of Bisan Owda's work; to inform the public.

I use this particular post to share how Bisan Owda speaks to her audience, many of whom are not Palestinian, but allies and advocates. In the caption, Owda writes: "Whenever the army withdrew from a place, I ran to find anything I knew, from my real world, far from the world of nightmares" (Owda in Instagram Post). Referring to the current state of Gaza as "the world of nightmares" she describes hurrying home in between attacks to find parts of the place she once knew. The place she once knew has been demolished and left in complete ruble: "They have crushed everything, trees, people, and stone"(Owda in Instagram Post). Comparing the killing of trees and stones to the murdering of people is indicative of how inhumanly the people of Palestine are being treated. There is no separation between the annihilation of land and people. It is hard to kill a stone. Through her message we, as outsiders and viewers, are shown the pain being felt by so many, especially by Bisan, she states: " Is there anything in the world more cruel to a storyteller than destroying her stories and her memory?" (Owda in Instagram Post) What she knows has been taken, and all the parts of her identity robbed. She is left with an unwanted terrifying blank slate to remake her stories and memories. With these heartwrenching accounts of what life has been like for Bisan Owda, she is creating an open and honest relationship between herself and her viewers, embracing the image of a persuader. A persuader can also be defined as an advocate like Bisan Owda.

Bisan Owda is one type of influencer and worth noting because of the relevance of what she is sharing using her platform. However, she is still one of many who because of their platform holds the power to influence the general public that engages with social media using their videos, posts, and captions. Using her as an example provides contextual evidence showing how impactful an influencer can be. Yet, not every social media figure will possess the same qualities that have led to their fame. In the case of Bisan Owda, it is the authentic and educational nature of her posts that contributed to her following, but as noted by some it is the complete and utter relatability and light-hearted essence of their profile that captures the eyes of many. But despite the differences between types of influencers, there is no denying that without social media these influencers would have minimal following and power to spread news both for commerce and humanitarian purposes.

Someone, or rather something, of influence can be separated from a singular person into individual videos. Meaning, that in addition to an influencer, who continuously posts and has a large following, there can be videos that gain traction despite the account's follower count. One video can hold as much power as an influencer. I examine this claim using videos that have been forms of resistance to oppression and the ability they have to reach various audiences.

Chapter Three: Media as An Agent for Social Change

I previously looked at an individual's ability to impact a group of people and in what follows I would like to focus on examples of how a singular video can share that impact.
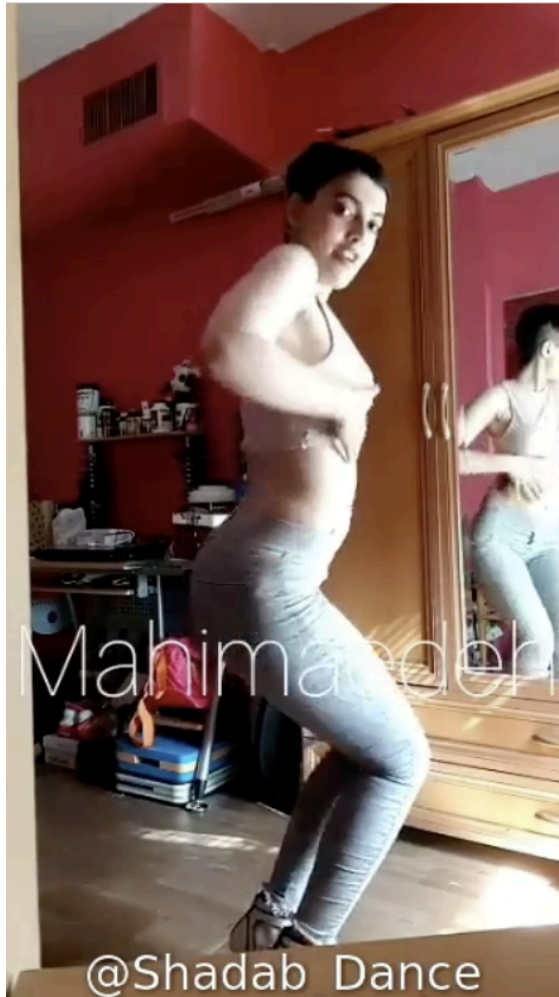
The Consequence of Being A Woman

The story of Maedeh Hojabri, an Iranian woman who lives in Iran ignited one of the most controversial and impactful debates surrounding dance and the implications of Westernization on Iranian society. Hojabri sparked a larger conversation about how dance is not illegal in Iran but rather what it is representative of is worthy of criminal consequence. The work of Ghoneheh Tazmini, " Dance and Resistance in Iran:#dancingisnotacrime" proves that the reaction of the regime to Maedeh Hojabri dancing is "a product of complicated historical dialectic with the West…" (Tazmini 410) depicts the relevance of the dissemination of information through the use of social media. Maedeh Hojabri is an embodiment of resistance. She possesses the ability to defy oppressive forces and share your story through social media platforms such as Instagram.

Dance is representative of youth, attraction, sexuality, and individuality, which is what scares Iranian officials the most. A young woman defying the government by posting a video of herself engaging in what is "deemed" tempting activity is worthy of extreme consequence.

Maedeh Hojabri, a seventeen-year-old Iranian girl, was detained due to a video she had posted on social media of herself dancing. The video captures her half-shown stomach and belly

dance-like movements, a provocative act in Iran. Along with her skin showing, Hojabri did not wear a hijab, a proper head scarf women in Iran are required, by law, to wear. These two aspects of the video are active forms of resistance against the covering of women's bodies. Like many Islamic Middle Eastern countries, negative perceptions around dance are deeply rooted in the fact that dance allows for female expression and seduction, which is forbidden endless in front of related or spousal males, "The new visibility of belly dance as an expression of women's femininity and as a popular fitness practice, raised the status of dance as a means of female empowerment" (395) A world in which a woman can obtain power over the observer, male, is not one adhering to traditional law. However, a teenager like Maedeh Hojabri engaged in belly dance to regain sovereignty over her body. It was an act of resistance and empowerment, an attempt to escape the reality of the Iranian political structure and enter a world where she was her ruler, like most who find themselves being controlled and having their lives dictated by others.

This image is of Maedeh Hojabri in the video that led to her arrest. Beneath it is a screenshot of the number of views it has received.

With the contextual background provided above, the image depicts the seductive nature of her dancing deemed consequential by the Iranian government. Additionally, her clothing is not of traditional wear. Her stomach is showing and her clothing is revealing. However, this was how

Maedeh Hojabri wanted to express herself and took to social media to share it with the world. The power of social media led to the Iranian government seeing this video, whereas if Maedeh Hojabri had engaged in the same activity without filming it, there is no question she would have never been arrested. Why is that? Due to social media having the ability to reach audiences oceans away, there is more fear in the spread of ideals and ways of life. Just as Maedeh Hojabri exposed viewers to her values. Hojabri must have been exposed to ideals different than those within Iranian society. Although it is the most contentious video, it is not the only one Hojabri put on social media. Following her arrest, Hojabr came back to social media continued creating videos, and gained a following as seen below:
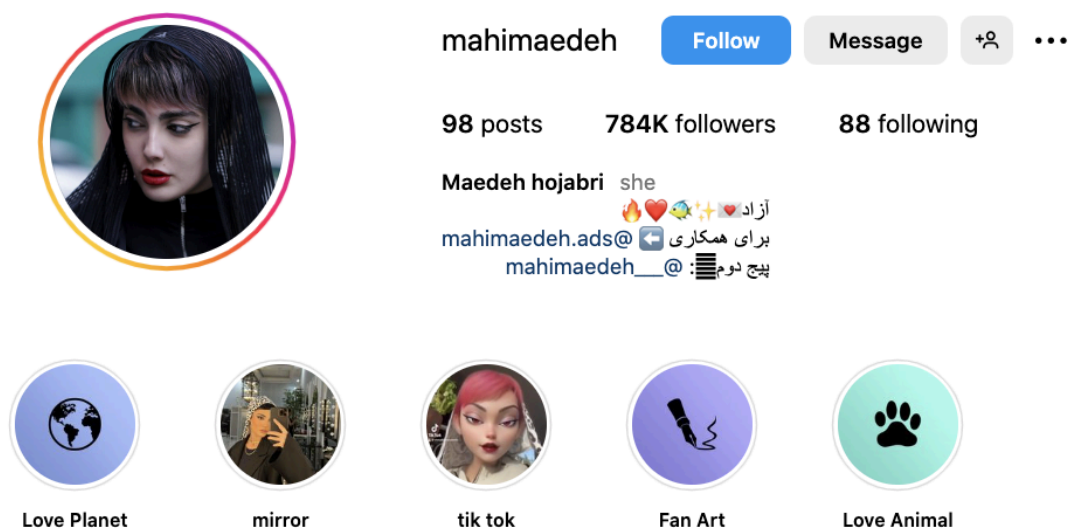
The fact that Maedeh Hojabri returned to social media and garnered such a following is a testament to the fact that she was a voice for so many women in Iran who face the same

oppression. The videos she has posted remain true to who she is without fear of the Iranian government. She uses her platform for self-expression, what she wanted to do in the first place. Social media can have so many purposes and can lead to so many different outcomes, like how Maedeh Hojabri now can show her makeup styles and share her life.

Mahmood Monshipouri and Theodore Prompichai's essay "Digital Activism in Perspective: Palestinian Resistance via Social Media" states:

" New technological mediums have empowered the younger generations to participate in and shape the public discourse of politics" (Monshipouri and Prompichai 39).

This is exactly what Maedeh Hojabri was doing. She engaged with Instagram to influence and challenge the politics of an oppressive state. This is also what we see with the capturing of Palestinian youths dancing and uploading these videos to technological platforms.

The Voices of Palestine

As mentioned above, for years, Palestinian people have been victims of colonization and displacement. Wanting to mourn their homeland yet maintain their pride has left many Palestinian people searching for a place in between, "Within spaces of happiness, we cannot fully be happy; guilt will not allow us to celebrate when our people are dying. And within spaces of mourning, we cannot fully mourn; pride will stop us from being weak in front of our colonizer"(Ayah Al Oballi 45). Dance, specifically Dabke, has created the space for people to

find an in-between, and the significance of this dance has been documented and shared on social media for years. It has been a way in which people from other countries can understand the culture while seeing the need for Palestinian justice.

Dabke is the dance of Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. It is performed differently on stage versus in social settings. Yet, the bones remain similar. Socially, the dance is usually seen at joyous occasions like a wedding, family gatherings, or general celebrations. As a mode of resistance and social change, we must understand in what circumstances Dabke has been used as a form of resilience and strength. Specific to Palestine, a country that practices Dabke, Johana Sellman in *DabkeDance: A Shared Tradition of the Levant* noted that " Palestinians have taken this to war zones and in the middle of protests because it unifies us against our oppressors. Even when there is a struggle, the Dabke dance has allowed us to look past the political battle and focus on our traditions and where we come from"(Sellman in The Ohio State University Blog) Dance is a rooting art form for the Palestinian people. In a time when things are not in their control, and the sense of isolation is high, Dabke is a way to feel connected and supported.

Despite being uprooted from their land and their culture being degraded, the Palestinian people fight to maintain their sense of community:"The occupation can take the land beneath our feet, but they cannot take the traditions and culture that lives within our hearts"(Sellman). Intense care for the community is particular to Arabic and Middle Eastern culture. Family is at the forefront of all actions and thoughts. It is essential within Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian cultures to maintain a strong sense of family, and this is the reason why the traditional dances

from these countries remain current, passed down from generation to generation rather than being lost as time continues, as you see in other cultures or countries.

This video was posted to TikTok in 2020:
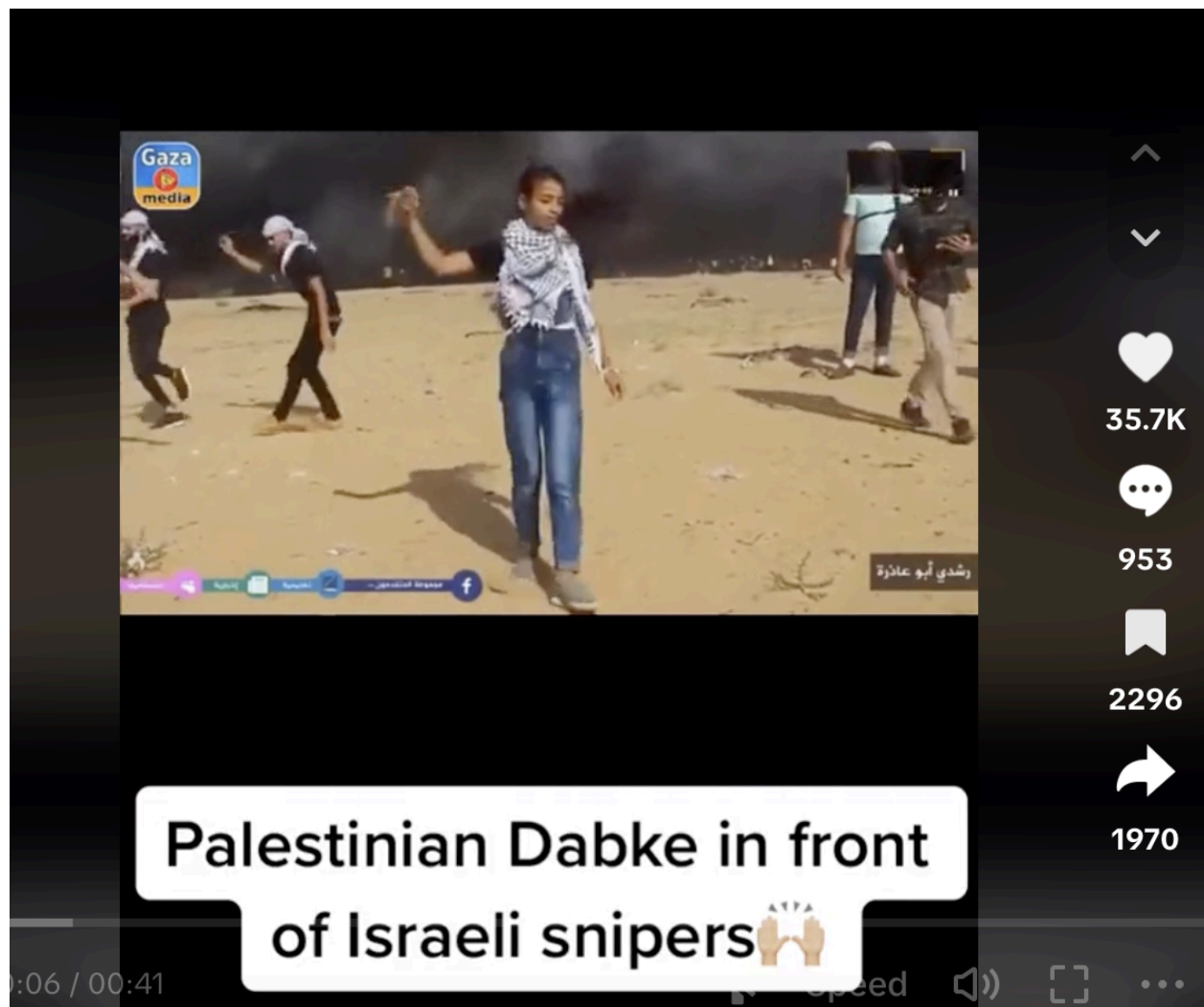
On the left side of the image, you can see a white heart with "35.7K" written beneath it. That
indicates the number of likes this video has received and that is 35,700 thousand likes. 251,700
thousand people have seen this video and 953 people have commented on it.

The Video ends with this group of boys dancing Dabke. They have covered their heads with keffiyeh, a traditional Palestinian scarf, and assembled into a group. Some of the boys are only covering their heads while others have their faces fully covered. This angle provides more visibility of the smoke in the background. It is caused by the destruction of what are assembly homes and communities.

The TikTok profile that posted this video does not have many followers, not nearly enough to be objectively considered an influencer. However, as mentioned above singular videos can become popular and receive just as much attention as those from established influencers. The content of this video can be deemed political and therefore is not shared with users as openly as videos with the ability to create a profit. That is the aspect of TikTok that is unique. Due to the algorithm, within the user's "for you" page there can be videos that have one like and three views or a video with thousands of likes and views but posted by someone with one hundred followers. Below is the profile of the account that posted the TikTok above.

culturevibes1

⚡

Follow

9 Following   **582** Followers   **38.7K** Likes

No bio yet.

This image supports the claim previously made that an influential post does not need to come from someone who has thousands of followers.

This video has been passed along from platform to platform. It has been seen by many people and is a popular video that shows the juxtaposition of the destruction and restoration of the Palestinian people. The smoke behind the young dancers depicts the war-torn reality they are living in. The words that accompany the video describe the dancers being in front of Israeli snipers speaking to the long-lasting fight between Palestinian and Israeli people. Within this, less than a minute-long video we are introduced to a whole world and reality so different than most and that is what is so powerful about social media. Somewhere in America, a student can be scrolling through TikTok to find this video of Palestinian youths dancing amidst a war that has lasted years. We are invited into worlds far from our own and encouraged to learn more, search through comments, or follow the person who posted the video to see more and stay aware.

It is proven that when you engage with a video there is a chemical reaction where "your brain is mimicking the feelings that you see in a video" (Swarner). Watching this video as a viewer you are attempting to empathize and put yourself in their shoes to understand what they are feeling and representing. In the face of turmoil, they find time to engage in a cultural activity. It is beautiful to witness as an outsider, as someone who has no perception of the pain they must feel as their home is being taken. This is authentic, which builds trust between a viewer and the subject. Separate from the creator the content can create a dynamic between the viewer and what is being publicized.

Conclusion: Restoring Faith in Humanity a Little Bit at a Time

The examples I have provided in my thesis depict the aspect of new media that allows for personal expression and how "People can become citizen journalists and create content by reporting on topics that are overlooked in the news media"(Goodarzi, Fahimifar, and Daryani 147). Bisan Owda's role as a user has been to inform the greater public of the reality of people in Palestine in a way the news media fails to do because they are not Palestinians living the reality Owda is. Giving life to the claim that the internet, or social media, is a newfound source of information: "Some see this feature as a factor in the survival of democracy and as a social weapon to destroy hegemony. One of the claims is that the Internet can be a new and powerful voice for people"(148).

Mostafa Goodarzi, Ali Asghar Fahimifar, and Elahe Shakeri Daryani in their research "New Media and Ideology: A Critical Perspective" use Louis Althusser's definition of Ideology and define it as: "… a set of imaginary representations of individuals concerning their real-world conditions." I equate this definition of ideology to the dynamic created by social media that supplies viewers with a form of reality only achievable through new media. this reality takes shape as politically based, commerce-based, pure entertainment, however, it begs the question of whether if it is truly reality. New media, "a catch-all term used for various kinds of electronic communications" (143),   has allowed room for falsities as it is not face-to-face interaction. New Media, like Instagram, has made reality easy to digest. People view social media as an escape and this escapism in itself becomes a reality: "Social media activity is 7/24. This means that there is no distance between man and technology, and technology is intertwined with man" (152) The electronic barrier gives rise to the questionable nature of the reality it provides. How can we fully trust new media, social media, to replace the imaginary with reality if that reality is skewed?

Althusser connects ideology to the interaction between the influencer and the audience. He notes consumption is an expression of ideas by a consumer which is influenced by the ideology of a leader - the influencer: "...as an example of the consumption of a commodity, which is a material act, expresses the ideas of the consumer subject, which Althusser considers to be tainted with ideology" (142). What the consumer is being influenced by is another point of discussion. The content being viewed is an extension of the capitalist agenda and political domination that has existed since before the new media. The conversation of how individuals have used these platforms to evoke change and awareness interjects with the commercialization

of media "... the logic of capitalism, public service, and civil society shapes the Internet and social media. However, the power of such new media is asymmetrical and heavily skewed in favor of a capitalist Internet and capitalist social media" (150). Due to this pawning of viewers as an endless source of consumers "...media organizations assume their audiences as customers, not citizens of a democratic society"(150).

This begs the question: does the content created by influencers carry undertones of their nation's or countries' fundamental values and, if so, can this influence the reality presented to the consumer of said content? "Media monopoly imperialism is the transmission of a nation's worldview (fundamental ideas) through the media by maximum production of content (Schiller, 1969; Postman, 2011)" (144). There are variables affiliated with the reality created by social media which I believe are crucial aspects to understand and question as we begin to recognize new media's power in the dissemination of ideas and ideals whether concerning political beliefs or lifestyles.

Does the social justice focus of these platforms challenge the commercial aspect of media?

Ideology dictates users' actions and how we receive these messages is through content. We digest a variety of content from a multitude of users via social media while more often than not exposing us to a homogeneous ideology- that of the ruling class: "Commercial content is managed by the ruling power and is governed by an ideology, which is the ideology of the ruling

class"(137). However "public content is controlled by media owners and contains a variety of ideologies that carry different ideas and meanings"(137) opening the door to social justice-directed content.

With users such as Bisan Owda and Maedeh Hojabri, there is life to these platforms being a mode for social justice, equality, freedom, and activism, and yet the fundamental quality of commercialization and consumption remains relevant in the user's agency. A handful of users engage with new media for reasons additional to those similar to Bisan and Maedeh they "feel empowered and autonomous in the device by directly manipulating the subject of interest, such as moving and creating a new folder or dragging photos into the trash and deleting and adding contacts, while it is the ideology that leads to this process " (151).

However with too many factors out of their control, what they, the users, fail to recognize is that "for instance, in an advertisement, a person thinks that he/she is the one who has chosen the product, but in reality, it is the ideology that has forced her/him to choose and consume"(151). Our actions are dependent on the content we digest, creating a codependency between our thoughts and others and this area creeps into dangerous territory. The work of "New Media and Ideology: A Critical Perspective" claims that through these platforms "We share judgments and opinions, but not our own thoughts" (152) prohibiting the transferring of honest thought. There is no room for individuals to think independently because "We are always busy sharing content, so we are very busy and always ready to connect and express" (152).

One constant of the media is there is always money and power dictating the innerworkings. Who are the people pulling the strings? and can we peel back the curtain to restructure the hierarchy to switch the narrative of social media? How do we dismantle the commercialization of media and open the floodgates for transparent dialogue with the intent to promote conversation around social justice, equality, sustainability, and conscious consumption?

There are these pockets where resistance happens and media becomes about so much more than money. People have proven that we, as a society, can use something so corrupt and controlled for the Good. Within these structures, there are spaces in which good things can happen and are happening. We see faith in humanity shine through the cracks of the hierarchy and we let the good peak through.

Works Cited:

"Biggest Social Media Platforms 2024." *Statista*,
https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of
-users/. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.

Definition of INFLUENCE. 21 Apr. 2024,
https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/influence.

Goodarzi, Mostafa, et al. "New Media and Ideology: A Critical Perspective." *Journal of
Cyberspace Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, July 2021, pp. 137–62. *jcss.ut.ac.ir*,
https://doi.org/10.22059/jcss.2021.327938.1065.

Suciu, Peter. "History Of Influencer Marketing Predates Social Media By Centuries – But Is
There Enough Transparency In The 21st Century?" *Forbes*,
https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2020/12/07/history-of-influencer-marketing-pr
edates-social-media-by-centuries--but-is-there-enough-transparency-in-the-21st-century
/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

*Influence Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced
Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.Com*.
https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/influence_1. Accessed
25 Apr. 2024.

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BfoQbinHjqa/. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.

Izhaan, Mohammed, et al. "Crafting and Promoting Content through Social Media
Platforms." *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, vol. 5, no. 3,
Mar. 2024, pp. 502–06. *DOI.org (Crossref)*,
https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0324.0618.

Khanam, Kazi Zainab, et al. "The Homophily Principle in Social Network Analysis: A
Survey." *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, vol. 82, no. 6, Mar. 2023, pp. 8811–54.
DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11042-021-11857-1.

Kim, Do Yuon, and Hye-Young Kim. "Trust Me, Trust Me Not: A Nuanced View of Influencer Marketing on Social Media." *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 134, Sept. 2021, pp. 223–32. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024.

McLeod, Carolyn. "Trust." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2023, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entriesrust/.

"Merriam‑Webster Online: The Language Center." *Electronic Resources Review*, vol. 4, no. 1/2, Jan. 2000, pp. 9–11. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1108/err.2000.4.1_2.9.11.

Monshipouri, Mahmood, and Theodore Prompichai. "Digital Activism in Perspective: Palestinian Resistance via Social Media." *International Studies Journal (ISJ)*, vol. 14, no. 4, Apr. 2018, pp. 42–63. *www.isjq.ir*, http://www.isjq.ir/article_89793_en.html.

Odoom, Raphael, et al. "Brand Hate Experiences and the Role of Social Media Influencers in Altering Consumer Emotions." *Journal of Brand Management*, Mar. 2024. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-024-00356-x.

TikTok - Make Your Day. https://www.tiktok.com/@culturevibes1/video/6871527105105022209. Accessed 25 Apr. 2024.

Swarner, Elizabeth. "The Relationship Between Emotion and Video." *Launch Media*, 6 Feb. 2020, https://launchmedia.tv/powerful-emotional-video/.

Woodward, Kathleen M. *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions. Duke University Press, 2009.*

Zainub, Anila. *Decolonization and Anti-Colonial Praxis: Shared Lineages*. BRILL, 2019. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004404588.

Ghobadian, Sydney "Embodied Resistance: The Purpose of Dance in States of Oppression"