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## Content Creator or Self-Journaler? Classifying Social Media Influencers in the Creator Economy

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# **Content Creator or Self-journaler? Classifying Social Media Influencers in the Creator Economy**

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## **Statements and Declarations**

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study received approval from the Ethics Committee of Politecnico di Milano on January 22, 2026.

### **Consent to Participate**

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation in the research.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interest**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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The data that support the findings of this article are available from the corresponding author upon request.

## **Content Creator or Self-journaler?**

### **Classifying Social Media Influencers in the Creator Economy**

#### **Abstract**

Social media today hosts a diverse range of influencers, which are not fully understood in the current taxonomies of follower count, source of fame, industry focus, and monetization. This research introduces two novel dimensions of influencer communication: content focus and self focus. Based on the relative occurrence of these foci in their social media posts, influencers are classified in three types: content creators (predominantly content-focused), self-journalers (predominantly self-focused), and self-creators (displaying both the foci relatively to the same extent). Through seven empirical studies, the authors validate multi-item scales that capture users' perceptions of the two dimensions, empirically establish the perceptual thresholds for the three influencer types, and show face validity in their relative prominence across industry genres. Finally, they demonstrate the observable impact of the classification for the most-followed influencers across five domains. While self-journalers work with more brands and have more posts and followers, content creators achieve higher engagement per post and per follower. Audience composition and brand payments reflect these differences, with self-journalers earning more overall, but content creators more by post and per engagement. For influencers and brands alike, this readily operational and conceptually grounded distinction provides shared norms, benchmarks, and clarity in decision making.

*Keywords:* creator economy, influencer marketing, content creators, social media, influencer classification, content focus, self focus

*“One of the main points is the distinction between influencers and content creators: they do two completely different jobs and have very different impacts on audiences. [...] However, when talking to the market and with our various brand managers, what I have realized is that there is no shared definition.”*

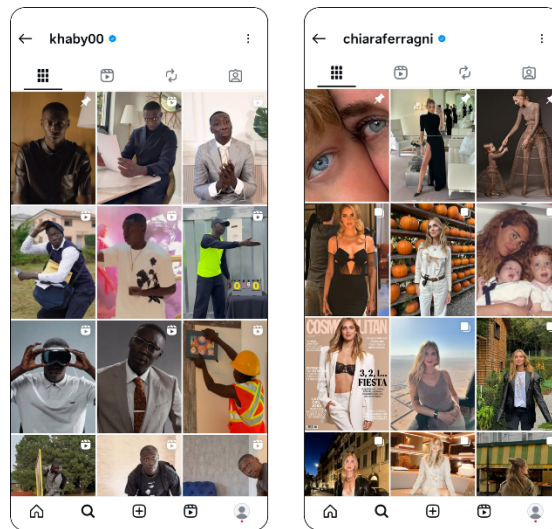
- Global Marketing Manager (Digital & Content) at Campari Group

The rise of social media has produced a vast and heterogeneous ecosystem of influential online actors, commonly referred to as ‘influencers’. These social media personalities play a central role in contemporary marketing and communication strategies, widely regarded as catalyzers and shapers of consumer attention, preferences and even meanings. Such influence has been studied over time mostly as a structural property of the actors: influencers have been classified according to their follower count (e.g., mega-, macro- and micro-), platform affiliation (e.g., Instagrammers, TikTokers, YouTubers), domain or industry focus (e.g., fashion, food, travel), source of fame (social media-made or celebrities coming to social media) and monetization strategy (e.g., brand partnerships, platform incentives, direct follower support). As demonstrated in the industry debate at the recent Advertising Research Foundation conference (ARF 2025), such classifications - though descriptively useful - may capture who influencers are, but not *what they do* to exert their influence. Are they primarily focused on self-promotion (“look at me!”) or content promotion (“look at this!”)? Practitioners recognize this distinction as a way to better frame influence and, in particular, to understand how the match between the influencer, the brand, and the sponsored content generates performance. As Google’s Creative Lead (Kat Gates 2025) put it at the ARF conference: *“while there’s a lot of overlap between the two, it’s their primary focus that sets them apart. Creators focus on producing authentic content that entertains or educates, whereas influencers focus on building a personal brand.”*

Academic literature is rich in classifications of influential personalities, drawing on variables such as follower count (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020), source of fame (Hess, Dodds, and Rahman 2022; Piehler et al. 2022; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020), or monetization strategy (Cheng, de Regt, and Young 2024; Mei and Genet 2024). However, it uses the terms ‘influencers’ and ‘content creators’ inconsistently: some papers treat them interchangeably (Zhang and Zhang 2024), others as distinct categories (Cunningham and Craig 2021; Prandelli, Wang, and Weijo 2024), and still others frame one as a subset of the other, without a systematic effort to clearly define these typologies (Peres et al. 2024; Tafesse and Dayan 2023). As a result, influencer theory often explains little about why similar influencers generate different forms of value.

For instance, Khaby Lame (@khaby00 on Instagram) and Chiara Ferragni (@chiaraferragni on Instagram) are both mega-influencers who gained prominence through their online activity rather than through pre-existing fame, and who primarily monetize their influence through brand collaborations. According to the state-of-the-art literature, they should therefore fall into the same structural category. Yet, their roles within the influencer ecosystem diverge, as visualized in Figure 1. Khaby Lame primarily produces *content-focused* posts, relying on humorous and entertaining sketches with minimal personal disclosure. In contrast, Chiara Ferragni shares *self-focused* content, offering glimpses into her personal life, appearance, and opinions. While both entertain their audiences, their content strategies may shape very different audience perceptions and engagement dynamics, and in fact they are diversely engaged by brands.

Figure 1: Khaby Lama (@khaby00) and Chiara Ferragni (@chiaraFerragni) profiles on Instagram in November 2025.



In the absence of better classification methods, brands distinguish among these influencers and study how audiences perceive them “*by 'intuition', or rather through a qualitative analysis of the talent's profile*” (Head of Strategy, influencer marketing agency). In practice, this involves manually scrolling through (most of) their posts, an activity for which influencer agencies employ entire teams. However, this qualitative approach is labor-intensive, difficult to scale and heuristic rather than conceptual.

In order to better capture such differences, both the business press and the academic literature have highlighted that recipients’ *perceptions of influencers’ profiles*, including parasocial relations and perceived competence, are better suited to capturing the nature of influence than mere follower or engagement numbers (Ashraf, Hameed, and Saeed 2023; McMullan, Laurell, and Pitt 2022; The Wall Street Journal 2024). Still, these observation-based or survey-based approaches are tough to validate and are therefore poorly suited to providing the systematic, practical, and scalable approach to influencer classification.

To address this gap, we reconceptualize influencer identity as the outcome of communicative orientation, rather than as a fixed structural attribute. Building on prior work that separately examines influencer content creation (e.g., Cheung et al. 2022; Syrdal et al.

2023) and influencer self-presentation (e.g., Duffek et al. 2025; Lee and Johnson 2022), we integrate these streams by introducing two foundational dimensions of influencer communication: *content focus*<sup>1</sup> and *self focus*<sup>2</sup>.

We argue that the relative salience of these two foci organizes influencer communication along a continuum, giving rise to three distinct influencer types: (i) *content creators*, who prioritize their creations over self-presentation, (ii) *self-journalers*, whose narratives center on the self, and (iii) *self-creators*, who blend elements of both approaches. We then propose a content-based approach to operationalize this classification, wherein influencers are categorized based on the relative presence of self-focused versus content-focused posts, and validate it across seven studies. Study 1 establishes our perceptual measures of influencer self focus and content focus, demonstrating that users can reliably distinguish self-journalers from content creators when presented in their archetypal forms (profiles featuring only self-focused posts versus only content-focused posts). Studies 2A-2E then systematically vary the mix of post types (from 90% down to 50%) to uncover thresholds in user perceptions of influencer profiles as self-journalers (mostly self-focused), self-creators (balanced), and content creators (mostly content-focused). Finally, Study 3 automates the validated content-based classification to 100 leading influencers across diverse domains (beauty and personal care, fashion, food and beverage, technology, and travel) for scalability and generalizability.

Our work has three key contributions. First, we advance a performative view of influencer identity, showing that influence is shaped by repeated communicative choices rather than by static attributes. Second, we integrate fragmented literatures on creativity, self-disclosure, and parasocial interaction by positioning them as manifestations of underlying

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<sup>1</sup> Content focus captures the extent to which an influencer's communication emphasizes the content being produced (ideas, information, entertainment).

<sup>2</sup> Self focus captures the extent to which an influencer's communication emphasizes their own life, appearance, opinions, or identity.

communication focus rather than as independent explanatory variables. Third, we provide a behavior-based foundation for distinguishing influencer types, resolving a longstanding definitional ambiguity in the creator economy.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first review definitions of influencers, highlighting the blurred boundaries with content creators, and critically examine existing influencer classifications in the literature. We then establish the theoretical foundation for our content focus and self focus constructs, proposing formal definitions for these constructs and for the three novel influencer typologies: self-journalers, content creators, and self-creators. Next, we detail our content-based approach to operationalize this classification and present our seven empirical studies, including methodology and findings for each. We demonstrate how market-relevant metrics differ by influencer type. We conclude by discussing the theoretical, managerial, influencer and policy making implications of our work and outline directions for future research.

### **Existing Classifications of Influencers**

The rise of social media platforms has produced a fragmented ecosystem of influential online actors (Tafesse and Dayan 2023). This heterogeneity has fueled persistent confusion in the literature about how to distinguish influencers, celebrities, and content creators (Table 1).

First, *source of fame* separates influencers from celebrities (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Influencers gain visibility natively through social media (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021), typically without institutional credentials (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). Celebrities, by contrast, emerge from recognized fields such as entertainment or sport (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). While this distinction was once clear-cut in the early stages of social media, it has become increasingly blurred: celebrities increasingly behave like influencers (Campbell and Farrell 2020), as exemplified by Kylie

Jenner's evolution from reality-TV personality to "world's most valuable Instagram influencer" (IAB UK 2018), and some influencers transition into celebrity status via '*influencer celebrification*' (Brooks, Drenten, and Piskorski 2021). As a result, academics and practitioners tend to group them together as influencers, emphasizing their shared persuasive capacity and intent (Pradhan, Kishore, and Gokhale 2023).

Influencers have been classified along multiple dimensions. The most common is follower count (nano-, micro-, macro-, and mega- categories), widely used but weakly informative about who influencers are, how they operate and how they exert their influence (Haenlein et al. 2020; Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip 2014). Others introduced taxonomies on the platform used (e.g., 'TikTokers', 'YouTubers', or 'Instagrammers'; Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020; Ooi et al. 2023), reflecting some differences in content format (Tafesse and Wood 2022). A third cluster classifies influencers by thematic domain, using labels such as 'fashion influencers' (e.g., Jegham and Bouzaabia 2022), 'food influencers' (e.g., Sokolova, Vessal, and Perez 2024) or 'travel influencers' (Manthiou, Ulrich, and Kuppelwieser 2024), though industry categories lack standardization.

Some recent works differentiate influencers by monetization strategy (Cheng, de Regt, and Young 2024; Mei and Genet 2024), in resonance with the growing body of literature about the influencer-content creator dichotomy. In this stream, 'content creators' are proffered as social media personalities who focus on producing original content and monetize through direct audience support, while 'influencers' rely more on brand partnerships (Cunningham and Craig 2021; Prandelli, Wang, and Weijo 2024). If such a classification intuitively moves in a sharper classification of "how" influence is exerted, academia is still lacking a shared definition, and as a result the dichotomy is still largely porous and inconsistent: some authors label the two categories interchangeably (Zhang and

Zhang 2024); others define influencers as a subtype within the broader creator economy (Peres et al. 2024; Tafesse and Dayan 2023); still others invert the hierarchy, framing content creators as a subset of influencers with greater creative autonomy (Kapitan et al. 2022). In an attempt to address the “how” question, the informer-entertainer dichotomy directly addresses content type (Ren et al. 2023). However, almost all influencers aim to both inform and entertain, as we learned from our interviews (see Web Appendix A for interviews excerpts).

The classifications presented thus far, combined with the unclear meaning and use of the label ‘content creator’, underscore the need for a novel framework that offers deeper insight into influencer identity, content strategy, and value creation, and directly addresses a central question in the current industry debate: *how can we clearly define and distinguish content creators from other types of influencers?*

Table 1: Overview of Existing Classifications of Influencers.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Reference(s)</b>
Follower Size	Nano- (<10k followers) Micro- (between 10k and 100k followers) Macro- (between 100k and 1 M followers) Mega- Influencers (> 1M followers)	Campbell and Farrell (2020); Haenlein et al. (2020)
Source of Fame / Origin	Native influencers (born on social media) Traditional celebrities (originating offline but active on social media)	Piehler et al. (2022); Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget (2020); Hess, Dodds, and Rahman (2022)
Domain / Industry	e.g., Food Influencer (mainly focused on the food industry) Fashion Influencer (mainly focused on the fashion industry) Travel Influencer (mainly focused on travel)	Sokolova, Vessal, and Perez (2024); Jegham and Bouzaabia (2022); Manthiou, Ulrich, and Kuppelwieser (2024)
Platform	e.g., TikTokers (primarily or exclusively active on TikTok) YouTubers (primarily or exclusively on YouTube) Instagrammers (primarily or exclusively on Instagram)	Choi, Shim, and Jeon (2024); Corrêa et al. (2020); Ooi et al. (2023)
Monetization Strategy	e.g., Platform-based monetization (e.g., leveraging paid viewership) Brand-based collaborations (e.g., producing sponsored content) Direct-to-follower revenue (e.g., directly transacting with their followers)	Cheng et al. (2024); Mei and Genet (2024)
Content Purpose	Informers (aim to inform) Entertainers (aim to entertain)	Ren et al. (2023)

### **A Novel Classification of Influencers**

The influencer-creator dichotomy has contributed to the debate on identity and content analysis. One stream of literature has studied influencers' content creation – what Doosti, Lee, and Tan (2025) recently described as the ‘content-based approach’ (e.g., Cheung et al. 2022; Syrdal et al. 2023). Another examines the influencer's persona and

their self-presentation (e.g., Duffek et al. 2025; Lee and Johnson 2022). These parallel developments (investigating either influencers' creative works or their persona) together with the practitioner debate that contrasts creators who "*make content for the sake of making content*" with influencers who create mainly to grow their personal brand (Influencer Marketing Hub 2024a), suggest that influencer profiles vary along a fundamental dimension: their communication focus. While some influencers emphasize content creation (prioritizing topics, expertise, or artistic output, and thus serving as the focal object of the first research stream), others emphasize self-promotion, foregrounding their lifestyle, identity, and personal narratives. We argue that these foci affect the influence exerted by social media personalities, in such a way that their combination represents a classification profile. Building on this idea, our research introduces the concepts of *content focus* and *self focus* and adopts them as central dimensions for distinguishing three types of influencers: content-creators, self-journalers and self-creators.

### ***Conceptual Definitions***

#### *Content focus*

While all influencers regularly create and share content on their profiles, some are particularly invested in crafting original material through their skills and creativity, producing educational, entertaining, or informational outputs for their audiences (Peres et al. 2024). In such cases, the post's content can become the main reason for audience engagement. Syrdal and Briggs (2018), for example, argue that the focal object of social media engagement may be the content itself, as individuals may choose to consume it even when they do not feel "connected" to the influencer, for instance when the information fulfils their utilitarian needs.

Focusing on the role of influencer content, prior research has highlighted the importance of creativity, originality, and quality in shaping consumers' perceptions of

influencers (Chan, Hung, and Tse 2023; Cheung et al. 2022; Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2022; Leung et al. 2022). Creative content has been found to prompt users to follow and emulate influencers and to increase their intention to interact with the content they share (Cheung et al. 2022). Similarly, perceived originality is a key factor leading an influencer to be perceived as an opinion leader (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020).

While these concepts can capture the influencer's ability to create novel and appealing posts, they do not address the influencer's underlying orientation toward content creation. In other words, existing constructs tell us how creative or original the content appears, but not how much the influencer's overall communication is centered on the content itself rather than on their own self-presentation. To address this conceptual gap, we define *content focus* as the extent to which an influencer's communication emphasizes their creations, ideas, pieces of information, or forms of entertainment. When content focus is high, the influencer's role is hence primarily to present or explain the content, rather than showcase their own persona.

### *Self focus*

Among influencers' motivations to publish, there is not only the use of social media as a creative outlet, but also its use as a means to journal their day-to-day lives and connect with others (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020). This is reflected in the literature, which, in parallel to the stream centered on content creation, has examined influencer self-presentation. Such self-presentation can take different forms, including circulating selfies (digital self-portraits) that highlight their appearance (Gannon and Prothero 2016) or sharing personal stories and information about their daily lives (Lee and Johnson 2022). Popular in the influencer marketing literature is the concept of self-disclosure, defined as the act of revealing personal information to others, such as aspects of one's private life or personal opinions (Jourard 1971). Influencers' self-disclosure has

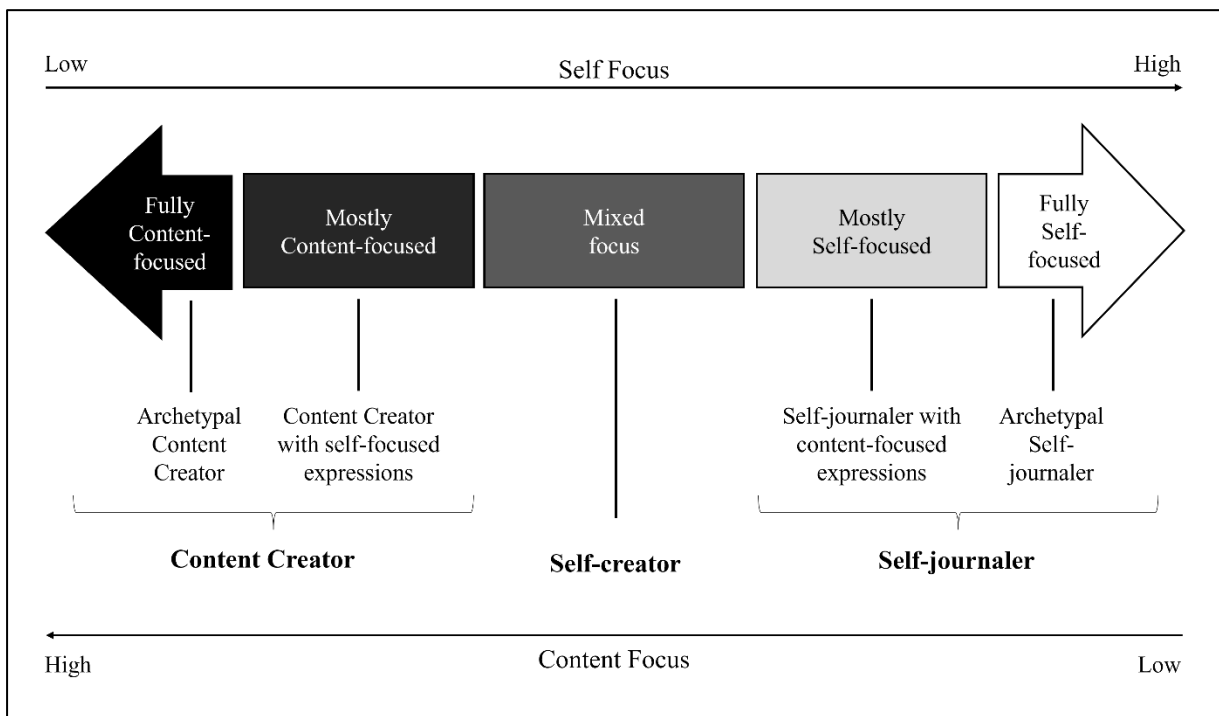
been shown to enhance followers' commitment and parasocial relationships with the influencer, that is, the illusion of a one-sided yet quasi-personal relationship (Agnihotri et al. 2023; Aw et al. 2023; Leite and Baptista 2022; Wang and Hu 2022). Moreover, self-disclosure positively affects perceptions of familiarity, which in turn foster followers' feelings of intimacy toward the influencer (Zhang and Mac 2023).

While self-disclosure measures the breadth and depth of personal information revealed by the influencer, it does not capture the extent to which their overall communication is centered on self-presentation beyond the act of sharing personal details. We therefore conceptualize *self focus* as the extent to which an influencer's communication emphasizes their own life, appearance, opinions, or personal identity. When self focus is high, the influencer becomes the main subject of the message, and the content primarily serves as a vehicle for showcasing and performing their persona, rather than for conveying independent informational or entertainment value.

#### *Content creators, self-journalers and self-creators*

By applying the concepts of content focus and self focus, influencers can be positioned along a continuum (see Figure 2). At one end are fully content-focused influencers (high content focus, minimal self focus), while at the other end are fully self-focused influencers (high self focus, minimal content focus). Along this continuum, influencers at the extremes display a clearly predominant orientation toward either content or self, whereas those positioned toward the center exhibit a more balanced communication style. Building on this framework, we distinguish three distinct types of influencers: content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators.

Figure 2: The influencer Continuum Scale.



A *content creator* is defined as an influencer whose communication is predominantly content-focused. Content creators are hence more likely to prioritize the quality and relevance of the material they share, positioning their personal identity as secondary to the content itself. This content-centric approach aligns with interest-driven and information-seeking followership (Yang and Ha 2021), where audiences engage primarily because of the perceived value, relevance, or creativity of what is shared. Consequently, content creators are likely to establish communities organized around shared interests (such as a topic, craft, game, or artistic style) rather than around their personal lives (Peres et al. 2024).

A *self-journaler* is instead defined as an influencer whose communication is predominantly self-focused. For self-journalers, the self serves as the central subject or point of interest in the content they post: their daily routines, emotions, relationships, and opinions constitute the core of their narrative. While they may include informational or

entertaining elements, their high self focus means that these are typically woven into an ongoing personal storyline.

The use of “predominantly” in these definitions acknowledges that both content creators and self-journalers may occasionally incorporate elements of the opposing focus in their communication. Indeed, while in their archetypal forms, content creators would be fully content-focused and self-journalers would be fully self-focused, influencers may display a dominant rather than exclusive orientation.

Finally, since a continuum framework inherently implies a middle ground, we define *self-creators* as influencers whose communication reflects a balanced combination of content focus and self focus.

### ***Operational Definitions***

To make this classification practical, we develop a content-based approach; an operationalization that uses influencers' public posting histories to position them along the continuum and thereby classify them as content creators, self-creators, or self-journalers. This approach builds on the premise that influencers' communication focus should be directly observable in the nature of their posts<sup>3</sup>. Specifically, we expect self-journalers to share predominantly *self-focused posts*, content creators to share predominantly *content-focused posts*, and self-creators to maintain a more balanced distribution between the two. Implementing this classification requires, first, distinguishing between content-focused versus self-focused posts and, second, specifying what “predominantly” means for the first two types and, consequently, what qualifies as “balanced” in the definition of self-creators.

To validate this content-based approach, we complement it with the development of influencer content focus and self focus scales, to directly measure users' perceptions of

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<sup>3</sup> We define *content-focused posts* as those emphasizing a creation, idea, information, or form of entertainment (e.g., tutorials, artistic works, comedy sketches). In contrast, *self-focused posts* center on the influencer's life, appearance, opinions, or identity (e.g., selfies, personal narratives, reflections).

influencers. We then assess the validity of both measures by testing their indicator and internal consistency reliability, as well as their convergent, discriminant, and nomological validity with respect to established constructs in the influencer literature – namely, influencer *creativity* and *self-disclosure*.

### **Overview of Studies**

To achieve our goals and validate the content-based approach to our classification, we conduct seven studies. Study 1 establishes and validates our perceptual measures of influencer self focus and content focus, examining whether sharing self-focused or content-focused posts shapes users' perceptions of influencers at the extremes of the continuum (i.e., profiles with 100% self-focused posts versus 100% content-focused posts). Studies 2A-2E then manipulate the percentage of predominance of content-focused (self-focused) posts across 90%, 80%, 70%, 60%, and 50% to identify the threshold at which users' perceptions shift from perceiving influencers as content creators (self-journalers) to self-creators. Finally, Study 3 applies our validated content-based classification to real-world influencer profiles, categorizing the 100 most-followed influencers on Instagram across five prominent domains (i.e., beauty and personal care, fashion, food and beverage, technology, and travel). Below, we detail the methodology and findings for each study.

#### ***Studies 1 and 2A-2E: Validation of Content-based Approach with Digital In-Context Experiments***

To manipulate complete feed compositions and create an experience that more closely resembles how users naturally encounter content on social media, Studies 1 and 2A-2E adopt the Digital In-Context Experiment (DICE) methodology, a recently introduced experimental paradigm that enables researchers to study entire social media feeds by presenting posts within scrollable feeds (Roggenkamp, Boegershausen, and Hildebrand 2025). Participants

were instructed to imagine browsing a social media feed and encountering an influencer's profile. They then viewed a simulated feed displaying ten posts by an influencer, and upon reaching the end of the feed, they could proceed to the subsequent part of the experiment on Qualtrics, where we assessed their perceptions of the influencer self focus and content focus, followed by measures to establish construct validity and a final section for demographics.

To enhance external validity, we decided to use real posts from an actual influencer as stimuli. Specifically, the influencer displayed across all six experiments was Susi Vidal (@susividal on Instagram), an influencer from the food domain, and the posts featured in the experiments were recreated from her actual Instagram content. We hired workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk to code her posts as either self-focused or content-focused, ensuring that each post was coded by at least three expert workers. To ensure that they fully understood the coding procedures, we provided them with the definitions of self-focused post and content-focused post, along with several examples of both types of content.

We achieved full agreement among coders on the binary classification of the posts and retained 20 posts as stimuli for our studies (10 content-focused posts and 10 self-focused posts). We then used different combinations of these posts to recreate the feeds for the six experiments, keeping everything constant, including the influencer, while manipulating the number of posts with content focus vs self focus<sup>4</sup>.

We planned and executed several techniques to avoid confounds. In each study, we randomized the order in which posts were displayed in the feed. To avoid familiarity confounds, we excluded the (27) participants who claimed to know and/or follow this influencer (4 in Study 1; 5, 6, 7, 2, and 3 in Studies 2A–2E, respectively). As planned, we

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<sup>4</sup> Because DICE currently does not support videos, video posts were transformed into static images by extracting the thumbnail (i.e., the image that appears as a cover before opening content), while image posts and captions were copied from the original posts.

also excluded the (26) participants who did not pass attention checks (5 in Study 1; 1, 6, 9, 1, and 4 in Studies 2A–2E, respectively).

### ***Study 1: Validation of Influencer Self Focus and Content Focus Measures***

In Study 1, we develop and validate the measures of our core theoretical constructs – influencer self focus and content focus – while testing whether users can reliably distinguish between content creators and self-journalers when presented in their archetypal forms (fully content-focused and fully self-focused).

#### ***Method***

Two hundred Prolific workers (44% male, 55% female, 1% third gender; between 19-50 years) participated in a between-subjects experiment in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: viewing an influencer profile composed entirely of self-focused posts (100% self-focused condition) or viewing a profile composed entirely of content-focused posts (100% content-focused condition).

We developed a three-item scale to capture perceptions of influencer self focus: “The influencer persona (e.g., their personal life, appearance, or opinions) is the main focus of the influencer's posts,” “The influencer acts as the central focus of the posts,” and “The main purpose of the posts is showcasing the individual who created or shared them.” In parallel, we developed a three-item scale to measure perceptions of influencer content focus: “The influencer content (e.g., an idea, creation, tutorial, recipe) is the main focus of the influencer's posts,” “The influencer acts as a 'vehicle' to illustrate or deliver the content,” and “The main purpose of the posts is sharing informational, artistic, or entertaining content.” All items were measured on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the scales (Gerbing and Anderson 1988; Churchill 1979) in terms of indicator reliability (factor loadings), internal consistency

reliability (Cronbach's alpha,  $\rho_{oc}$ ), convergent validity (average variance extracted), and discriminant validity. To assess the constructs' discriminant and nomological validity, the CFA also included two additional constructs expected to correlate with self focus and content focus, namely perceptions of the influencer's self-disclosure and creativity. Including these established constructs allowed us to assess both discriminant validity (ensuring our new measures capture distinct concepts) and nomological validity (confirming theoretically expected relationships). All measurement items were adapted from prior studies, with the four items measuring influencer creativity adapted from Cheung et al. (2022) and the three items measuring influencer self-disclosure adapted from Chung and Cho (2017). Based on our conceptualization, we predict a positive association of self focus with self-disclosure, and of content focus with creativity. For discriminant validity, as suggested by Voorhees et al. (2016), we applied two complementary criteria: the Fornell-Larcker criterion, verifying that the square root of each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds its correlations with other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981), and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) of correlations, using the conservative threshold of .85.

### *Results*

The CFA demonstrated good model fit to the data [ $\chi^2 = 139.55$ ,  $df = 59$ ,  $CFI = .95$ ,  $TLI = .93$ ,  $RMSEA = .08$ ,  $SRMR = .06$ ], with all factor loadings statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) and exceeding the recommended threshold of .50 (see Web Appendix B for the adopted measurement scales and factor loadings). Both self focus ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $\rho_{oc} = .90$ ,  $AVE = .75$ ) and content focus ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $\rho_{oc} = .85$ ,  $AVE = .66$ ) exhibited good internal consistency and convergent validity, with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values well above the .70 threshold, and AVE values exceeding the .50 benchmark (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981; Nunnally 1978). Following the Fornell-Larcker criterion (1981), we confirmed that the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with

all other constructs (see Table 2), indicating that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs. Moreover, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of .85, providing additional strong evidence of discriminant validity (see Table 3).

Table 2: Internal Consistency, Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity.

Variables	$\alpha$	$\rho_{hc}$	AVE	Self Focus	Content Focus	Self-disclosure	Creativity
Self Focus	.89	.90	.75	<b>.86</b>			
Content Focus	.85	.85	.66	-.75	<b>.81</b>		
Self-disclosure	.79	.80	.57	.53	-.23	<b>.75</b>	
Creativity	.87	.87	.63	-.06	.33	.27	<b>.79</b>

Note: Diagonal elements (in bold) represent the square root of AVE.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of Correlations.

Variables	Self Focus	Content Focus	Self-disclosure
Self Focus			
Content Focus	.76		
Self-disclosure	.51	.24	
Creativity	.07	.31	.31

To examine the nomological validity of the proposed constructs and conduct subsequent analyses, we extracted factor scores for the latent constructs from the measurement model using the Bartlett method (Brown 2015). Consistent with our conceptualization, self focus correlated positively with influencer self-disclosure ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ), while content focus correlated positively with influencer creativity ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ) and negatively with influencer self-disclosure ( $r = -.21, p < .001$ ), suggesting that emphasis on subject matter is associated with higher perceived creativity and less personal revelation. Importantly, self focus and content focus demonstrated a strong negative correlation ( $r = -.68, p < .001$ ), confirming that, although they are distinct constructs, they move in opposite directions along the influencer continuum.

Moving to the differences between our two conditions (100% content-focused versus 100% self-focused), a one-way ANOVA revealed that participants perceived significantly higher levels of self focus when viewing the influencer with 100% self-focused posts ( $M_{100\%self-focused} = .91, SD = .59$ ) compared to the influencer with 100% content-focused posts ( $M_{100\%content-focused} = -.93, SD = .76$ ),  $F(1,198) = 362.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .65$ . Conversely, participants perceived significantly higher content focus when viewing the influencer with 100% content-focused posts ( $M_{100\%content-focused} = .71, SD = .55$ ) compared to the influencer with 100% self-focused posts ( $M_{100\%self-focused} = -.70, SD = .82$ ),  $F(1,198) = 203.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .51$ , supporting the idea that that perceptions of influencer self focus and content focus are shaped by exposure to self-focused posts or content-focused posts.

### ***Studies 2A-2E: Identifying the Perceptual Threshold for Influencer Classification***

In Studies 2A-2E, we manipulate the percentage of self-focused versus content-focused posts to identify the threshold at which users' perceptions shift from categorizing an influencer as a content creator or self-journaler to categorizing them as a self-creator.

#### ***Method***

A total of 778 Prolific workers (48.7% male, 50.6% female, 0.7% third gender; between 19-50 years) participated across five between-subjects experiments (Study 2A:  $N = 179$ ; Study 2B:  $N = 170$ ; Study 2C:  $N = 164$ ; Study 2D:  $N = 175$ ; Study 2E:  $N = 90$ ) for payment. Studies 2A through 2D manipulated the composition of the influencer's profile by varying the predominance of content-focused versus self-focused posts: 90%-10% (Study 2A), 80%-20% (Study 2B), 70%-30% (Study 2C), and 60%-40% (Study 2D). Within each of these studies, participants were randomly assigned to view either a profile dominated by content-focused posts (content creator condition) or a profile dominated by self-focused posts (self-journaler condition). Study 2E presented a balanced profile containing equal proportions of both post types (50%-50%) to test whether participants would perceive similar levels of

self focus and content focus when neither type dominated. Participants evaluated the influencer using the self focus and content focus measures validated in Study 1.<sup>5</sup>

### *Results*

One-way ANOVAs revealed systematic patterns in how post composition shaped influencer perceptions. For self focus, significant differences between conditions emerged at 90%, 80%, and 70% predominance levels, with participants in the self-journaler condition (majority self-focused posts) perceiving significantly higher self focus than those in the content creator condition (majority content-focused posts). However, this difference disappeared at the 60% predominance level ( $p = .73$ ). For content focus, significant differences between conditions persisted across all predominance levels tested, including 60% (see Table 4), supporting the idea that post composition shapes user perceptions of influencers.

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<sup>5</sup> Reliability and validity statistics for the self focus and content focus measures across Studies 2A-2E are reported in Web Appendix C.

Table 4: ANOVA Results for Studies 2A-2D.

Study	Condition Content-focused posts (%) - Self-focused posts (%)	N	Self Focus					Content Focus				
			M	SD	F	p	$\eta^2$	M	SD	F	p	$\eta^2$
2A	10% - 90%	92	-.70	.83	162.49	< .001	.48	-.64	.84	147.98	< .001	.46
	90% - 10%	87	.67	.59				.68	.57			
2B	20% - 80%	82	.48	.80	67.10	< .001	.29	-.30	.66	40.71	< .001	.20
	80% - 20%	88	-.45	.69				.28	.51			
2C	30% - 70%	86	.34	.88	28.82	< .001	.15	-.22	.61	28.04	< .001	.15
	70% - 30%	78	-.37	.80				.24	.47			
2D	40% - 60%	87	.02	.77	.12	.73	.001	-.17	.70	10.63	.001	.06
	60% - 40%	88	-.02	.80				.17	.68			

*Note:* Factor scores are reported for self focus and content focus.

To determine the threshold at which influencers are perceived as distinct typologies, we further conducted paired-samples t-tests comparing perceptions of self focus and content focus within each experimental condition.

When profiles contained 70% or more content-focused posts (i.e., 70%-30%, 80%-20%, 90%-10%, and 100%-0% distributions), participants perceived significantly higher content focus than self focus (all p values < .001). Conversely, when profiles contained 70% or more self-focused posts (i.e., 30%-70%, 20%-80%, 10%-90%, and 0%-100% distributions), participants perceived significantly higher self focus than content focus (all p values < .001). Notably, when post distributions were more balanced, at 60%-40%, 40%-60%, or 50%-50%, no significant differences emerged between self focus and content focus perceptions (p values > .10), suggesting these profiles were not clearly categorized as either type (see Table 5).

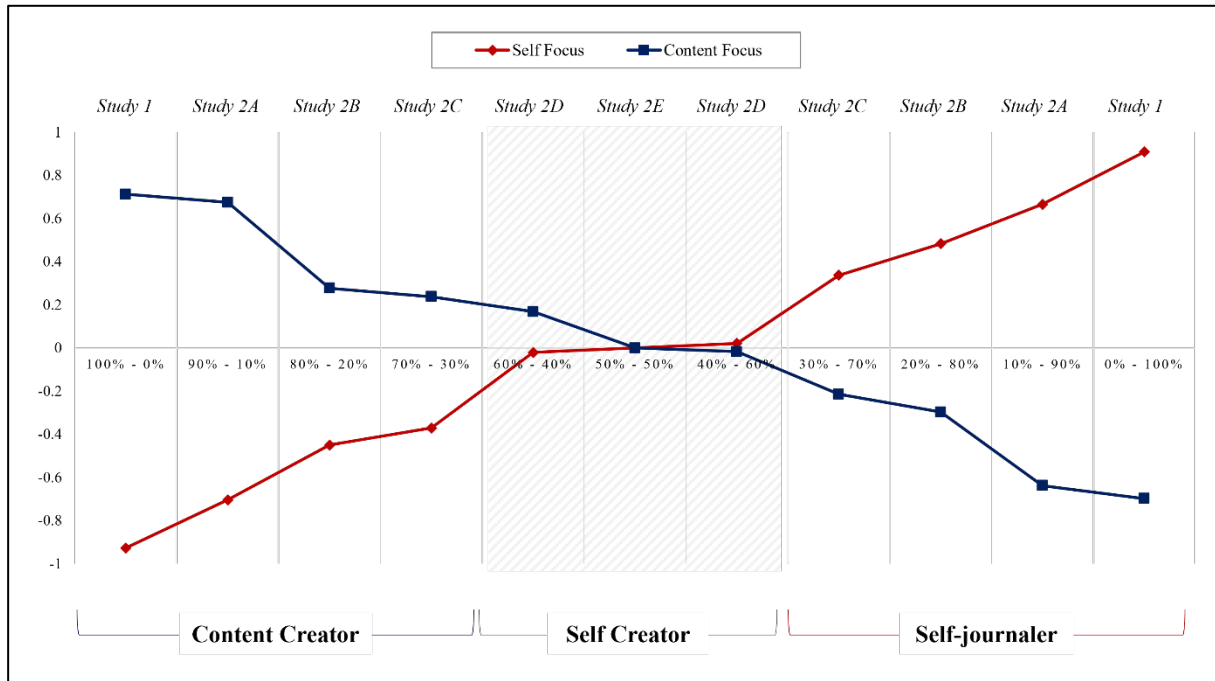
Overall, these findings support *70% as the cutoff* for distinguishing influencer typologies based on their posting history. Profiles in which at least 70% of posts are of one type are perceived by users as predominantly content-focused (content creators) or self-focused (self-journalers), whereas profiles with more balanced compositions (40%-60% of either type) constitute the hybrid archetype of self-creators (see Figure 3 for perceptions of self focus and content focus across all post compositions tested in Studies 1 and 2A-2E).

Table 5: Paired t-tests Results for Studies 1 and 2A-2E.

Content-focused posts (%) – Self-focused posts (%)	Study	N	Self Focus		Content Focus		Difference (Content Focus - Self Focus)	t	p	dz
			M	SD	M	SD				
100% - 0%	1	98	-.93	.76	.71	.55	1.64	14.87	< .001	1.49
90% - 10%	2A	87	-.70	.83	.68	.57	1.38	11.27	< .001	1.21
80% - 20%	2B	88	-.45	.69	.28	.51	.73	6.59	< .001	.70
70% - 30%	2C	78	-.37	.80	.24	.47	.61	5.22	< .001	.59
60% - 40%	2D	88	-.02	.80	.19	.68	.19	1.54	.13	.16
50% - 50%	2E		.00	.75	.00	.49	.00	.00	1.00	.00
40% - 60%	2D	87	.02	.77	-.02	.70	-.19	-1.48	.14	-.16
30% - 70%	2C	86	.34	.88	-.22	.61	-.55	-4.27	< .001	-.46
20% - 80%	2B	82	.48	.80	-.30	.80	-.78	-6.07	< .001	-.67
10% - 90%	2A	92	.67	.59	-.64	.84	-1.30	-9.99	< .001	-1.04
0% - 100%	1	101	.91	.59	-.70	.82	-1.61	-14.79	< .001	-1.47

*Notes:* Factor scores are reported for self focus and content focus. Positive difference scores indicate content focus > self focus; negative difference scores indicate self focus > content focus.

Figure 3: Perceptual Threshold for Influencer Classification Based on Post Composition.



Notes: The figure illustrates the relationship between post composition (percentage of content-focused versus self-focused posts) and users' perceptions of influencer type. The 70% threshold marks the boundary at which influencers are perceived as content creators ( $\geq 70\%$  content-focused posts), self-journalers ( $\geq 70\%$  self-focused posts), or self-creators (40-60% of either post type). The shaded region represents the perceptual ambiguity zone where influencers are categorized as self-creators.

### ***Study 3: Applying the Classification to Leading Influencers Across Different Domains***

In Study 3, we apply our validated content-based classification to leading influencer profiles on Instagram, to highlight its practical value while describing how content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators are distributed across diverse domains.

#### ***Method***

We identified the most-followed influencers across five key domains in influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub 2024b): (1) beauty and personal care, (2) food and beverage, (3) fashion, (4) travel and (5) technology. Specifically, from each category, we selected 20 top-followed influencers (see Web Appendix D-H for the complete list).

Following Ren et al. (2023), we consider a three-month period an appropriate time horizon for capturing an influencer's communication approach, as it provides sufficient data to identify consistent patterns while remaining sensitive to recent shifts in strategy or style. We therefore

collected all posts published by the selected influencers between September 1, 2024, and November 30, 2024, gathering a total of 3,986 posts (an average of 40 posts per influencer).

As in the previous studies, we asked independent coders<sup>6</sup> to classify each post as either self-focused or content-focused based on clear definitions and examples, in line with prior literature (e.g., Chakraborty, Kim, and Sudhir 2022; Li and Xie 2020). To characterize these three typologies along market-relevant dimensions, we then retrieved profile-level metrics from an influencer marketing platform that tracks influencers' average content performance, past brand collaborations, and audience demographics and distribution (see Web Appendix I for the list and description of the considered variables). To offer preliminary evidence on how the three influencer types differ, we ran a series of one-way ANOVAs with influencer type (self-journaler, content creator, self-creator) as a between-subjects factor, estimated separately for each performance and audience metric.

### *Results*

The classification of posts achieved high inter-coder agreement (average = 92.02%). The distribution of influencer types varied across the selected domains, suggesting domain-specific patterns in communication strategies. Indeed, in the *beauty and personal care domain*, self-journalers predominated (70%), followed by self-creators (20%) and content creators (10%). Content creators in this domain focus primarily on providing informative value through tutorials and product reviews, educating audiences on makeup techniques or skincare routines. In contrast, self-journalers emphasize showcasing their appearance, personal aesthetics, and lifestyle, while self-creators blend elements of both approaches (see Figure 4; note that a simple inspection of the three influencers' thumbnails does not reveal a

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<sup>6</sup> Posts were classified by 1,110 independent MTurk coders, with at least three per post and fair compensation. After classification, we calculated each influencer's share of content- and self-focused posts and categorized influencers into the three types using the identified thresholds.

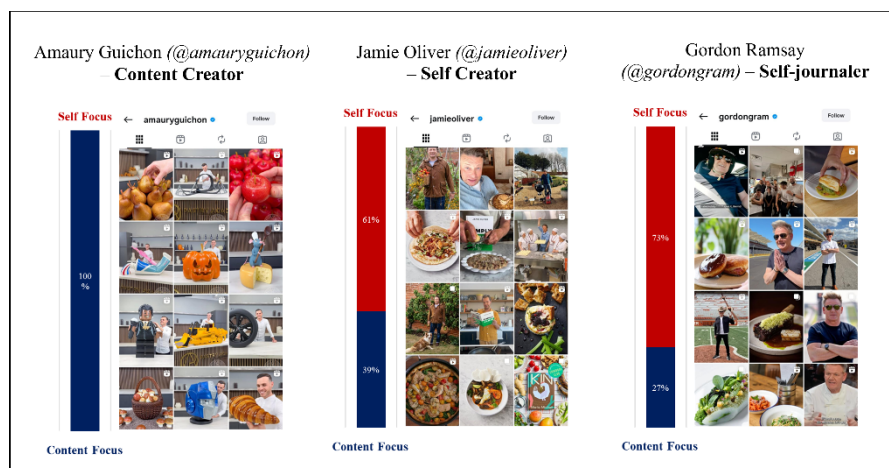
strong difference in their posting style, while our analysis allows us to classify their differences).

Figure 4: Examples of the Three Influencer Types in the Beauty and Personal Care Domain.



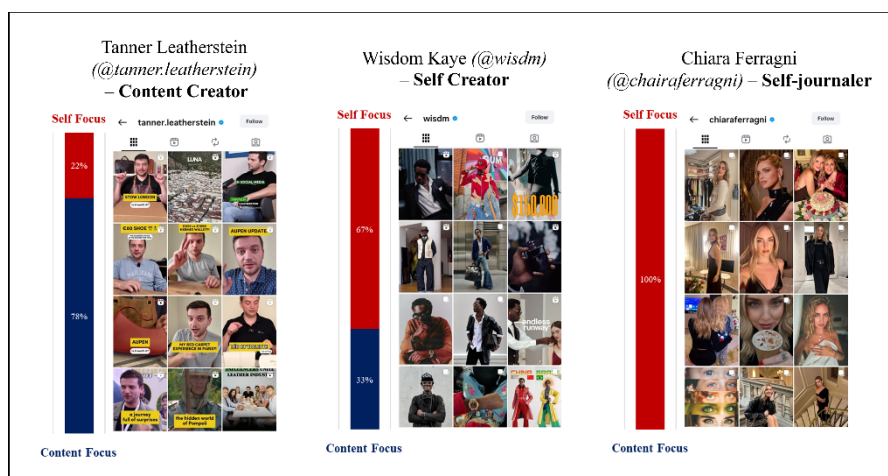
The *food and beverage* domain exhibited a higher concentration of content creators (60%), with 15% self-journalers, and 25% self-creators. In this domain, content creators predominantly share recipe videos and culinary techniques, centering their posts on the food itself. Self-journalers, conversely, tend to showcase personal achievements, such as cookbook launches, television appearances, or restaurant openings. Many food self-journalers are professionally trained chefs who leverage their external credentials as central elements of their social media presence. In contrast, self-creators apparently aim to create personal brands tied to cookbooks, shows, or entrepreneurship (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Examples of the Three Influencer Types in the Food and Beverage Domain.



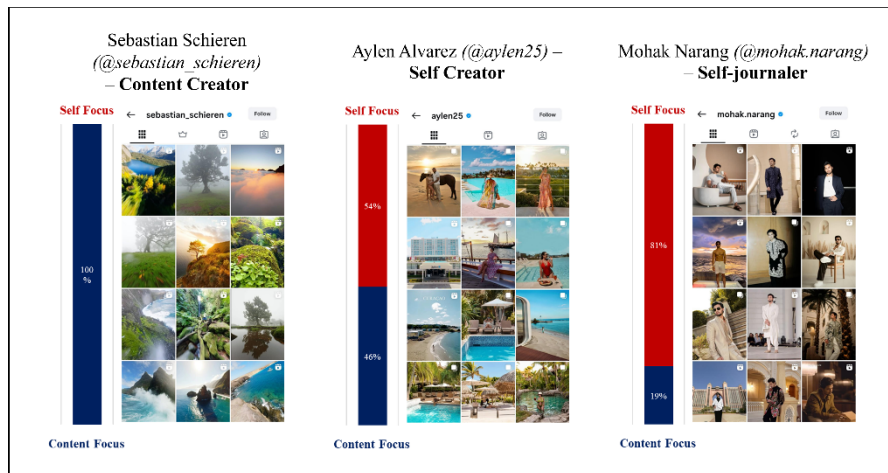
The *fashion* domain mirrored beauty and personal care in its distribution pattern, with self-journalers comprising the majority (85%), 5% self-creators, and 10% content creators. Content creators here focus on fashion trends analysis, fabric reviews, and styling education, whereas self-journalers position themselves as “models” showcasing their day-to-day outfits and personal style, often interspersed with updates about their personal lives, making their appearance and aesthetic the focal point (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Examples of the Three Influencer Types in the Fashion Domain.



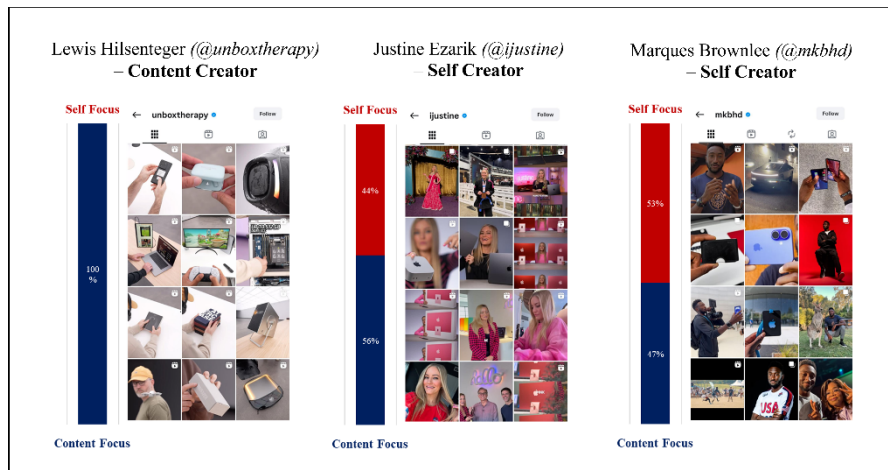
The *travel* domain demonstrated the most balanced distribution across the three types (content creators: 40%, self-journalers: 40%, self-creators: 20%). Content creators focus on showcasing landscapes and travel destinations with minimal emphasis on their personal experiences or lives, whereas self-journalers present travel locations as integral parts of their personal narratives, sharing subjective experiences and opinions that foreground their own journey. Note from the examples in Figure 7 that the influencer thumbnails provide a strong indication of the influencer type in the travel category.

Figure 7: Examples of the Three Influencer Types in the Travel Domain.



The *technology* domain presented a distinct pattern, with content creators dominating (80%) and self-creators present (20%), but notably, no self-journalers in our sample of top-followed technology influencers. This absence aligns with the informational and educational nature of technology content, where audiences primarily seek product reviews, tutorials, and technical explanations rather than personal narratives (Kim and Yoon 2023) (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Examples of Content Creators and Self-creators in the Technology Domain.



Do the influencers indicate their focus in their bios? To some extent: influencers who highlighted family roles in their bios, such as being parents or married (N = 4), were classified as self-journalers (e.g., Chiara Ferragni: “*Leone and Vittoria's mama and entrepreneur from Italy*”; Jaclyn Roxanne Torrey: “*Wife to my dream man*”; Eva Chen: “*Mom to Ren, Tao, and Riv*”) or self-creators (e.g., Jamie Oliver: “*Chef & Dad*”). In

contrast, influencers who explicitly identified themselves as ‘content creator’ – or related terms like ‘creator’ or ‘digital creator’ – in their bios (N = 28) were most often classified as content creators (N = 18), including Julia Gal (“*Luxury Travel Content Creator*”), Romina Gafur (“*Tech Creator | unboxing, hacks, productivity*”), and Caitlin Sarian (“*#1 Cybersecurity creator in 🌍*”), though some self-journalers (N = 7) and self-creators (N = 3) also used this label to describe themselves.

Overall, the distribution patterns of the three influencer typologies reveal that our content-based classification represents a distinct dimension from domain focus.

#### *How influencer market-relevant metrics differ across influencer types*

Finally, we examine whether the three influencer types differ along market-relevant dimensions such as posting activity, engagement performance, audience composition, and brand collaborations (see Table 6 for detailed results).

In terms of activity, self-journalers in our sample publish more posts than self-creators, who themselves post more frequently than content creators. Relative to audience size, content creators receive more comments and shares, both per follower and per thousand people reached, suggesting that a content focus is associated with more active engagement. This may be linked to audience composition, as content creators have the highest percentage of followers who follow fewer than 500 accounts. Followers of between 500 and 1,500 accounts tend to follow self-journalers, while self-creators have the highest share of followers who follow more than 1,500 accounts. Finally, self-journalers attract a relatively higher share of female followers.

In terms of brand collaborations, self-journalers work with brands across a broader range of industries than self-creators, and especially more than content creators. This pattern may be the reflection of a better “stretchability” of an influencer’s persona in terms of brand fit compared to the more characterized content identity of a content creator.

Finally, the estimated price range for a single sponsored post, reel, or story is highest for self-journalers, followed by self-creators, and lowest for content creators. However, when we normalize these prices by follower base, the pattern reverses: price per follower is higher for content creators. A similar pattern emerges for cost per engagement of sponsored stories, where content creators again command the highest rates. These results suggest that, while absolute prices are largely driven by the breadth of an influencer's audience, content creators are valued more highly by the market when conditional on audience size and engagement. What is remarkable to note is the fact that this higher value appears more related to consideration than to conversion, given the non-significance of the difference in click-through rates.

Across most variables, self-creators occupy an intermediate position between self-journalers and content creators, consistent with their hybrid nature.

Table 6: ANOVA Results for Influencer Type (Self-journaler vs. Content Creator vs. Self-creator) Across Performance and Audience Metrics.

Variable	Group Mean Order	Content creator		Self-creator		Self-journaler		F	p	$\eta^2$
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
<b>Influencer Characteristics</b>										
Posts Count	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	1,398.60	1,271.47	2,346.31	2,952.78	3,139.21	3,466.35	4.33	<b>.02</b>	.08
Followers Count (in thousands)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	4,083.11	3,515.87	6,307.46	5,788.01	24,651.05	70,939.68	2.20	.12	.04
<b>Influencer Engagement</b>										
Reach (in thousands)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	514.73	488.18	792.56	763.51	2,923.92	8,391.82	2.14	.12	.04
Plays (in thousands)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	1,798.84	3,399.02	1,827.39	2,028.23	2,669.86	5,041.02	.56	.58	.01
Likes (in thousands)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	64.25	140.48	94.36	124.25	179.83	433.33	1.56	.22	.03
Comments (in thousands)	Self-journaler > Content creator > Self-creator	.55	.99	.47	.50	.85	1.72	.77	.46	.02
Shares (in thousands)	Content creator > Self-journaler > Self-creator	4.65	10.12	2.43	2.75	3.60	8.98	.37	.69	.01
Clicks (in thousands)	Self-journaler > Content creator > Self-creator	.87	1.98	.86	.79	3.44	9.64	1.90	.16	.04
Reached Followers	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	12.40%	1.40%	12.20%	1.80%	11.90%	1.70%	.80	.45	.02
Likes per Follower	Self-creator > Content creator > Self-journaler	1.30%	1.50%	1.30%	1.40%	1.00%	1.10%	.53	.59	.01
Comments per Follower	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	.014%	.021%	.009%	.008%	.007%	.009%	2.42	<b>.09</b>	.05
Shares per Follower	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	.10%	.20%	.00%	.00%	.00%	.10%	9.40	<b>&lt; .001</b>	.16
Clicks per Follower	Content creator > Self-journaler > Self-creator	.10%	.30%	.00%	.00%	.00%	.00%	.71	.49	.01
Likes per Thousand Reach	Self-creator > Content creator > Self-journaler	.95	1.03	.96	.95	.76	.76	.56	.57	.01
Comments per Thousand Reach	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	2.99	<b>.06</b>	.06
Shares per Thousand Reach	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	.10	.12	.03	.03	.02	.05	10.03	<b>&lt; .001</b>	.17
Clicks per Thousand Reach	Content creator > Self-journaler > Self-creator	.04	.15	.02	.00	.02	.01	.67	.51	.01
<b>Followers Characteristics</b>										
Female Followers	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	45.90%	30.30%	55.10%	27.60%	75.10%	19.60%	13.90	<b>&lt; .001</b>	.22
Followers Aged 13-17	Self-journaler > Content creator > Self-creator	5.50%	2.10%	5.50%	3.10%	5.70%	2.80%	.08	.92	.00
Followers Aged 18-24	Content creator > Self-journaler > Self-creator	36.40%	10.10%	33.10%	11.00%	34.00%	10.30%	.82	.45	.02

Followers Aged 25-34	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	42.00%	4.10%	42.30%	5.40%	45.40%	6.90%	4.27	<b>.02</b>	.08
Followers Aged 35-44	Self-creator > Content creator > Self-journaler	11.60%	6.50%	13.60%	7.30%	10.90%	6.80%	.93	.40	.02
Followers Aged 45-64	Self-creator > Content creator > Self-journaler	4.50%	4.80%	5.60%	6.50%	4.00%	5.10%	.53	.59	.01
Followers Aged 65+	Self-creator > Content creator > Self-journaler	.10%	.10%	.10%	.20%	.00%	.10%	.63	.54	.01
Followers Reachability < 500	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	67.70%	12.40%	59.50%	9.80%	56.60%	14.70%	7.75	< <b>.01</b>	.14
Followers Reachability 500-1,000	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	16.60%	5.40%	19.50%	3.30%	22.40%	6.80%	10.43	< <b>.001</b>	.18
Followers Reachability 1,000-1,500	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	6.20%	2.70%	7.80%	2.00%	8.40%	3.30%	6.05	< <b>.01</b>	.11
Followers Reachability > 1,500	Self-creator > Self-journaler > Content creator	9.50%	4.80%	13.10%	6.30%	12.60%	6.80%	3.63	<b>.03</b>	.07
<b>Brand Collaborations</b>										
Industry Breadth of Collaborations	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	4.33	2.58	4.56	2.85	5.52	2.23	2.62	<b>.08</b>	.05
Post Cost per Engagement (\$)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	1.04	1.20	1.20	1.70	1.61	3.21	0.62	.54	.01
Reel Cost per Engagement (\$)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	1.19	1.38	1.39	1.96	1.77	3.68	0.49	.62	.01
Story Cost per Engagement (\$)	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	.19	.05	.18	.05	.16	.05	2.78	<b>.07</b>	.05
Story Cost per Click (\$)	Self-creator > Content creator > Self-journaler	9.39	3.88	9.60	3.27	8.78	3.02	.49	.61	.01
Post Price (Sponsored) (\$ Min – \$ Max)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	14.27 17.14	9.31 11.17	19.58 23.50	14.13 16.95	42.88 51.31	85.11 102.16	2.81 2.78	<b>.07</b> <b>.07</b>	.06 .06
Reel Price (Sponsored) (\$ Min – \$ Max)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	16.42 19.70	10.71 12.86	22.52 27.02	16.23 19.49	49.31 59.18	97.88 117.46	2.81 2.81	<b>.07</b> <b>.07</b>	.06 .06
Story Price (Sponsored) (\$ Min – \$ Max)	Self-journaler > Self-creator > Content creator	3.58 4.29	2.27 2.73	4.85 5.83	3.43 4.12	10.25 12-39	19.85 23.78	2.80 2.88	<b>.07</b> <b>.06</b>	.06 .06
Post Price (Sponsored) per Thousand Followers (\$ Min – \$ Max)	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	4.00 5.00	1.00 1.00	4.00 4.00	1.00 1.00	3.00 3.00	1.00 1.00	18.47 18.96	< <b>.001</b> < <b>.001</b>	.28 .28
Reel Price (Sponsored) per Thousand Followers (\$ Min – \$ Max)	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	5.00 5.00	1.00 1.00	4.00 5.00	1.00 1.00	3.00 4.00	1.00 1.00	18.53 18.63	< <b>.001</b> < <b>.001</b>	.28 .28
Story Price (Sponsored) per Thousand Followers (\$ Min – \$ Max)	Content creator > Self-creator > Self-journaler	1.00 1.00	.00 .00	1.00 1.00	.00 .00	1.00 1.00	.00 .00	18.81 18.37	< <b>.001</b> < <b>.001</b>	.28 .28

## General Discussion

### *Implications for Theory*

This research advances influencer marketing theory by reframing influencer identity as a communicative performance rather than a structural attribute. Existing classifications of follower size, domain, platform, or fame origin imply that influence resides in who the influencer is. Our findings show that influence is shaped *by how influencers communicate*.

The first implication of this argument is conceptual: we demonstrate that influencer identity is not an intrinsic characteristic but rather the result of communicative choices, thereby shifting the field toward a performative theory of influence in which the relative salience of content versus self defines the identity of the influencer as perceived by audiences. Far from being conclusive, the results on the top 100 influencers suggest that our framework may help integrate fragmented streams of literature on self-presentation, parasocial relationships, creativity, and expertise as expressions of an underlying communication continuum. For instance, mega self-journalers overperform in the breadth of their impact, as reflected in reach, plays, likes, and comments, and tend to have follower bases that follow a larger number of personalities. In contrast, mega content creators overperform in the intensity of their impact, with follower bases that are generally more selective in their followership. Self-creators emerge as a hybrid profile, characterized by larger audiences and lower engagement intensity than pure content creators.

A second contribution is the introduction of content focus and self focus as dimensions that capture the orientation of an influencer's communication strategy, rather than single psychological attributes such as self-disclosure, creativity, or authenticity. This could represent a foundational step towards understanding the different pathways through which influence is exerted.

Further, our findings address long-standing definitional inconsistencies surrounding the ‘creator’ versus ‘influencer’ distinction. By showing that creators and self-journalers can be distinguished by high content versus high self focus, we reframe the creator-influencer dichotomy as a communication strategy rather than a social category, further refining the concept by conceptualizing and empirically observing the hybrid state of the self-creator.

Finally, we establish a behavior-based norm for categorizing influencers according to their communication strategy. Our research shows that influencer types can be detected directly from posting histories and that this classification aligns with audience perceptions. This dual validation, content-based and perceptual, yields a scalable classification framework that future research can apply across platforms, time periods, and cultural contexts.

### ***Implications for Practice***

This research has important implications for all actors in the influencer marketing ecosystem, as evidenced by the positive reception from brands, agencies, and influencers (see Web Appendix L for excerpts from different stakeholders' reactions to our research results).

### ***Implications for marketers***

The results of our analysis of the top 100 influencers show that the performance accomplished by these personalities strongly depends on the self focus/content focus orientation, with relevant implications for campaign objectives. Content creators, whose communication is more content-focused, show higher levels of likes and comments, making them potentially better suited for campaigns aimed at consideration, where engagement is the primary goal. In contrast, self-journalers, with their larger number of views and reach, appear better suited for awareness campaigns, while self-creators occupy an intermediate position. For managers, this implies that influencer selection should start from the object of attention required by the marketing task, rather than from the platform, follower size, or generic engagement metrics.

A second implication concerns the strategic use of influencer portfolios. Our classification suggests that different influencer types are not substitutes but potentially *complementary assets* within a broader communication strategy. Brands may therefore benefit from combining content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators to address different stages of the customer journey, rather than relying on a single influencer type. This has two main consequences: (i) managers should consider not only which influencers to activate, but also how their combined communication foci shape the overall narrative and clarity of the brand message; (ii) different influencer types reach different kinds of audience, with content creators reaching individuals who follow significantly fewer influencers than the followers of self-journalers. When influencers are activated simultaneously to pursue the same marketing objectives, this implies a higher probability of reach overlap among self-journalers than among content creators.

Third, the results show that self-journalers tend to engage in broader brand collaborations, suggesting a greater potential “stretchability”, whereas content creators appear more closely tied to an idea of content relevance and brand congruity.

Finally, self-creators exhibit a hybrid profile that combines elements of the two polar types, suggesting that they may serve as bridges between their respective objectives and prerogatives. At the same time, their hybrid nature also implies a risk of diluted signaling if their role is not clearly defined.

#### *Implications for influencers*

Our findings also carry two paramount implications for influencers themselves. First, influencers should *manage potential conflicts in their content strategy* with a clear awareness that different audiences may read the same content differently. New or weakly familiar followers may tend to infer an influencer’s positioning from recent posting prevalence, whereas long-term followers may rely more on accumulated memory, expectations, and

iconic past content. As a result, shifts in tone or focus may attract new audiences while simultaneously creating tension or confusion among existing followers. Managing content strategy therefore requires a deliberate balancing of tones and foci, recognizing that incremental changes can reframe positioning for newcomers without necessarily updating, and sometimes even conflicting with, the perceptions held by established audiences.

Second, influencers should carefully reflect on the strategic trade-offs involved in *transitioning* from a polarized type toward a hybrid (self-creator) position. While moving towards a more balanced communication style may increase flexibility, broaden collaboration opportunities, and reduce dependency on a single influence mechanism, it may also introduce perceptual ambiguity and weaken the clarity of the influencer's identity, especially among new followers. Our framework suggests that hybrid positions are not neutral compromises but distinct states, with both advantages and potential costs. Influencers should therefore consider whether such transitions are intentional and aligned with long-term positioning goals, rather than being the by-product of incremental and uncoordinated content decisions.

#### *Implications for policy makers*

The very definition and classification of social media personalities have become a contested regulatory issue, as legislators and agencies debate who counts as an 'influencer', what responsibilities they should bear, and how their commercial communication ought to be governed. This debate is evident in policy initiatives such as the EU Digital Services Act, which calls for enhanced transparency for online advertising and influencers' commercial communications (European Commission 2025), the UK Advertising Standards Authority and Competition and Markets Authority guidance on influencer ad labelling and social media endorsements (ASA 2025), and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's Endorsement Guides and 'Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers' (Federal Trade Commission 2025), all of which aim to ensure that sponsored content is clearly identifiable and not misleading.

Although these frameworks primarily focus on transparency and disclosure, they implicitly presuppose that policy makers, platforms, and firms can identify who functions as an influencer and what kinds of commercial content they produce. By offering a clear definition of content creators and other influencer types, showing how these can be identified from posting histories, and paving the way for more research on the distinct types of influence that different profiles leverage in their commercial content, our work helps lay the groundwork for a better governance. In this sense, it contributes not only to managerial practice but also to bringing greater order and clarity to the influencer ecosystem.

### ***Future Research Agenda***

Four themes for future research follow directly from our paper: (i) influencer journey, (ii) influencer success, (iii) influencer-follower relationship, and (iv) influencer-brand collaborations. Table 7 presents an overview of these research opportunities and questions.

#### *Influencer journey*

Recent work has recognized the importance of studying influencer development as a *dynamic* process (Libai et al. 2025). Cheng, de Regt, and Young (2024) propose a lifecycle framework identifying five developmental stages – influence potential, formulation, competence, monetization, and reward – and describe characteristic behaviors and varying degrees of influence exerted at each stage. Our content-based classification provides a lens for investigating how content and self focus evolve over time.

Further, research should explore whether content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators have different *motivations* when deciding to establish their presence on social media. Do content creators primarily seek to share knowledge or demonstrate skills, while self-journalers pursue connection and community? Understanding these differences can shed light on why influencers adopt a particular communication focus and how these positioning choices shape their subsequent development and the nature of the influence they exert.

### *Influencer success*

As most influencers show a mix of content and self focus, how does a post of the non-dominant content type affect audience engagement and follower stickiness? A Turkish micro-influencer in the beauty and personal care domain, who typically posts content-focused material, illustrates this tension: “*Sometimes I was sharing content with my boy. I took my boy from school and some people were writing me 'we really like these touchy points.' But some of my followers don't like when I post my personal life, they unfollow me.*”

### *Influencer-follower relationship*

Prior research shows that followers may perceive influencers as friends through parasocial relationships (Bi and Zhang 2023), as role models through wishful identification (Cheung et al. 2022) and aspirational connection (Koay and Lim 2024), or as sources of informational and creative content, considering them opinion leaders or experts (McMullan, Laurell, and Pitt 2022). How content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators draw upon different relational resources and cultivate distinct follower relationships?

Moreover, given growing concerns about influencers' effects on follower well-being (Hudders and Lou 2023; Shehzala et al. 2024), research should examine how the three influencer types differentially affect followers' self-esteem and mental health.

### *Influencer-brand collaborations*

When are content-focused versus self-focused posts more effective, and whether and how do the three influencer types differ in sponsorship performance? Extending research on influencer-brand congruence (e.g., Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023; Foroughi et al. 2024; Ju and Lou 2022), scholars should examine style congruity, as the alignment between influencer type and sponsored content focus.

Table 7: Future Research Agenda.

Area	Research-Practice Gaps	Research Opportunities	Research Questions
<b>Influencer Journey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior research identifies the stages each influencer progresses through when developing their influence (influence potential, formulation, competence, monetization, reward), describing influencers' behaviors and varying degrees of influence at each stage</li> <li>• In practice, even influencers within the same stage display different behaviors and types of influence</li> <li>• From the outset, influencers present diverse motivations for opening their profiles (e.g., as creative outlets, to build awareness for their main profession, to journal their daily lives, to connect with like-minded communities)</li> <li>• As they become established, influencers leverage distinct influence sources (e.g., their expertise, aspirational image) and employ different monetization approaches (e.g., platform-based incentives, brand sponsorships, follower donations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore motivations for different influencer types (content creators, self-journalers, self-creators) to establish their social media presence</li> <li>• Examine the role of contextual variables such as domain of interest, source of fame, follower count, and platform in shaping influencers' communication focus</li> <li>• Investigate how influencers' stage in their journey affects communication focus adoption and evolution</li> <li>• Examine causes and effects of shifts in influencers' communication focus over time</li> <li>• Explore monetization approaches adopted by different influencer types and their effects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ What motivates content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators to establish their social media presence? Do motivations differ systematically across types?</li> <li>✓ What role does domain of interest (e.g., food, fashion, technology) play in shaping communication focus? What are the effects of conforming to versus deviating from the dominant approach in a domain?</li> <li>✓ Do the amount and configuration of capital (e.g., attentional capital, social capital) that influencers possess and can mobilize (e.g., celebrity vs. social media-native) affect their communication focus?</li> <li>✓ Does the social media platform (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) shape communication focus adoption and effectiveness?</li> <li>✓ How does influencers' journey stage (e.g., influence potential, competence, monetization) affect their communication focus and evolution?</li> <li>✓ Do influencers maintain consistent communication focus or shift between types? What triggers such shifts?</li> <li>✓ What monetization approaches do different types of influencers adopt?</li> </ul>

<p><b>Influencer Success</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior research examines influencer success both in terms of their ability to reach and engage audiences (assessing the impact of follower count and sponsorships) and in terms of entrepreneurial success, identifying key environmental and individual drivers of effectiveness</li> <li>• In practice, the primary lever influencers can pull to shape their success on social media is the content they share with their audience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine whether content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators differ in their success potential across different metrics and explore the underlying mechanisms</li> <li>• Examine how sharing non-dominant content types affects audience engagement and follower stickiness for self-journalers and content creators</li> <li>• Examine drivers of entrepreneurial success across influencer types and their differential effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Do content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators differ in their success potential in terms of content reach, engagement, follower stickiness and growth rate?</li> <li>✓ How does inclusion of non-dominant content types affect audience engagement and follower stickiness?</li> <li>✓ What drives entrepreneurial success for self-journalers, content creators, and self-creators?</li> <li>✓ Are certain influencer types better positioned for entrepreneurship given existing resources and audience relationships?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Influencer-follower Relationship</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The influencer marketing literature examines the mechanisms underlying influencer-follower relationships, including the development of parasocial relationships, wishful identification, and aspirational connection</li> <li>• In practice, these mechanisms are unlikely to operate simultaneously to the same extent; different influencers exert different types of influence and develop different types of relationships with their follower base</li> <li>• Research on social cognition suggests that people's (e.g., followers') mental categorization of other individuals (e.g., influencers) depends on the salience of cues that are category-relevant during encounters with them (e.g., influencers' posts)</li> <li>• In practice, some influencers' posts may be more informative than others about the influencer's communication focus</li> <li>• Prior research highlights the importance of analyzing the effects of exposure to influencers' content on followers' self-esteem and mental well-being</li> <li>• In practice, some users, especially younger ones, experience problematic social media use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine distinct resources that content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators draw upon to influence their follower base</li> <li>• Investigate types of relationships each influencer type tends to cultivate with their followers</li> <li>• Identify which cues are diagnostic for influencers' communication focus to refine the content-based classification</li> <li>• Assess role of additional variables (e.g., creativity levels, posting frequency, post salience) in shaping follower perceptions</li> <li>• Investigate followers' overall perceptions of multi-platform influencers</li> <li>• Examine how different influencer types affect followers' mental well-being and self-esteem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ What distinct resources do content creators, self-journalers, and self-creators draw upon?</li> <li>✓ What types of relationships do different influencer types cultivate?</li> <li>✓ Do parasocial relationship levels differ across types?</li> <li>✓ Which cues are diagnostic for categorizing influencers as content creators, self-journalers, or self-creators?</li> <li>✓ Could particularly high levels of creativity shift perceptions of self-creators toward content creators despite balanced content distribution?</li> <li>✓ How does posting frequency affect perception formation? For influencers with limited posting, may a single salient post disproportionately shape perceptions?</li> <li>✓ How do followers perceive multi-platform influencers who adopt different approaches across platforms?</li> <li>✓ What are the effects of self-journalers, content creators, and self-creators on followers' self-esteem and mental well-being?</li> </ul>

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### **Influencer-brand Collaborations**

- Prior research examines factors affecting the effectiveness of influencer-sponsored content, investigating how performance varies across influencers differing in follower count (e.g., macro vs. micro) or domain of interest relative to the brand (fit vs. misfit)
- Recent research highlights how key campaign decisions such as influencer portfolio, level of control over content creation, communication tone, and content strategy are interrelated within firms' influencer marketing strategies
- In practice, influencers are selected for marketing campaigns also based on their communication focus, as such variable may affect campaign outcomes

- Examine whether influencer type affects brand collaboration opportunities
- Explore optimal portfolio composition for influencer marketing campaigns (diverse vs. similar types)
- Assess content strategies best suited for each influencer type
- Investigate effects of different brand control levels across influencer types
- Explore congruity effects as the alignment with vs. deviation from influencer's dominant communication focus
- Assess influencer type and content type effectiveness at different funnel stages

- ✓ Are content-focused or self-focused posts more effective for marketing purposes? Under which conditions?
  - ✓ Do self-journalers, content creators, and self-creators systematically differ in sponsored content performance?
  - ✓ What is the role of style congruity (alignment between influencer type and sponsored content type)?
  - ✓ Does influencer type shape the scope of feasible collaborations with brands? Do self-creators have broader collaboration opportunities given their hybrid positioning?
  - ✓ Which products and services are most suitable for promotions by self-journalers, content creators, and self-creators?
  - ✓ Are certain influencer types particularly effective for specific campaign objectives (awareness, engagement, conversion)?
  - ✓ Do firms benefit more from influencer portfolios diverse versus homogeneous in communication focus?
  - ✓ Which content strategies are best suited to each influencer type?
  - ✓ Under what conditions is higher (vs. lower) brand control over content creation more appropriate for each influencer type?
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Thinking *more broadly*, our classification of influencers opens a set of theoretically intriguing research directions that speak to core debates in marketing concerning *persuasion, value creation, and media effectiveness*.

First, what is the mechanism through which the different types exert influence? The observed differences in engagement rates may point to a dominant persuasion route (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), for example, content creators through a central route, where influence stems from the value of the shared content. In contrast, self-journalers, whose communication centers on personal narratives and identity, may rely more on affective mechanisms such as parasocial interaction, identification, and emotional attachment, thereby enabling a peripheral route processing. Variables such as argument quality, source expertise, or sponsorship disclosure may operate differently depending on whether audiences attend primarily to the content itself or to the person behind it. Self-creators, positioned in the hybrid zone between content creators and self-journalers, represent a particularly promising context for investigating potential interference, dilution, or cross-route effects when multiple persuasion mechanisms coexist.

Following this argument, our framework opens new questions regarding how brands should strategically activate different influencer types. If different types exert different kinds of influence, is the brand portfolio aligned with the specific marketing objectives and do different portfolios drive different performances? The results on the top 100 influencers, and recent evidence in literature (e.g., Prandelli et al. 2024) suggest that content creators may be particularly effective in high-involvement or early-stage decision contexts where consumers seek information, skills, or expertise. In contrast, self-journalers may be better suited for building awareness, lifestyle branding, community building, and the cultivation of emotional bonds. Self-creators may play a transitional role, allowing brands to bridge functional and

symbolic value propositions. Such matching logics could improve research on endorsement strategy, influencer-brand alignment, and media orchestration.

A further promising avenue for research concerns the boundary conditions of influencer effectiveness. By identifying perceptual thresholds, our findings suggest that influencer effectiveness may not increase linearly with changes in communication style. Future research could examine non-linear and threshold-based relationships between influencer communication strategies and marketing outcomes. Such work would advance understanding of categorization processes, schema clarity, and ambiguity in consumer judgment, while offering a theoretical account of why some influencers underperform despite strong reach or engagement metrics.

Our classification further invites research on *monetization and value capture in the creator economy*. Do monetization strategies emerge endogenously from attention structures? Content creators, focusing their posts on more artistic content, may use Instagram as a teaser to attract traffic to monetized off-platform profiles (e.g., Youtube), while self-journalers, being conceptually closer to Prandelli, Wang, and Weijo (2024) idea of “influencer”, may instead rely more on sponsorship-based monetization and thus consider individual posts as their primary unit of remuneration.

Finally, a theoretically relevant avenue for future research concerns *how influencer perceptions evolve once prior knowledge about an influencer exists*. Our empirical approach operationalizes prevalence quantitatively as the relative proportion of content-focused versus self-focused posts in an influencer’s posting history. This logic is well suited to the evaluation of unfamiliar or weakly known influencers, for whom audiences rely primarily on observable frequency patterns to infer communication focus. For well-known influencers, however, perceptions may no longer be driven by quantitative prevalence alone. Accumulated exposure, memory structures, and salient past experiences may act as strong

priors that shape how new content is interpreted. Future research could therefore investigate whether and when a change in posting strategy is sufficient to update established perceptions, or whether influencer categorizations exhibit inertia and resistance to change.

### **Closing Remarks**

This research reframes influencer marketing from a problem of reach and endorsement to one of attention and value creation. By distinguishing influencers based on what audiences attend to - content or self - our framework clarifies why seemingly similar influencers produce fundamentally different outcomes. In doing so, it offers a unifying lens for future research and practice in a creator economy where influence is increasingly fragmented, monetized, and debated.

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## Web Appendix A: Influencer Interview Excerpts on Informing and Entertaining

Table W1: Interview Excerpts.

<b>Influencer</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Follower count</b>	<b>Excerpt</b>
<b>AM</b>	Female	166,374	<i>“I do both because, in my opinion, the audience appreciates both.”</i>
<b>EI</b>	Male	157,341	<i>“We can say it’s a 50-50? I mean, it depends on the content. Then, you know that the emotional route makes the person watching the video feel more involved.”</i>
<b>KE</b>	Male	640,262	<i>“My goal has always been to entertain, because I really like it. But there have been many times when I still wanted to inform the people who follow me too, for example about certain behaviors that can truly be toxic. So I’d say that maybe I’m not completely in the middle; I’m a bit more on the entertainment side, but still with, let’s say, an eye toward information.”</i>
<b>MM</b>	Female	48,746	<i>“Can I say exactly halfway? I talk a lot about beauty tips, for example, and I’d identify that as informative, but it’s really proportionate: in a day I’ll post a video like a product review or beauty tips, and then another one that’s more chatty where I’m, like, doing my makeup but talking about something else.”</i>
<b>AZ</b>	Male	29,517	<i>“I’m often on the entertainment side because I try to maintain my style, but there’s also the informative side.”</i>
<b>CC</b>	Couple Profile	477,975	<i>“I’d say almost 50-50, because we obviously have a need to dive deeper into some topics that are definitely complex, very specific, and difficult for a lot of people to deal with. But of course we realize that social media was born with a much more, let’s say, edutainment approach, so the entertainment side is essential to convey the message and make it land.”</i>
<b>AV</b>	Female	336,690	<i>“I wouldn’t put myself entirely in the entertainment category because I often give real, practical advice on topics I know very well. Like, I studied cosmetology, I know everything about these subjects, even the more technical ones.”</i>

Notes: Interview question: “What type of content do you typically create (more informative or entertaining)?” Follower count refers to their Instagram profile.

## Web Appendix B: Measurement Scales and Item Loadings (Study 1)

Table W2: Scale Items and Loadings.

Item		Loading	Source
<b>Influencer Self Focus</b>			
SF.1	The influencer persona (e.g., their personal life, appearance, or opinions) is the main focus of the influencer's posts	.85	
SF.2	The influencer acts as the central focus of the posts	.77	The authors
SF.3	The main purpose of the posts is showcasing the individual who created or shared them	.96	
<b>Influencer Content Focus</b>			
CF.1	The influencer content (e.g., an idea, creation, tutorial, recipe) is the main focus of the influencer's posts	.78	
CF.2	The influencer acts as a 'vehicle' to illustrate or deliver the content	.86	The authors
CF.3	The main purpose of the posts is sharing informational, artistic, or entertaining content	.79	
<b>Influencer Self-disclosure</b>			
SD.1	The influencer reveals herself	.71	
SD.2	The influencer shares her personal feelings with her fans	.89	Chung and Cho (2017)
SD.3	The influencer is honest about her feelings or opinions	.64	
<b>Influencer Creativity</b>			
C.1	The content shared by this influencer is unique	.88	
C.2	The content shared by this influencer is really out of ordinary	.78	Cheung et al. (2022)
C.3	The content shared by this influencer is intriguing	.78	
C.4	The content shared by this influencer is surprising	.74	



## Web Appendix C: Content Focus and Self Focus: Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Item Loadings (Studies 2A-2E)

Table W3: Measurement Properties of Content Focus and Self Focus.

Item		Study 2A	Study 2B	Study 2C	Study 2D	Study 2E
<b>Influencer Self Focus</b> (Cronbach's alpha, rho <sub>c</sub> )		(.87, .88)	(.86, .86)	(.81, .82)	(.84, .84)	(.84, .85)
SF.1	The influencer persona (e.g., their personal life, appearance, or opinions) is the main focus of the influencer's posts	.80	.80	.77	.75	.78
SF.2	The influencer acts as the central focus of the posts	.79	.79	.69	.82	.74
SF.3	The main purpose of the posts is showcasing the individual who created or shared them	.91	.86	.85	.84	.88
<b>Influencer Content Focus</b> (Cronbach's alpha, rho <sub>c</sub> )		(.89, .90)	(.83, .83)	(.78, .78)	(.66, .66)	(.77, .77)
CF.1	The influencer content (e.g., an idea, creation, tutorial, recipe) is the main focus of the influencer's posts	.81	.73	.64	-	.62
CF.2	The influencer acts as a 'vehicle' to illustrate or deliver the content	.89	.82	.87	.69	.74
CF.3	The main purpose of the posts is sharing informational, artistic, or entertaining content	.88	.79	.68	.71	.81
<b>Observations</b>		179	170	164	175	90
<b>HTMT</b>		.75	.57	.42	.36	.40
<b>Factor correlation</b>		-.67	-.51	-.38	-.27	-.35

Notes: All factor loadings and factor correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ . In Study 2D the item CF.1 was excluded due to loading (= .44) < .50.

## Web Appendix D: Beauty and Personal Care Influencers

Table W4: Complete List and Classification of Analyzed Beauty and Personal Care Influencers.

Influencer (@username on Instagram)	Followers (Millions)	Gender	Posts published over a 90-day period (09/01/2024 - 11/30/2024)					Influencer type
			Total	Self-focused	Content-focused	% Self-focused	% Content-focused	
Kylie Jenner (@kyliejenner)	392	Female	67	65	2	97.01%	2.99%	Self-journaler
Hailey Rhode Bieber (@haileybieber)	55.8	Female	9	9	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
James Charles Dickinson (@jamescharles)	19.9	Male	40	23	17	57.50%	42.50%	Self-creator
Bretman Rock Sacayanan Laforga (@bretmanrock)	19.3	Non-binary	20	19	1	95.00%	5.00%	Self-journaler
Nikkie de Jager-Drossaers (@nikkietutorials)	19	Female	21	7	14	33.33%	66.67%	Self-creator
Miranda Kerr (@mirandakerr)	14.3	Female	15	15	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Catriona Gray (@catriona_gray)	13.7	Female	80	73	7	91.25%	8.75%	Self-journaler
Alissa Violet (@alissaviolet)	12.1	Female	10	10	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Jaclyn Roxanne Torrey (@jaclynhill)	8.5	Female	15	15	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Eva Marisol Gutowski (@mylifeaseva)	8.3	Female	45	39	6	86.67%	13.33%	Self-journaler
Mounir (@mounir)	8.2	Male	17	0	17	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Nagma Mirajkar (@nagmamirajkar)	8.1	Female	59	42	17	71.19%	28.81%	Self-journaler

Brooke Monk (@brookemonk)	7.9	Female	35	16	19	45.71%	54.29%	Self-creator
Negin Mirsalehi (@negin_mirsalehi)	7.1	Female	17	15	2	88.24%	11.76%	Self-journaler
Karen Sarahi Robles (@iluvsarahii)	6.5	Female	64	56	8	87.50%	12.50%	Self-journaler
Huda Kattan (@huda)	5.1	Female	49	38	11	77.55%	22.45%	Self-journaler
Amulya Rattan (@amulyarattan_)	4.6	Female	30	22	8	73.33%	26.67%	Self-journaler
Hasan Kreik (@kreik.hassan)	4.4	Male	65	29	36	44.62%	55.38%	Self-creator
Anastasile (@anastasile)	4.2	Female	26	6	20	23.08%	76.92%	Content Creator
Manny Gutierrez (@mannymua733)	3.9	Male	23	18	5	78.26%	21.74%	Self-journaler

## Web Appendix E: Food and Beverage Influencers

Table W5: Complete List and Classification of Analyzed Food and Beverage Influencers.

Influencer (@username on Instagram)	Followers (Millions)	Gender	Posts published over a 90-day period (09/01/2024 - 11/30/2024)					Influencer type
			Total	Self-focused	Content-focused	% Self-focused	% Content-focused	
Gordon Ramsay (@gordongram)	19.5	Male	158	116	42	73.42%	26.58%	Self-journaler
Amaury Guichon (@amauryguichon)	18.2	Male	13	0	13	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Zach Choi (@zachchoi)	13.7	Male	29	0	29	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Jamie Oliver (@jamieoliver)	10.6	Male	178	109	69	61.24%	38.76%	Self-creator
Skyy John (@tipsybartender)	7.9	Male	18	0	18	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Alberto Magrí (@pastrychef_am)	7	Male	14	2	12	14.29%	85.71%	Content Creator
Pooja Dhingra (@poojadhingra)	6.9	Female	57	45	12	78.95%	21.05%	Self-journaler
Kian Hiatt (@cookingwithkian)	6.9	Male	23	0	23	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Stanley Tucci (@stanleytucci)	6	Male	39	30	9	76.92%	23.08%	Self-journaler
Nadia Caterina Munno (@the_pastaqueen)	5.6	Female	88	27	61	30.68%	69.32%	Self-creator
Carleigh Bodrug (@plantyou)	5.5	Female	39	8	31	20.51%	79.49%	Content Creator
Cedrik Lorenzen (@cedriklorenzen)	5.5	Male	22	13	9	59.09%	40.91%	Self-creator
Ahmad Noori (@dr.vegan)	5.4	Male	31	5	26	16.13%	83.87%	Content Creator
Tieghan Gerard (@halfbakedharvest)	5.4	Female	100	7	93	7.00%	93.00%	Content Creator
Stella Drivas (@hungry.happens)	5.2	Female	89	0	89	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Alfie Steiner (@alfiecooks)	5.2	Male	35	5	30	14.29%	85.71%	Content Creator
Ina Garten (@inagarten)	4.9	Female	39	31	8	79.49%	20.51%	Self-journaler
Nara Smith (@naraaziza)	4.9	Female	39	31	8	79.49%	20.51%	Self-journaler
Yumna Jawad (@feelgoodfoodie)	4.7	Female	67	3	64	4.48%	95.52%	Content Creator
Olivia Tiedemann (@oliviatiied)	4.4	Female	19	4	15	21.05%	78.95%	Content Creator

## Web Appendix F: Fashion Influencers

Table W6: Complete List and Classification of Analyzed Fashion Influencers.

Influencer (@username on Instagram)	Followers (Millions)	Gender	Posts published over a 90-day period (09/01/2024 - 11/30/2024)					Influencer type
			Total	Self-focused	Content-focused	% Self-focused	% Content-focused	
Kendall Jenner (@kendalljenner)	285	Female	10	10	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Chiara Ferragni (@chiaraFerragni)	28.1	Female	51	51	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Irina Shayk (@irinashayk)	23.8	Female	22	19	3	86.36%	13.64%	Self-journaler
Gisele Bündchen (@gisele)	22.9	Female	7	7	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Ashley Graham (@ashleygraham)	21.2	Female	46	42	4	91.30%	8.70%	Self-journaler
Lena Mantler (@lena)	20.3	Female	14	12	2	85.71%	14.29%	Self-journaler
Elsa Hosk (@hoskelsa)	8.5	Female	60	57	3	95.00%	5.00%	Self-journaler
Jasmine Tookes (@jastookes)	7.7	Female	40	39	1	97.50%	2.50%	Self-journaler
Wisdom Kaye (@wisdm)	7.6	Male	9	6	3	66.67%	33.33%	Self-creator
Aimee Song (@aimeesong)	7.1	Female	23	22	1	95.65%	4.35%	Self-journaler
Rickey Thompson (@rickeythompson)	6.4	Male	11	10	1	90.91%	9.09%	Self-journaler
Alexa Chung (@alexachung)	6.2	Female	45	40	5	88.89%	11.11%	Self-journaler
Nick Bateman (@nick__bateman)	5.8	Male	8	7	1	87.50%	12.50%	Self-journaler
Georgina Mazzeo (@georginamazzeo)	5.6	Female	68	63	5	92.65%	7.35%	Self-journaler
Jon Kortajarena (@jonkortajarena)	4.1	Male	16	14	2	87.50%	12.50%	Self-journaler
Eva Chen (@evachen212)	2.5	Female	28	25	3	89.29%	10.71%	Self-journaler
Calum Harper (@calumharper)	1.8	Male	47	45	2	95.74%	4.26%	Self-journaler
Lorena Rae (@lorena)	1.7	Female	25	25	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Maggie Nelson (@poppyluclothing)	1	Female	15	1	14	6.67%	93.33%	Content Creator

Tanner Leatherstein  
 (@tanner.leatherstein)

0.8

Male

23

5

18

21.74%

78.26%

Content Creator

## Web Appendix G: Travel Influencers

Table W7: Complete List and Classification of Analyzed Travel Influencers.

Influencer (@username on Instagram)	Followers (Millions)	Gender	Posts published over a 90-day period (09/01/2024 - 11/30/2024)					Influencer type
			Total	Self-focused	Content-focused	% Self-focused	% Content-focused	
Joshua Platillero (@megaamerican)	7.1	Male	16	0	16	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Asel Mustafaeva (@aselmustafaeva)	3.5	Female	9	9	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Julia Gal (@juliagal_)	3.5	Female	28	6	22	21.43%	78.57%	Content Creator
Aylen Alvarez (@aylen25)	3.5	Female	13	7	6	53.85%	46.15%	Self-creator
Shashank Sanghvi (@iamshashh)	3.3	Male	21	16	5	76.19%	23.81%	Self-journaler
Mohak Narang (@mohak.narang)	3.2	Male	36	29	7	80.56%	19.44%	Self-journaler
Marco Marques (@marcoxmarques)	3.2	Male	10	1	9	10.00%	90.00%	Content Creator
Aurélie Bouti (@aureliestory)	3	Female	66	10	56	15.15%	84.85%	Content Creator
Markus Manfredi (@swissaround)	2.9	Male	22	0	22	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Muhammad Arsalan Sabir (@world.from.my.eyes)	2.6	Male	23	8	15	34.78%	65.22%	Self-creator
Jennifer Tuffen (@izkiz)	2.6	Female	30	13	17	43.33%	56.67%	Self-creator
Marwa bin Hassan (@marwahassan)	2.6	Female	22	20	2	90.91%	9.09%	Self-journaler
Sebastian Schieren (@sebastian_schieren)	2.6	Male	49	0	49	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Irina Cerutti (@irina_cerutti)	2.5	Female	36	34	2	91.89%	5.41%	Self-journaler
Sarah Harris (@iamsarahharris)	2.5	Female	15	15	0	100.00%	0.00%	Self-journaler
Veronika Orchid (@veronikaorchid)	2.5	Female	42	41	1	97.62%	2.38%	Self-journaler
Japan Walker (@japan_walker_)	2.2	Male	77	0	77	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator

Priya Sharma and Sid Madiwale (@himynameispriya)	2.1	Female	49	37	12	75.51%	24.49%	Self-journaler
Giulio Gröbert (@giuliogroebert)	2.1	Male	163	34	129	20.86%	79.14%	Content Creator
Asa Steinars (@asasteinars)	1.5	Female	42	18	24	42.86%	57.14%	Self-creator

### Web Appendix H: Technology Influencers

Table W8: Complete List and Classification of Analyzed Technology Influencers.

Influencer (@username on Instagram)	Followers (Millions)	Gender	Posts published over a 90-day period (09/01/2024 - 11/30/2024)					Influencer type
			Total	Self-focused	Content-focused	% Self-focused	% Content-focused	
Marques Brownlee (@mkbhd)	5.1	Male	17	9	8	52.94%	47.06%	Self-creator
Arvind Kharra (@techmasterco)	4.6	Male	91	3	88	3.30%	96.70%	Content Creator
Naman Deshmukh (@techplusgadgets)	3.6	Male	58	3	55	5.17%	94.83%	Content Creator
Matty McTech (@setupspawn)	3.3	Male	27	1	26	3.70%	96.30%	Content Creator
Lewis Hilsenteger (@unboxtherapy)	2.8	Male	30	0	30	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Mohammad Farhan Shaikh (@dr_tech_786)	2	Male	23	1	22	4.35%	95.65%	Content Creator
Arun Rupesh Maini (@mrwhosetheboss)	1.8	Male	12	4	8	33.33%	66.67%	Self-creator
Karan Singh (@karanlohiaa_)	1.7	Male	19	4	15	21.05%	78.95%	Content Creator
Akshay Jadhav (@jarvis_9594)	1.6	Male	32	6	26	18.75%	81.25%	Content Creator
Justine Ezarik (@ijustine)	1.6	Female	94	41	53	43.62%	56.38%	Self-creator
Taras Kovtun and Nickolas (@no_clue_boy)	1.5	Male	14	0	14	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Joey Urbinati (@chillrogg)	1.5	Male	22	4	18	18.18%	81.82%	Content Creator
Caitlin Sarian (@cybersecuritygirl)	1.4	Female	97	7	90	7.22%	92.78%	Content Creator
Naresh Bhanot (@iamnareshbhanot)	1.4	Male	31	4	27	12.90%	87.10%	Content Creator
Akash Pal (@technicalskyco)	1.2	Male	62	3	59	4.84%	95.16%	Content Creator
Abhinav Ranjan Jha (@digidoty)	1.2	Male	53	10	43	18.87%	81.13%	Content Creator

Sakshi Gaur (@lastnighttech)	1.1	Female	46	0	46	0.00%	100.00%	Content Creator
Tiancheng Luo (@bbbigdeer)	1.1	Male	29	3	26	10.34%	89.66%	Content Creator
Romina Gafur (@romina)	1	Female	35	8	27	22.86%	77.14%	Content Creator
Angelica Georges (@itsangelicageorges)	1	Female	53	26	27	49.06%	50.94%	Self-creator

## Web Appendix I: Variable Descriptions (Study 3)

Table W9: Variable Descriptions.

Variable	Description of the Variable
<b>Influencer Characteristics</b>	
<b>Posts Count</b>	Total number of feed posts on the influencer's Instagram profile
<b>Followers Count</b>	Number of followers of the influencer
<b>Influencer Engagement</b>	
<b>Reach</b>	Average number of users reached with feed posts
<b>Plays</b>	Average number of times Instagram Reels are played
<b>Likes</b>	Average number of likes on feed posts
<b>Comments</b>	Average number of comments on feed posts
<b>Shares</b>	Average number of shares on feed posts
<b>Clicks</b>	Average number of clicks on Instagram Stories
<b>Reached Followers</b>	Average number of users reached with feed posts divided by the number of followers
<b>Likes per Follower</b>	Average number of likes on feed posts divided by the number of followers
<b>Comments per Follower</b>	Average number of comments on feed posts divided by the number of followers
<b>Shares per Follower</b>	Average number of shares on feed posts divided by the number of followers
<b>Clicks per Follower</b>	Average number of clicks on Instagram Stories divided by the number of followers
<b>Likes per Thousand Reach</b>	Average number of likes divided by the average number of thousand reached users per feed post
<b>Comments per Thousand Reach</b>	Average number of comments divided by the average number of thousand reached users per feed post
<b>Shares per Thousand Reach</b>	Average number of shares divided by the average number of thousand reached users per feed post
<b>Clicks per Thousand Reach</b>	Average number of clicks divided by the average number of thousand reached users per Instagram Stories

**Followers Characteristics****Female Followers**

Share of female followers

**Followers Aged 13-17**

Share of followers aged 13-17 years

**Followers Aged 18-24**

Share of followers aged 18-24 years

**Followers Aged 25-34**

Share of followers aged 25-34 years

**Followers Aged 35-44**

Share of followers aged 35-44 years

**Followers Aged 45-64**

Share of followers aged 45-64 years

**Followers Aged 65+**

Share of followers aged 65 or older

**Followers Reachability < 500**

Share of followers following less than 500 accounts

**Followers Reachability 500-1,000**

Share of followers who follow between 500 and 1,000 accounts

**Followers Reachability 1,000-1,500**

Share of followers who follow between 1,000 and 1,500 accounts

**Followers Reachability > 1,500**

Share of followers who follow more than 1,500 accounts

**Brand Collaborations****Industry Breadth of Collaborations**

Number of distinct industries of brands the influencer has collaborated with

**Post Cost per Engagement**

Estimated average cost per engagement for sponsored posts

**Reel Cost per Engagement**

Estimated average cost per engagement for sponsored Instagram Reels

**Story Cost per Engagement**

Estimated average cost per engagement for sponsored Instagram Stories

**Story Cost per Click**

Estimated average cost per click for sponsored Instagram Stories

**Post Price (Sponsored)**

Estimated price range (min-max) charged for one sponsored post

**Reel Price (Sponsored)**

Estimated price range (min-max) charged for one sponsored Reel

**Story Price (Sponsored)**

Estimated price range (min-max) charged for one sponsored Story

**Post Price (Sponsored) per Thousand Followers**

Estimated price range (min-max) charged for one sponsored post divided by the number of followers (in thousands)

**Reel Price (Sponsored) per Thousand Followers**

Estimated price range (min-max) charged for one sponsored Reel divided by the number of followers (in thousands)

**Story Price (Sponsored) per Thousand Followers**

Estimated price range (min-max) charged for one sponsored Story divided by the number of followers (in thousands)

## Web Appendix L: Stakeholder Reactions to the Novel Classification

Table W10: Interview Excerpts from Stakeholders on Their Reactions to the Novel Classification.

Stakeholder	Role	Excerpt
<b>Major Brand in the Beauty Domain</b>	Media Director	<i>“We have the perception that the type of influence differs between influencers and creators, so knowing that there are more or less objective classification measures, and whether they are associated with different performances, is helpful.”</i>
<b>Talent Agency</b>	Chief Communications Officer	<i>“This is a very hot topic in the market. Let’s say that Treccani has not yet done us the favor of writing it once and for all and making us stop talking about what is one and what is the other. There are many points of view, [but] the common factor that we intercept is very related to what we have discussed now, the focus of their communication.”</i>
<b>Influencer Marketing Agency</b>	Head of Strategy	<p><i>“The distinction convinces me, and I believe the “self-creator” category is one of the most widespread. [...] There’s a big difference in the way they exercise their influence, and we often take this into account by structuring “tiered” strategies or creating “matrices,” assigning each category a different role, different formats, and customized approaches. This is because we observe that the different categories respond very differently to KPIs.</i></p> <p><i>There’s also an important distinction in terms of fees. Very often, Creators have higher fees because they are professionals who go beyond the world of social and also work on other touchpoints, such as TV and theatre. Their fees go up because of the notoriety they have, the value of their creativity, and the potential virality of their content, and these elements increase the fee. Self Journalers, on the other hand, have lower CPMs because they often achieve excellent impressions but their rates are lower.</i></p> <p><i>So, we differentiate how we use them based on the objectives they can achieve, but also based on the type of product/brand we want to communicate and the project’s creativity. The important thing is to be very clear, with ourselves but also with the client, about the role of each tier, and not to expect from one or the other objectives they simply can’t reach.</i></p> <p><i>[Currently this distinction is done] “by intuition, or rather through a qualitative analysis of the talent’s profiles. Our platforms can help us by selecting some profiles based on keywords found in the bio, which are an indicator, and also based on some of the most recurring words in the content, at the level of post copy. AI is improving in this respect, but a large part of this qualitative analysis is still human.”</i></p>

<b>Major Brand in the Spirits Domain</b>	Global Marketing Manager	<p><i>“One of the main points is the distinction between influencers and content creators: they do two completely different jobs and have very different impacts on audiences. It’s true that there’s also this intermediate layer, which is a bit harder to identify, but I completely agree that we’re talking about two different worlds, with rules of engagement that are totally different. However, when talking to the market and with our various brand managers, what I have realized is that there is no shared definition. There is no objective, commonly agreed analysis, so in contexts where decisions have to be made on these issues, it becomes difficult to use the term content creator with the confidence that the person you’re speaking to will understand it in the way you intend. I therefore believe this is an area we need to work on, because it has now become a fundamental distinction, but at the same time it is still not so clear-cut across the wider marketing and communication world.”</i></p>
<b>Influencers</b>	<p>Content Creator (male micro-influencer in the travel domain)</p> <p>Self-journaler (female mega-influencer covering multiple domains)</p>	<p>Self-journaler: <i>“I think this distinguishment is useful to have in terms of how you position yourself to brands. For me it was not really clear where the difference lies [between content creators and other typologies] because it’s just based on feeling. For me this explanation is very clear and it makes more sense because I could very clearly tell you [i.e., the other interviewee] are a content creator because you post about your work and not about yourself and I do post about myself.”</i></p> <p>Content Creator: <i>“Exactly, I post probably 99 % about my work. If you scroll through my feed you even never see my face so it’s really content-focused and work-focused. So if there could be a label for brands or specific jobs that says “this is for self-journaler” and “this is for content creator” that would be very useful for me because maybe I say yes to something and then they ask me to be the face of a project and I would be like “yeah but this does not fit with my social presence, my brand, because I’m not that”. So I think it would be very useful.”</i></p> <p>[..]</p> <p>Content Creator: <i>“In your case it’s about you [i.e., the other interviewee]. You could even post a picture of a glass on the table and people would love it.”</i></p> <p>Self-journaler: <i>“People would be like, where’s the glass from?”</i></p> <p>Content Creator: <i>“People are really interested about what you post. Instead, for my content, it has to be something technically good, so people love it. Otherwise, nobody cares.”</i></p> <p>Self-journaler: <i>“Yes, I see what I do as a more community-based thing in the sense that it feels a lot more social, because we’re constantly interacting about the same things that we like. For instance, when I like something, usually my audience does too, because we have the same taste. So we’re always in conversation. It’s very personal. And people are just curious about a lot of things. Whatever I post, people are going to ask “oh, where did you get that from?” And for you [i.e., the other interviewee], I feel like it’s a bit more professional, like there’s</i></p>

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*some more distance there. It's more like LinkedIn.”*

*Content Creator: “Yes, it's more LinkedIn, in the sense that people just follow my content because they can learn, for instance the technique, but they don't really care about me as a person, they just care about the photo I post or the video.”*

*Self-journaler: “For me it's more my personality and it's more like a friendship thing and for you [the other interviewee] I would say you have more of an authority position for people which for brands I think is interesting. For me the collabs are those that fit to the lifestyle that I have, they represent just the sort of style that I show on my Instagram. But for you, I feel like sometimes a collab would have more value because if you use something, it must be good. So it's a very different way also for brands, I think, to approach a collab.”*

*Content Creator: “But in my case, I think the only clients and brands that could get benefit from me are the ones that are in the same niche, like photography, tech, travelling. While for you [the other interviewee], it can be anything.”*

*Self-journaler: “Yeah, exactly. Because, for instance I also post about books, so a company selling reading glasses would work as well, because you can always relate it back to the lifestyle that I represent in some way. While it would be weird if you [the other interviewee] start promoting glasses.”*

*Content Creator: “Yeah, people would be like, why are you doing it? It makes no sense.”*

*Self-journaler: “So there's definitely a difference there.”*

*[...]*

*Self-journaler: “In collaborations, when they want a really commercial message, I don't feel good because I want to remain authentic to my audience. So for me it is really important to have some freedom in how I show the product or service.”*

*Content Creator: “For me I think it's mostly about the aesthetic. I don't care about being too commercial, but if they tell me “Oh, you need to use this logo and this screenshot of a story that we already made for you”, then, since I post only high-quality content and it has to be a certain standard, I don't like it.”*

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## Web Appendix References

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