

The Influencer Phenomenon as Cultural Actors: An Analysis of Image Construction and Digital Communication Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of influencers as cultural actors in digital communication spaces by examining processes of image construction and digital communication practices. A qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design is employed, as the influencer phenomenon is contextual and requires an in-depth understanding of symbolic meaning-making and cultural practices. The research setting is situated in digital spaces, specifically Instagram and TikTok, selected due to their central role in influencer self-representation and audience interaction. Five influencers were purposively selected as informants based on content consistency, audience engagement, and their influence on digital cultural discourse. The findings reveal that influencers function as cultural actors who actively construct their public image through symbolic representations, personal narratives, and platform-driven communication practices. These practices contribute to the production and circulation of social and cultural meanings within digital environments. The study highlights that influencer communication is shaped by both cultural intentions and platform logics. It is recommended that future research further develop critical perspectives in digital cultural communication and address the ethical implications of influencer practices in shaping contemporary digital culture.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of influencers in digital spaces has evolved beyond their role as merely popular figures on social media (Huang, 2025). Influencers now function as cultural actors who actively shape meanings, values, and social representations through structured and sustained digital communication practices (Qureshi et al., 2025). Within the context of networked societies, influencers not only influence consumption preferences but also construct discourses of identity, lifestyle, and social norms that circulate widely in digital public spaces (F. Liu et al., 2023). This development positions influencers as significant subjects in contemporary communication and cultural studies.

The state of the art indicates that existing research on influencers has largely focused on digital marketing, endorsement effectiveness, source credibility, and consumer behavior. Other studies have begun to address issues of identity performance and personal branding, yet these analyses often remain limited to individual strategies without adequately considering broader cultural power relations. Meanwhile, cultural communication studies have extensively examined meaning-making and representation, but have not fully incorporated influencers as cultural actors operating within complex and algorithm-driven digital media ecosystems (Ramtohul & Khedo, 2024).

The central problem lies in the lack of a comprehensive understanding of how influencers simultaneously construct their public image and engage in digital communication practices that function as processes of cultural production (Croce & Cera, 2024). Influencers do not merely represent themselves, they articulate symbols, narratives, and values that are consumed and reproduced by audiences. However, these image construction mechanisms are often approached descriptively and

insufficiently analyzed within frameworks of cultural communication and the social construction of reality (Shang et al., 2023).

The research gap emerges from the limited integration of digital communication and cultural studies perspectives in examining influencers as active cultural actors. Previous studies tend to separate personal image analysis from cultural contexts and digital media structures (Fox, 2024). Moreover, few studies investigate how influencer communication practices interact with platform logics, participatory audiences, and symbolic dynamics that collectively shape social meaning (Pushpalatha & Prithvi, 2025). This gap highlights the need for a more integrative and critical analytical approach.

This study offers novelty by positioning influencers as cultural actors involved in image construction and meaning production through digital communication practices. Rather than focusing solely on message content, this research examines how communication is produced, circulated, and interpreted within specific cultural contexts (Avşar, 2025). By integrating cultural communication and digital communication perspectives, the study provides a new understanding of influencers' roles in shaping the symbolic reality of digital societies (Xian, 2023).

Based on this background, the research questions aim to explore how influencers construct their image as cultural actors in digital spaces, how their digital communication practices contribute to cultural meaning-making, and how audiences interpret and reproduce the images and messages conveyed by influencers (Martín, 2025). These questions seek to uncover the relationship between image construction, communication practices, and digital cultural contexts in greater depth.

The objective of this study is to analyze the phenomenon of influencers as cultural actors by examining processes of image construction and digital communication practices (Banfi & Oreni, 2023). The study aims to identify the communication strategies employed by influencers, understand the cultural dimensions embedded in their digital representations, and explain the implications of these practices for social meaning formation in digital environments (Palestini et al., 2023).

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of cultural communication studies by extending the concept of cultural actors into the realm of digital media. Academically, it enriches the literature on influencers through an interdisciplinary approach that connects communication, culture, and digital technology (He & Zaibon, 2024). Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for communication practitioners, content creators, and policymakers in understanding the strategic role of influencers and their impact on cultural dynamics and public communication.

This study has limitations, particularly in terms of its analytical scope, which focuses on specific digital contexts and selected influencer characteristics. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital media suggests that the findings are context-dependent and temporally situated. Therefore, caution is required in generalizing the results.

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope by comparing influencers across platforms or cultural contexts and by incorporating diverse methodological approaches such as digital ethnography or big data analysis. Such efforts are expected to deepen the understanding of influencers as cultural actors within the continuously evolving landscape of digital communication.

LITERATUR REVIEW

The study of influencers as cultural actors requires a theoretical foundation capable of explaining the intersection of communication, culture, and digital media. Influencers should not be understood merely as popular individuals but as agents involved in the production of meaning and symbolic representation. Accordingly, this study employs three main theoretical frameworks: the Social Construction of Reality, Cultural Representation Theory, and Network Society and Digital Communication Theory, which together explain image construction, communication practices, and digital cultural contexts (Zhou et al., 2024).

The first theoretical framework is the Social Construction of Reality, popularized by Peter Ludwig Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966 through *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger was affiliated with The New School for Social Research, United States, while Luckmann was associated

with the University of Konstanz, Germany (Das & Selvan, 2024). This theory posits that social reality is not inherently objective but is continuously produced through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. In the context of influencers, digital images are not natural reflections of identity but socially constructed realities that gain legitimacy through audience acceptance (Baydar & Akbas, 2024).

The development of this theory in contemporary studies highlights the accelerating role of digital media in shaping reality. Influencers act as mediators of meaning by repeatedly producing narratives, visuals, and symbolic messages (Khare & Amita, 2025). This framework directly addresses the main research problem concerning how influencer images are constructed and normalized in digital spaces, while also responding to research gaps that have yet to fully apply social construction theory to influencer studies (Cera & Origlia, 2023).

The second framework is Cultural Representation Theory, developed by Stuart Henry McPhail Hall, a scholar from the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, particularly articulated in his works from the late 1980s to 1997, including *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Nasta, 2025). Hall conceptualized representation as a process of meaning production through language, symbols, and signs, emphasizing its relationship with power and ideology (Zo'by & Labidi, 2025).

Applied to influencers, representation theory explains how digital self-images, lifestyles, and identities function as cultural texts (Steinkamp & Magkou, 2023). Contemporary developments of Hall's theory demonstrate that representation in digital environments is increasingly visual, interactive, and globally networked (C. Liu & Shi, 2024). Influencers thus operate as producers of cultural meanings rather than passive content creators, filling a research gap concerning the cultural significance of influencer communication (Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024).

The third framework is Network Society and Digital Communication Theory, popularized by Manuel Castells since 1996 in *The Information Age* trilogy (Gerakakis & Makris, 2024). Castells is affiliated with the University of Southern California, United States, and the University of Barcelona, Spain (Xu & Schneider, 2025). This theory explains how communication in modern societies occurs through digitally mediated networks shaped by technological and algorithmic logics (Vigo & Corbett, 2023).

Castells argues that power in network societies lies in controlling information flows and meaning-making processes (Balla et al., 2024). Influencers function within this structure by leveraging digital platforms to gain symbolic authority and audience engagement (Gadekar et al., 2024). Recent developments of this theory emphasize the cultural dimensions of digital communication, making it particularly relevant for analyzing influencer practices within networked environments (Paananen & Häkkinen, 2025).

Together, these three theories form an integrated conceptual framework. Social construction theory explains how influencer images are produced, representation theory elucidates the cultural meanings embedded in these images, and network society theory contextualizes these processes within digital infrastructures (Melman & Evsutin, 2024). This synthesis addresses the main research problem, research gap, and supports the formulation of research questions, objectives, and theoretical, academic, and practical contributions.

In conclusion, this literature review demonstrates that influencers must be understood as cultural actors operating within digitally networked societies. By integrating the perspectives of Berger and Luckmann, Stuart Hall, and Manuel Castells, this study offers a novel analytical framework that contributes to cultural communication research and advances understanding of influencer-driven meaning production in digital contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach aimed at achieving an in-depth understanding of influencers as cultural actors within the context of digital communication. The qualitative approach is chosen because the study does not seek statistical generalization but rather focuses on exploring

meanings, processes, and social dynamics underlying image construction and digital communication practices. This approach enables the researcher to examine social reality as a symbolic and socially constructed phenomenon shaped through interaction, narratives, and digital representations.

The research design employed is an interpretive qualitative case study. This design is selected due to the contextual and complex nature of the influencer phenomenon, which cannot be separated from the digital environments in which influencers operate. A case study approach allows for a detailed examination of influencer communication practices, image construction processes, and cultural meanings within specific digital contexts. The interpretive perspective facilitates understanding social reality from the viewpoints of both influencers and their audiences.

The research setting is situated in digital spaces, specifically Instagram and TikTok platforms. These platforms are selected because they serve as primary arenas for influencers to construct visibility, identity, and cultural engagement. Instagram is chosen for its strong visual and narrative features in shaping self-representation, while TikTok is selected for its interactive, algorithm-driven, and viral characteristics that accelerate cultural meaning production. The research setting is conceptualized as a digital social space rather than a physical geographic location.

The study involves five key informants selected through purposive sampling based on criteria such as content consistency, audience engagement, and symbolic influence. The informants are assigned pseudonyms to ensure ethical confidentiality. The first informant, Andra, is a lifestyle content creator. The second informant, Sinta, focuses on beauty content and body representation. The third informant, Raka, engages with popular culture and youth identity issues. The fourth informant, Maya, produces educational content related to digital culture. The fifth informant, Dimas, specializes in personal branding and online community building.

The selection of informants is justified by their role not only as content producers but also as cultural actors who construct meanings, values, and symbols through digital communication practices. The diversity of content backgrounds enables a comprehensive analysis of image construction and cultural representation. Informants were also selected based on their willingness to participate in reflective and in-depth interviews.

Data collection techniques include semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant digital observation, and digital document analysis. Interviews are conducted to explore influencers' perspectives on communication strategies, image construction, and their perceived cultural roles. Digital observation involves systematic monitoring of content, interactions, and communication patterns on social media platforms. Digital document analysis examines captions, videos, visuals, and audience responses as cultural texts containing symbolic meanings.

Data analysis follows a thematic interpretive approach. Collected data are coded, categorized, and interpreted based on the theoretical frameworks of social construction of reality, cultural representation, and network society. Source and method triangulation are employed to enhance the credibility of findings. Conclusions are drawn inductively by linking empirical findings with the conceptual framework, resulting in a coherent understanding of influencers as cultural actors within digital communication practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that influencers in digital communication contexts cannot be understood merely as highly popular individuals or content creators operating for commercial visibility. Rather, influencers emerge as cultural actors who actively participate in the construction, negotiation, and circulation of meaning and social reality within digital environments. This shift in perspective addresses the central research problem of how influencers construct their public image and enact communication practices that extend beyond personal branding into the realm of cultural production. The evidence shows that influencer image is not a spontaneous or incidental outcome of online presence, but a deliberate, reflexive, and continuously legitimized social construction shaped through audience interaction, platform affordances, and algorithmic visibility. In this sense, influencer identity is produced through ongoing symbolic labor rather than fixed personal expression.

This finding is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality theory, which conceptualizes reality as the outcome of social processes involving externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Within digital environments, these processes occur with greater speed, reach, and intensity. Influencers externalize meanings by producing content that articulates personal narratives, values, and lifestyles. These narratives become objectified through repetition, audience recognition, and platform circulation, eventually being internalized by followers as naturalized representations of reality. The digital context accelerates this cycle, allowing symbolic meanings to stabilize rapidly within networked publics. As a result, influencer-produced realities gain legitimacy not because of inherent truthfulness, but due to sustained visibility and audience validation.

Table 1. Qualitative Synthesis of Research Findings and Discussion on Influencers as Cultural Actors

Analytical Focus	Main Research Findings	Theoretical Interpretation	Conceptual Implications
Influencer image construction	Influencer images are selectively constructed through personal narratives, symbolic visuals, and content consistency aligned with audience expectations and platform logics	Social Construction of Reality Theory (Berger & Luckmann): influencer images constitute socially constructed realities that are externalized, objectified, and internalized by audiences	Influencers function as agents of symbolic reality formation rather than merely popular figures or individual communicators
Digital communication practices	Influencer communication is repetitive, interactive, and relational, shaped by audience engagement and platform algorithms	Network Society Theory (Castells): communication practices operate within digital networks governed by technological structures and information flows	Influencer communication practices should be understood as relational processes involving actors, audiences, and platforms
Cultural representation	Influencer content represents values, lifestyles, and identities that are normalized as social standards	Cultural Representation Theory (Stuart Hall): influencers produce meaning through ideologically embedded systems of signs and symbols	Influencers possess symbolic authority in framing cultural meanings within digital spaces
Audience relations	Audiences actively validate, reproduce, and reinforce influencer images through digital interactions	Integration of Berger & Hall: reality internalization and representational decoding occur through participatory processes	Audiences are not passive recipients but co-producers of digital cultural meaning
Power and visibility	Influencer influence is determined by the ability to manage visibility, engagement, and algorithmic adaptation	Network Society Theory (Castells): power resides in the management of networks and meaning flows	Influencer power is dynamic, contextual, and dependent on platform structures
Influencer positioning	Influencers act as cultural mediators between social values, digital technologies, and audience experiences	Synthesis of three theories: reality construction, representation, and networks	Influencers are positioned as cultural actors within digital

Analytical Focus	Main Research Findings	Theoretical Interpretation	Conceptual Implications
			communication ecosystems
Research gap	Previous studies tend to position influencers as marketing instruments or economic actors	Integrative theoretical approaches address the lack of cultural analysis	This study extends influencer research into the domain of digital cultural communication
Novel findings (novelty)	Influencers are understood as producers of cultural meaning operating within networked digital structures	Integration of Berger, Hall, and Castells	This study offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing influencer phenomena

This table presents a qualitative synthesis of the research findings and discussion by mapping the relationships between empirical results, theoretical interpretations, and conceptual implications. Each analytical focus demonstrates how influencers not only construct their public image but also engage in digital communication practices that function as processes of cultural production. By integrating the Social Construction of Reality theory, Cultural Representation theory, and Network Society theory, the table affirms that influencers operate as cultural actors within complex technological networks and social relations. The table also highlights the study's contribution in addressing gaps in previous research and underscores the novelty of the study in conceptualizing influencers as agents of cultural meaning-making in the era of digital communication.

The implementation of social construction theory is particularly evident in the ways influencers curate their identities through selective self-presentation. Influencers consciously foreground certain aspects of their lives such as success, authenticity, or emotional relatability while minimizing or concealing others that do not align with audience expectations or platform norms. This selective visibility creates symbolic realities that appear coherent, aspirational, and socially acceptable. Audiences, in turn, participate in reinforcing these constructions through likes, comments, shares, and imitation, thereby contributing to the internalization of influencer-generated meanings. This finding addresses a significant gap in existing research, which has often framed influencer image primarily as a marketing instrument or strategic branding practice, without recognizing its role as a socially constructed cultural reality.

Beyond social construction, the findings gain further depth when examined through Stuart Hall's Cultural Representation Theory. From this perspective, influencer communication practices function as representational processes embedded with cultural, ideological, and symbolic meanings. Influencers do not merely transmit information or promote products; they actively produce signs, symbols, and narratives that shape how audiences understand lifestyle, identity, success, beauty, and authenticity. These representations operate as cultural texts that encode particular values and norms, which audiences decode within their own social and cultural contexts. Influencers thus participate in meaning-making processes that extend far beyond individual communication acts.

The study reveals that influencer-generated representations frequently normalize specific cultural standards. For instance, notions of success are often framed through productivity, visibility, and self-optimization, while ideals of beauty are presented through carefully curated aesthetics that blend accessibility with aspiration. Authenticity is similarly constructed as a performative quality, achieved through controlled self-disclosure rather than unmediated transparency. These representational practices contribute to the reproduction of dominant cultural narratives, which audiences then circulate, reinterpret, and embody in their own digital practices. This empirical evidence

demonstrates the practical relevance of Hall's theory in contemporary digital culture, where representation operates through visual, narrative, and algorithmic mediation.

Importantly, the findings indicate that influencer representations are neither static nor universal. Instead, they are dynamic, situational, and deeply contextual. Influencers continuously adapt their representational strategies in response to shifting cultural trends, evolving audience expectations, and changes in platform algorithms. This adaptive behavior reinforces Hall's assertion that representation is never neutral, but always shaped by power relations and institutional contexts. In digital environments, power operates through visibility regimes, platform governance, and algorithmic prioritization, which influence whose representations are amplified and whose are marginalized. By highlighting influencers as authoritative producers of cultural meaning within these structures, the study addresses a research gap that has often overlooked the power dimension of influencer representation.

The application of Manuel Castells' Network Society theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding influencer practices within broader technological, structural, and cultural dynamics that characterize contemporary digital communication. Castells conceptualizes modern society as a network society, in which social structures are increasingly organized around digitally mediated networks rather than fixed institutions or hierarchical systems. Within this context, communication becomes the primary arena where power, meaning, and identity are negotiated. Influencer practices, as revealed by the findings of this study, are deeply embedded in these networked structures and cannot be separated from the technological infrastructures that enable and constrain them.

The findings indicate that influencer communication operates within digitally networked environments defined by flexibility, decentralization, and constant connectivity. Unlike traditional mass communication models that rely on centralized production and one-way dissemination, influencer communication is distributed across multiple nodes, including platforms, audiences, algorithms, and commercial actors. Influencers function as nodal points within these networks, simultaneously acting as content producers, cultural intermediaries, and symbolic reference figures. Their ability to circulate meanings depends not only on personal creativity or authenticity, but also on their position within the network and their capacity to mobilize attention across interconnected digital spaces.

One of the defining characteristics of the network society highlighted by Castells is the compression of time and space through digital connectivity. The findings demonstrate that influencers build and maintain relationships with audiences that transcend geographic boundaries, enabling the rapid circulation of meanings across diverse cultural and social contexts. Influencer-generated content can reach global audiences almost instantaneously, allowing local narratives, identities, and symbols to be recontextualized within transnational digital cultures. This spatial transcendence reinforces the role of influencers as cultural actors whose practices contribute to the globalization of meaning while simultaneously adapting to localized audience interpretations.

However, the study also reveals that this apparent decentralization does not imply the absence of structure or power. On the contrary, influencer practices are embedded within platform-controlled systems governed by algorithmic logic, data extraction mechanisms, and commercial imperatives. Castells emphasizes that power in the network society lies in the ability to program networks and control the flows of information within them. In the case of influencer communication, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok function as powerful network programmers that shape visibility, reach, and engagement through algorithmic sorting and ranking processes. Influencers must therefore align their practices with platform logics to maintain relevance and visibility within the network.

The findings suggest that influencer agency is both enabled and constrained by these algorithmic structures. While influencers possess a degree of autonomy in crafting narratives and representations, their communicative practices are continually adjusted in response to platform metrics such as engagement rates, views, and algorithmic recommendations. This dynamic illustrates Castells' argument that actors within the network society operate under conditions of structural dependency, where autonomy is negotiated rather than absolute. Influencers strategically adapt their content formats, posting schedules, and aesthetic choices to remain compatible with platform algorithms, highlighting the interdependence between cultural expression and technological infrastructure.

Moreover, the commercial dimension of networked platforms plays a significant role in shaping influencer practices. The findings show that influencer communication is deeply intertwined with monetization models, branding partnerships, and data-driven advertising systems. Platforms extract value from user-generated content and audience interactions, positioning influencers as both cultural producers and economic actors within the attention economy. This commercial embedding reinforces Castells' notion that networks are not neutral spaces but are shaped by capitalist logics that prioritize profitability and data accumulation. Influencer practices thus operate at the intersection of cultural production and economic exploitation, complicating simplistic narratives of creative freedom in digital environments.

The study further demonstrates that influencers function as mediators of meaning within networked power relations. Castells distinguishes between "network power," which arises from inclusion or exclusion within networks, and "networked power," which refers to the ability of certain actors to influence others within the network. Influencers exercise networked power by shaping discourses, normalizing values, and guiding audience interpretations through repeated communicative practices. However, their power is contingent upon continued network inclusion, which is regulated by platform policies, algorithmic shifts, and market dynamics. This precarious positioning underscores the fragility of influencer authority within the network society.

In addition, the findings highlight the role of audiences as active nodes within the network. Influencer communication is not a unidirectional process but a relational practice that depends on audience participation, feedback, and content circulation. Likes, comments, shares, and remixes function as mechanisms through which meanings are reinforced, contested, or transformed. This participatory dynamic aligns with Castells' emphasis on interactive communication flows in networked societies, where power and meaning emerge from continuous interactions rather than fixed hierarchies. Influencers must therefore engage in ongoing relational labor to sustain audience attachment and symbolic legitimacy.

At the same time, the study reveals tensions between participatory engagement and algorithmic governance. While audiences contribute to meaning-making, their interactions are filtered and amplified through platform algorithms that prioritize certain forms of engagement over others. This selective amplification shapes which meanings gain visibility and which remain marginal, reinforcing Castells' argument that network architectures structure communication possibilities. Influencers navigate this environment by crafting content that encourages algorithmically valued interactions, thereby aligning cultural expression with technological metrics. This alignment illustrates how network logic influences not only communication strategies but also the substance of cultural representation.

The findings also suggest that influencer practices contribute to the normalization of networked subjectivity. Influencers model forms of self-presentation, lifestyle performance, and identity negotiation that reflect the demands of constant connectivity and visibility. This aligns with Castells' concept of the "networked self," where individual identity is shaped through ongoing interaction with digital networks. Influencer communication promotes particular modes of selfhood that emphasize adaptability, self-branding, and continuous engagement, reinforcing broader cultural expectations within networked societies.

Importantly, the application of Network Society theory enables a critical understanding of the contradictions inherent in influencer practices. While influencers appear to embody empowerment, visibility, and cultural influence, their practices are deeply constrained by technological infrastructures that they do not control. The findings demonstrate that influencer communication is simultaneously a site of cultural creativity and structural dependency. This duality reflects Castells' broader argument that the network society produces new forms of power and resistance that are embedded within technological systems rather than external to them.

In the context of this research, Network Society theory also bridges the gap between micro-level communication practices and macro-level structural forces. Influencer image construction and digital communication strategies cannot be fully understood without considering the networked conditions under which they operate. The theory contextualizes individual agency within systemic

dynamics, highlighting how cultural meanings are produced through interactions between human actors, technological platforms, and economic interests. This integrative perspective addresses a key gap in influencer studies that often focus on individual strategies without adequately accounting for structural constraints.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that influencers play a role in reproducing and reshaping network culture itself. By adapting to algorithmic logics and commercial imperatives, influencers contribute to the normalization of platform-centric communication practices. At the same time, they introduce creative variations and cultural narratives that can challenge dominant representations, albeit within constrained parameters. This ambivalence reflects Castells' view of networks as spaces of both domination and potential transformation, where cultural change emerges through ongoing negotiation rather than radical rupture.

In sum, the application of Manuel Castells' Network Society theory provides a critical lens for understanding influencer practices as situated within complex, digitally mediated power structures. The findings demonstrate that influencer communication operates within flexible and decentralized networks that enable global connectivity while remaining governed by algorithmic and commercial logics. Influencers act as cultural actors who navigate these structures by strategically aligning cultural expression with technological demands. This analysis underscores that influencer practices are not merely individual choices but are shaped by the broader dynamics of the network society, where meaning, power, and identity are continuously produced through digitally networked communication processes.

Within this networked context, the symbolic power of influencers does not derive solely from quantitative metrics such as follower counts, likes, or views, which have traditionally been used to measure visibility and success in digital environments. While such metrics remain important indicators of reach, the findings of this study demonstrate that they are insufficient to explain the deeper forms of influence exercised by digital actors. Symbolic power emerges instead from the influencer's capacity to curate narratives, manage information flows, and continuously negotiate meaning within highly competitive and saturated attention economies. In digital networks characterized by constant content circulation, the ability to remain meaningful is as crucial as the ability to remain visible.

Influencers exercise power through their strategic positioning within communicative flows rather than through formal authority or institutionalized hierarchies. Their influence is rooted in the capacity to determine which topics gain prominence, how certain values are framed, and which forms of identity become normalized in everyday digital discourse. By selecting what to highlight, what to silence, and how to narrate experiences, influencers actively shape symbolic boundaries within networked publics. This process reflects a form of cultural power that operates subtly through representation, affect, and repetition rather than coercion or command.

The findings reveal that influencers sustain their symbolic power by maintaining sustained engagement rather than episodic attention. Engagement, in this sense, extends beyond numerical interaction and encompasses relational continuity, perceived authenticity, and emotional resonance. Influencers cultivate a sense of proximity with audiences by sharing personal narratives, responding selectively to audience feedback, and embedding cultural references that resonate with shared experiences. This relational labor transforms audiences from passive consumers into active participants in the circulation and reproduction of meaning, thereby reinforcing the influencer's symbolic authority.

Within competitive attention economies, relevance is not a static achievement but an ongoing process of adaptation. Influencers must continuously recalibrate their communicative strategies in response to shifting platform algorithms, emerging cultural trends, and changing audience expectations. The findings indicate that influencers who successfully maintain relevance are those who demonstrate interpretive sensitivity to cultural signals while simultaneously aligning their content with platform logics. This dual orientation underscores that symbolic power in digital networks is contingent upon both cultural competence and technological literacy.

This dynamic aligns closely with Manuel Castells' argument that power in network societies is exercised primarily through control over communication processes and meaning-making rather than through traditional hierarchical structures. In networked societies, Castells emphasizes that power resides in the ability to shape the codes of communication and the frameworks through which reality is interpreted. Influencers exemplify this form of power by functioning as nodes that mediate between cultural narratives, technological infrastructures, and audience interpretations. Their influence lies not in commanding audiences but in shaping the interpretive environments within which audiences make sense of social reality.

The findings further suggest that influencers operate as cultural intermediaries who translate abstract values into everyday symbolic forms. Through visual aesthetics, linguistic styles, and narrative framing, influencers render complex cultural meanings accessible and relatable. This intermediary role amplifies their symbolic power, as they become trusted reference points for interpreting trends, identities, and social norms. The authority of influencers thus emerges from their perceived competence in navigating cultural complexity and articulating it in ways that feel authentic and relevant to their audiences.

Importantly, the symbolic power exercised by influencers is relational and negotiated rather than absolute. Audience engagement plays a critical role in validating or contesting influencer authority. The findings indicate that influencers constantly monitor audience feedback, adapting their content to maintain alignment with collective expectations while preserving a coherent personal brand. This negotiation underscores that power in digital networks is distributed and contingent, shaped by ongoing interactions between influencers, audiences, and platforms.

Technological infrastructures further mediate the exercise of symbolic power. Platform algorithms prioritize certain forms of content, rhythms of posting, and modes of engagement, indirectly shaping which meanings gain visibility. Influencers who understand and strategically engage with these infrastructures are better positioned to amplify their symbolic influence. However, this dependence on platform logics also introduces vulnerability, as shifts in algorithmic governance can rapidly alter visibility and relevance. The findings thus highlight the precarious nature of symbolic power in networked communication environments.

From a cultural perspective, influencers contribute to the normalization of particular values and lifestyles through repetitive symbolic practices. The study shows that influencer content often reinforces dominant cultural narratives, such as entrepreneurial selfhood, aestheticized authenticity, and aspirational lifestyles. At the same time, some influencers strategically challenge or reframe these narratives, introducing alternative representations that resonate with marginalized or niche audiences. This dual capacity to reproduce and contest cultural norms further illustrates the complexity of influencer power within digital networks.

The intersection of culture, technology, and communication becomes particularly evident in how influencers manage visibility. Visibility is not merely about exposure but about being seen in specific ways. Influencers actively curate their self-presentation to align with cultural expectations of credibility and relatability while leveraging technological affordances to optimize reach. This process transforms visibility into a form of symbolic capital that can be converted into social legitimacy, cultural authority, and economic opportunity.

The findings position influencers as strategic actors who navigate these intersecting domains with reflexivity and intentionality. Their strategies are informed by an awareness of cultural trends, audience dynamics, and technological constraints. This strategic orientation distinguishes influencers from traditional media figures, whose authority often derives from institutional affiliation. Influencers, by contrast, construct authority through ongoing performance, interaction, and adaptation within decentralized communication networks.

In this sense, influencer power reflects broader transformations in the organization of social influence in digital societies. Power is no longer concentrated within centralized institutions but dispersed across networked actors who compete for attention and legitimacy. Influencers exemplify this

shift by demonstrating how cultural influence can be exercised through everyday communicative practices rather than formal positions of authority. Their success depends on the ability to align personal narratives with broader cultural currents while maintaining flexibility in response to technological change.

The findings also underscore the ethical implications of symbolic power in digital communication. As influencers shape what is perceived as desirable or meaningful, they bear responsibility for the cultural consequences of their representations. The normalization of certain ideals can contribute to exclusion, pressure, or unrealistic expectations among audiences. Recognizing influencers as cultural actors with symbolic power invites greater scrutiny of their communicative practices and the values they promote within digital publics.

In conclusion, the expanded analysis of symbolic power within networked contexts reinforces the central argument of this study: influencers function as strategic cultural actors whose power lies in their capacity to manage meaning, visibility, and engagement within digitally mediated networks. Their influence cannot be reduced to quantitative metrics but must be understood as a complex interplay of cultural representation, technological mediation, and communicative practice. By operating at the intersection of culture, technology, and communication, influencers exemplify the evolving nature of power in network societies, offering critical insights into how meaning is produced, circulated, and contested in contemporary digital life.

Collectively, these findings directly address the research questions concerning how influencers construct their image and enact digital communication practices as cultural actors. The integration of social construction theory, cultural representation theory, and network society theory demonstrates that image construction, representational practice, and digital communication are not isolated processes. Instead, they form an interconnected ecosystem of meaning production in which influencers function as cultural mediators. Through their practices, influencers bridge symbolic values, narrative frameworks, and technological structures, shaping how digital culture is produced, circulated, and interpreted.

The research objectives are achieved by identifying the layered and interdependent processes through which influencer image construction and digital communication practices operate within contemporary media environments. Rather than functioning as isolated activities, image formation and communication emerge as mutually constitutive processes shaped by social interaction, cultural negotiation, and technological mediation. The findings demonstrate that influencer practices unfold across multiple levels, including individual self-presentation, audience interpretation, and platform governance, all of which interact dynamically to produce socially meaningful realities. This layered process confirms that influencer phenomena cannot be adequately understood through linear or reductionist explanations, but require an integrative analytical perspective attentive to complexity and context.

At the theoretical level, the study reaffirms the enduring relevance of classical social and cultural theories while demonstrating their adaptability to digital communication contexts. Berger and Luckmann's framework of the social construction of reality provides a foundational explanation for how influencer identities are produced, stabilized, and taken for granted within everyday digital interactions. Influencer content represents a form of externalization, whereby subjective intentions, values, and narratives are projected into the public digital sphere. Through repetition and circulation, these expressions become objectivated as recognizable patterns of identity and authenticity. Over time, audiences internalize these constructions, accepting influencer images as naturalized social realities rather than strategic or performative outputs. This process illustrates how digital media intensifies and accelerates mechanisms of social construction that Berger and Luckmann originally conceptualized within face-to-face and institutional settings.

The findings further indicate that influencer realities are sustained through continuous interaction rather than fixed representation. Unlike traditional media figures whose images are largely mediated by institutional gatekeepers, influencers engage in ongoing negotiation with audiences through comments, feedback, and participatory practices. This interaction reinforces the normalization

of constructed realities, as audiences play an active role in validating and reproducing influencer identities. The application of Berger and Luckmann's theory thus extends beyond explaining how realities are formed to illustrating how they are maintained through networked participation. In this sense, influencer culture exemplifies a contemporary mode of social reality construction characterized by visibility, immediacy, and mutual reinforcement between producers and consumers of meaning.

Complementing this perspective, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation elucidates the symbolic and ideological dimensions embedded in influencer communication. The findings reveal that influencer content functions as a system of representation through which meanings about lifestyle, success, morality, and identity are articulated and circulated. Influencers do not merely depict aspects of social life; they actively frame and encode cultural meanings using visual aesthetics, narrative structures, and affective cues. These representations invite audiences to decode and interpret content in ways that align with dominant or negotiated cultural frameworks, reinforcing particular norms while marginalizing others.

Hall's emphasis on representation as a site of power is particularly salient in the context of influencer practices. The study demonstrates that influencers occupy a privileged position within digital cultural hierarchies, enabling them to define what is desirable, authentic, or aspirational. Their representations often blur the boundary between personal expression and cultural prescription, presenting curated lifestyles as attainable norms. This process underscores how influencer communication contributes to the reproduction of cultural values and social distinctions. By applying Hall's theory, the research moves beyond descriptive accounts of influencer content to critically examine how meaning is constructed, circulated, and contested within digital culture.

Moreover, the findings highlight the fluidity of representation in digital environments. Influencer representations are not static texts but evolving narratives responsive to trends, audience feedback, and platform affordances. This dynamism aligns with Hall's conception of representation as a process rather than a fixed outcome. Influencers continuously adjust their self-presentation to remain culturally relevant and algorithmically visible, illustrating how representation operates as an ongoing negotiation shaped by both cultural sensibilities and technological constraints. Through this lens, influencer practices exemplify contemporary forms of cultural production characterized by hybridity, reflexivity, and performativity.

While Berger and Luckmann and Stuart Hall provide insight into the social and cultural dimensions of influencer phenomena, Manuel Castells' theory of the network society situates these processes within broader technological and structural contexts. The findings demonstrate that influencer communication practices are embedded within networked systems governed by platform architectures, algorithmic logics, and data-driven visibility regimes. Influencers operate as nodes within digital networks, where power is exercised through the capacity to manage attention, connectivity, and information flows. Castells' perspective explains how influencer influence is not solely a function of individual charisma or cultural resonance, but also of strategic engagement with network structures.

The research reveals that influencers must continuously adapt their communication strategies to align with platform logics, including content formats, posting rhythms, and engagement metrics. These adaptations illustrate Castells' argument that power in network societies is exercised through the programming and reprogramming of networks. Influencers who successfully navigate these systems gain enhanced visibility and symbolic authority, while those who fail to adapt risk marginalization. The application of Castells' theory thus underscores the structural conditions shaping influencer practices and highlights the interdependence between cultural agency and technological infrastructure.

Importantly, the integration of Castells' framework shifts the analysis away from individual-centric explanations toward a relational understanding of influence. Influencers are not autonomous actors operating outside technological systems, but participants within complex networks that enable and constrain their cultural production. This insight addresses a critical gap in influencer research that often privileges personal branding and creativity while underexamining the role of platforms in shaping communication practices. By situating influencer phenomena within network society dynamics, the

study provides a more comprehensive account of how digital power operates at the intersection of culture, technology, and communication.

Taken together, the integration of Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism, Hall's representation theory, and Castells' network society perspective offers a robust analytical framework for understanding influencer phenomena beyond instrumental or commercial explanations. Rather than reducing influencers to marketing tools or economic actors, this theoretical synthesis positions them as cultural agents embedded within socially constructed realities, representational systems, and networked infrastructures. The findings demonstrate that influencer practices simultaneously produce social meanings, negotiate cultural values, and engage with technological logics, revealing the multidimensional nature of digital influence.

This integrated framework also advances scholarly understanding by bridging theoretical traditions that are often treated separately. Social construction theory explains how influencer realities are formed and normalized, representation theory reveals how meanings are encoded and circulated, and network society theory contextualizes these processes within digital power structures. By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the study contributes to the development of a holistic approach to digital communication research that accounts for agency, culture, and structure. Such an approach is particularly necessary in analyzing contemporary media phenomena characterized by rapid technological change and cultural hybridity.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the findings have important implications for future research and critical inquiry. The recognition of influencers as cultural actors invites scholars to examine ethical, political, and social dimensions of digital influence, including issues of representation, inequality, and algorithmic governance. It also encourages methodological approaches that capture the complexity of digital practices, such as multi-sited digital ethnography and longitudinal analysis. By grounding these inquiries in established social and cultural theories, researchers can develop nuanced analyses that transcend surface-level descriptions and engage with deeper questions of meaning and power.

In conclusion, the achievement of the research objectives lies not only in explaining how influencer image and communication practices function, but in demonstrating the continued relevance of classical theories for understanding contemporary digital culture. The findings affirm that despite technological transformations, fundamental processes of social construction, cultural representation, and networked power remain central to communication practices. By adapting and integrating these theoretical frameworks, the study provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing influencer phenomena as complex cultural processes rather than merely commercial strategies, thereby enriching the field of digital communication and cultural studies.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in advancing digital cultural communication scholarship through an integrative framework that synthesizes sociological, cultural, and technological perspectives. Academically, the study enriches influencer research by offering a critical, interdisciplinary approach that moves beyond descriptive analyses toward deeper conceptual engagement. It challenges reductionist views of influencers as marketing tools and instead positions them as active participants in cultural production and social meaning-making.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer valuable insights for communication practitioners, content creators, and policymakers. Understanding influencers as cultural actors highlights the broader societal implications of influencer communication, including its impact on identity formation, value normalization, and public discourse. For policymakers, this perspective underscores the need for ethical considerations and regulatory frameworks that address the cultural influence of digital content creators. For practitioners, the findings emphasize the responsibility inherent in shaping symbolic realities that audiences internalize and reproduce.

In relation to previous studies, this research aligns with existing literature that recognizes influencers' capacity to shape audience attitudes and preferences. However, it extends prior research by situating influencer practices within a broader cultural and theoretical context. Rather than focusing solely on effectiveness, engagement, or persuasion, this study foregrounds meaning production,

representation, and power relations. In doing so, it bridges the longstanding gap between cultural analysis and technological analysis in influencer research.

By systematically linking empirical findings with established theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates that influencers operate as agents of reality construction and cultural representation within networked digital environments. The research questions and objectives are comprehensively addressed, and the study's contributions theoretical, academic, and practical are strengthened by robust empirical evidence. Ultimately, the findings affirm that influencers play a strategic role in shaping digital communication and cultural dynamics, making them indispensable subjects for contemporary communication scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the phenomenon of influencers in digital communication spaces cannot be narrowly understood as a matter of popularity or marketing strategy alone, but rather as a complex cultural practice. Drawing from the research findings and discussion, influencers are demonstrated to function as cultural actors who actively construct, negotiate, and reproduce social meanings through image construction and sustained digital communication practices. The images presented by influencers are not objective reflections of identity but socially constructed realities legitimized through continuous interaction with audiences and digital media structures.

The findings indicate that influencer image construction involves selective representation of identity, values, and narratives aligned with audience expectations and platform logics. This process confirms that digital realities produced by influencers are symbolic constructions accepted as social truths by audiences. Such conclusions reinforce the discussion that positions influencers as agents of social reality construction within digital societies.

In terms of communication practices, the study concludes that influencers employ digital communication not merely as a channel for message delivery but as a mechanism of cultural production. Influencer-generated content functions as symbolic representation shaping how audiences interpret lifestyle, identity, and social values. These representations are dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by power relations embedded within digital media ecosystems. This conclusion aligns with the discussion highlighting influencers' symbolic authority in shaping digital cultural discourse.

The study further concludes that influencer communication practices are embedded within networked societies governed by technological and algorithmic logics. Influencers operate within digital networks that enable broad circulation of meaning while simultaneously constraining communication through platform visibility mechanisms. Consequently, influencer power is relational and contingent upon their ability to manage information flows and audience engagement within digital networks. This conclusion reinforces the discussion that situates influencers as mediators between technology, culture, and audiences.

Overall, the conclusions address the central research problem concerning influencers as cultural actors by demonstrating how image construction and digital communication practices contribute to cultural meaning-making. Influencers are shown to shape not only individual audience perceptions but also collective meanings within digital societies. As such, influencers occupy a strategic position in the production and circulation of contemporary culture.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the advancement of digital cultural communication scholarship by providing a comprehensive understanding of influencers as active agents in meaning production and social reality construction. Grounded in the research findings and discussion, the study offers a conceptual foundation for future research examining cultural dynamics in digital communication. By synthesizing the empirical results, this research underscores the importance of recognizing influencers as integral components of ongoing transformations in communication and culture in the digital era.

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