No Filter: Navigating Well-Being in Troubled Times as Social Media Influencers

Nataly Levesque, Alysha Hachey, Albena Pergelova

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Nataly Levesque

Faculty of Business Administration, Laval University, Marketing Department

Palasis Prince Pavilion, office 5240

2325 rue de la Terrasse, Quebec, Canada, G1V 0A6

Tel. +1 514-265-0540

Email: nataly.levesque.1@ulaval.ca

Alysha Hachey

University of Hawaii

Shidler College of Business

2404 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822

Tel. +1 (808) 956-6723

E-mail: ahachey@hawaii.edu

Albena Pergelova*

Associate Professor

Department of International Business, Marketing, Strategy & Law

School of Business, MacEwan University,

10700-104 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T5J 4S2

Tel. +1 780 633 3798

E-mail: PergelovaA@macewan.ca

*Corresponding author

Note: The authors contributed equally to the development of this manuscript.

Author bios:

Nataly Levesque, PhD, is a lecturer in Marketing in the Faculty of Business Administration (FSA) at Laval University, Canada. Her research interests lie in the field of social psychology of consumer behaviour. Specifically, she studies brand management, focusing on the human brand either the relation of engagement between an influencer and a follower on social media. She is also interested in sports management and is a member of the International Observatory of Sports Management. Her research is supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Fonds de recherche du Québec-Society and Culture (FRQSC). Nataly holds Bachelor of Arts in Communication from the University of Montreal and a Master of Science in Marketing from the UQAM-ESG School of Management.

Alysha Hachey is a PhD student in Management at the University of Hawaii. Prior to starting the program, she worked as a Sessional Instructor at MacEwan University for four years. Alysha's research interests surround social media influencers, family business and telework. Her research is supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Alysha holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from MacEwan University as well as a Master of Business Administration from Pepperdine University.

Albena Pergelova, PhD, is an associate professor at the School of Business, MacEwan University (Canada). Her research is multidisciplinary and spans marketing, entrepreneurship, and international business. Albena's research has been recognized with numerous awards, among which the G. Dale Meyer Best Paper Award for the Most Relevant Research in Social Entrepreneurship from the Babson College Entrepreneurship Research Conference (2017), Best Paper Award from DIANA International Research conference on women entrepreneurship (2017), Commendable Research Paper Award from the Eastern Academy of Management Annual Meeting (2019), and several Best paper in track Awards from the Academy of Marketing (UK). Albena's research has appeared in a wide range of international journals across disciplines, such as Journal of Advertising, Journal of Consumer Affairs, International Journal of Advertising, Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, Entrepreneurship & Regional Development, Journal of Business Research, International Small Business Journal, Journal of Small Business Management, Journal of Business Ethics, among others.

No filter: Navigating well-being in troubled times as social media influencers

Abstract

Social media influencers have the ability to impact the behaviours and attitudes of others (i.e., their followers), affecting people's feelings of connectedness, and well-being. This has become particularly apparent during troubled times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the importance of relationships and social interactions for people's well-being. However, less attention has been paid to influencers' own well-being in a monetised attention economy, which imposes tensions between the desire for authenticity and the self-presentations of influencers in online interactions. Using in-depth interviews and netnography as methodology, in this study we examine how the decision to engage with the topic of COVID-19 on social media impacted influencers' well-being during the pandemic. We build on self-determination theory to reveal how the contentious nature of the subject led to internal struggles of influencers' self-presentation, and elucidate how influencers navigated the boundaries of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in a quest for well-being.

Keywords: social media influencers, troubled times, COVID-19, well-being, self-determination theory, autonomy, relatedness, competence

Summary statement of contribution

This research highlights a neglected aspect of influencer marketing - the importance of attending to the influencer's well-being and integrated sense of self in the process of building a "human brand." The findings underscore the tensions inherent in influencers' labour (especially during troubled times such as the COVID-19 pandemic), and the resulting implications for their well-

being. We uncover how the process of building and marketing a self-brand was intermingled with externally imposed pressures, as influencers were renegotiating what is possible and desirable during the pandemic.

Introduction

Collectively and throughout history, individuals have experienced periods of troubled times (e.g., famine, slavery, war) creating significant socio-economic changes (Benjamin et al., 2020). More recently, social events such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and COVID-19 have forced us to examine our values, affecting the perception of our rights to freedom and the way we communicate with others. The impact of COVID-19 on the world and the global economy is likely to be the most severe since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Euronews, 2020; He & Harris, 2020). The pandemic has presented a concerning combination of adverse effects, such as physical isolation, economic instability, and stress of insecurity about the future, all of which impacts people's mental health and overall well-being (Brooks et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The pandemic has also presented many challenges for businesses, shifting the way they must reach out to and communicate with customers (e.g., Azer et al., 2021) and limited our ability to socialise (Hollebeek et al., 2020). Thus, social media has proven to be widely used as a relevant media channel in communication and crisis management (Azar et al., 2021) helping people meet their human interaction needs and cope with the pandemic (Benjamin et al., 2020).

The growing interest in social media has also highlighted the ubiquity of a type of human brand: the digital influencer (Levesque & Pons, 2020). Influencers are individuals who have amassed a following on social media (Campbell & Ferrall, 2020). As opinion leaders, they share

their personal experiences and their daily life with their followers (Pirick, 2018). Influencers are perceived as very close to their community, and for many followers, influencers are an ultimate reference to guide their perceptions and actions (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Therefore, influencers' social platform allows them to play an important role in communicating and supporting their community in troubled times.

Previous research has emphasised the role of relatedness in influencer - follower interactions (Thomson, 2006; Ilicic et al., 2016). The presence of influencers can therefore be particularly important in the daily life of many individuals. Especially during the pandemic lockdowns, as people were observed to spend more time on social media (Holmes, 2020), influencers provided a friendly virtual presence for their followers. Interestingly, some celebrity influencers such as Tom Hanks and Kristen Bell, or others who have built their notoriety on social media, like Claudie Mercier and Camille Dufresnehave chosen to engage actively with the topic of COVID-19 on their social media posts, becoming advocates for safety measures and / or mental health. Meanwhile, many influencers have avoided the topic altogether, while others have directly contributed to the dissemination of misinformation (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). Thus, it is important to recognize the profound social impact of social media influencers, and the role that influencer-follower interactions can play in the well-being of the interacting parties.

Previous research on influencer marketing has examined the effectiveness of using influencers in marketing campaigns (e.g., Ki et al., 2020), the growing commodification of private lives on social media (e.g., Drenten et al., 2020), as well as how influencers can impact the well-being of their followers (e.g., Hurley, 2019; Lutkenhaus et al., 2019). However, less attention has been paid to the influencers' own perceptions of well-being. Yet, such issues are

important to attend to in a neoliberal attention economy, where influencers are subjected to the pressures of trying to balance their desirability as brand ambassadors (monetising their following) versus their desire to express their authentic self (Ashman et al., 2018). Those pressures have implications for influencers' sense of self, as well as their well-being. Importantly, during troubled times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, those pressures can intensify because the expression of their opinions and values can be more constrained due to the polarity of opinions. Thus, in this research we focus on the less-explored socio-cultural aspects of the increasing use of influencers as marketing tools. In particular, we examine how interactions between influencers and their followers' impact influencers' search for meaning and expression of self - and consequently their well-being - during troubled times, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a context. More specifically, the research question that we address is: *How does navigating the monetised attention economy during troubled times affect influencers' well-being?* Accordingly, in this study we explore how and why social media influencers reacted to COVID-19 in their posts on social media and what is the impact of engagement with the topic on influencers' well-being.

The pandemic presents a particularly suitable context to assess well-being, as both influencers and followers turned to parasocial relationships (e.g., Reinikainen et al., 2020) for support and many people were forced to re-examine their lives and reconstruct their relationships. In order to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of influencers, we followed a netnography approach (Kozinets, 2015), combined with in-depth interviews with Instagram influencers. We specifically focused on influencers who have chosen to engage with the topic of COVID-19 in their interactions with followers on social media, as the topic is controversial, and many influencers decided to ignore it altogether. Thus, choosing to

"take sides" and discuss COVID-19 has implications for the way influencers perceive and project themselves online, and can affect their well-being.

Our study offers the following contributions to the literature on influencer marketing. First, we highlight the importance of attending to the different drivers toward well-being (autonomy, relatedness, competence) in the process of building a human brand. While extant literature has underscored the importance of influencers' presence for their followers' feelings of well-being (Thomson, 2006; Ilicic et al., 2016), we turn the attention to how the dynamics of online social interactions impact the well-being of influencers. Second, our research demonstrates how tensions arise for influencers as they seek to build and negotiate an integrated sense of self amid pressures between their desire for authenticity and their felt responsibility to preserve a socially accepted human brand in troubled times. Living and working under the pressure of "monetised life" in the attention economy (Marwick, 2015), many influencers struggle to maintain personal well-being and a sense of authentic self (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). Our findings shed light on the tensions inherent in influencers' labour, and the resulting implications for their well-being. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, we present a brief literature review on influencer marketing with a special focus on the role of influencers and associated tensions in "troubled times". Then, we outline our conceptual framework, building on the tenets of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Next, we present the methodology, including sample, data collection, and analytical approach. We then turn to a description of the findings, and finally offer a discussion and conclusion.

Conceptual Development

Social Media Influencers in Troubled Times

Social media influencers have become a major part of many brands' marketing campaigns (Levesque, 2022). Initial attention to influencers in marketing research has been focused on the *effectiveness of using influencers as a marketing tool* (e.g., Kay et al., 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020), as well as the *ethical and regulatory concerns* related to consumers' knowledge and understanding of when influencer posts are brand-sponsored and not the authentic opinion of the influencer, and consequently the importance of proper disclosure (e.g., De Jans et al., 2018; Abidin et al., 2020; De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Research has also looked at the *commodification and monetisation of private lives* of influencers and the labour involved in doing so, along with gendered aspects of identity construction on social media (e.g., Campana et al., 2020; Drenten et al. 2020; Ferguson et al., 2021). The pressures of such commodification in a monetised attention economy have led to tensions for influencers struggling to project their authentic self, while negotiating the demands of brands and followers. Identifying the tensions around their authenticity is essential to understanding the well-being implications for influencers (Rivera et al., 2019), as they must reconcile their positions as promoters of consumption and marshals of authentic sociality and community (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021).

A recent stream of research has examined the role of influencers and associated tensions in "troubled times" across a wide range of important social issues, such as racial inequality (e.g., the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement), sexism (e.g., #MeToo), ageism, and consumer health and well-being (Mendes et al., 2018; Yang et al. 2021; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). In troubled times, navigating the monetised economy (a source of influencers' income) while maintaining a sense of authentic self (a source of well-being) becomes increasingly challenging. For instance, Wellman (2022) examined the #BlackLivesMatter discourse on Instagram, and found that

influencers used posting of black squares as a way of allyship and to build and maintain credibility with their followers; however, influencers' inability to genuinely integrate their brand image with the Black Lives Matter movement meant little or no progress towards equity goals. Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund (2022) studied #BlackLivesMatter on TikTok and contend that while (white) influencers raised awareness for the movement, they appeared to leverage it for their own self-exposure, thus displacing the focus on racial injustice. Yang et al. (2021) found that black-influencer-created BLM messages attracted higher consumer engagement than posts by nonblack influencers and brands, and received the highest percentage of praise and appreciation. The authors suggest that influencers have a promising potential of communicating social responsibility messages of high relevance to society.

Researchers have also examined the role of influencers in discourses about gender issues and ageism. Mendes et al. (2018) discuss how the use of hashtags such as #MeToo can lead to positive experiences, such as generating community and connections, but also to anxiety and fear for some participants. Veresiu & Parmentier (2021) examined how female style influencers aged 50+ can help transform perceptions in the ageist and sexist fashion and beauty markets, using embodied resistance to the dominant discourses and defying beauty standards. Campana et al. (2020) show how father influencers on Instagram ("Instadads") challenge gendered discourses on masculinities and monetise the sharing of their parental experiences.

Another "troubled times" topic that influencers have a role in is the increasing attention to consumer (mental) health and well-being. Research has found both positive and negative effects of influencers on consumer health. For instance, McCosket (2018) studied prominent peer mentors acting as mental health influencers, and their role in framing mental health and recovery. Conversely, Lowe-Calverley & Grieve (2021) point to the negative impacts (negative mood and

body dissatisfaction) of viewing idealised influencer imagery, and how such idealised / unrealistic content affects female psychological well-being. Other studies have also found negative effects on young women, related to body image perceptions and correspondingly reduced well-being (e.g., Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017; Fardouly et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017). Chatzopoulou et al. (2020) focused on young male consumers, and explored how exposure to Instagram fitness hashtags and the idealised "instabod" affects their well-being. The authors found that it could lead to anxiety and muscle dysmorphia symptoms, but also to positive reinforcements such as higher self-confidence, and motivation to stay fit and to eat healthy.

As social media provides a digital platform for idealised performance and identity experiences (Hurley, 2019), followers are increasingly engaged in identifying influencers who seem to defy the standards of true self-presentation by acting as "the authenticity police" (MacRae, 2017). This has given rise to "keeping it raw", for example, showing unedited and realistic visuals of the influencer body on Instagram, as well as fuelling real discussions on topics such as mental health (Reade, 2021).

Relatedly, studies have demonstrated the importance of the ability of influencers to instil feelings of relatedness and autonomy in their followers for building attachment to the influencer (Thomson, 2006; Ilicic et al., 2016). However, even though the literature has provided evidence of how influencers can affect well-being through fostering feelings of relatedness and autonomy for their followers, to date, the literature has neglected what factors affect the influencers' experiences and perceptions of well-being. The tensions inherent in trying to be true to oneself while adhering to market pressures present a challenge for influencers' perceptions of self, and authenticity, and pose a threat to their ability to achieve well-being. Research has suggested that influencers act as autopreneurs in creating and maintaining a marketable identity, but in this

process, they encounter many prescribed norms and constraints stemming from the nature of the attention economy (Ashman et al., 2018). In the context of COVID-19, many influencers have had to redefine their projected persona online while balancing their self-concept and the tensions of a polarised social environment. Thus, it is pertinent to examine influencers' well-being during troubled times such as COVID-19.

Self-Determination Theory

To guide our study, we build on self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT has been used in the marketing literature to study influencers (e.g., Thomson, 2006; Liu et al., 2015; Ilicic et al., 2016), and in the entrepreneurship literature to study entrepreneurial behaviour and motivations (e.g., Shir et al., 2019; Nikolaev et al., 2019), many of which are relevant for influencers who act entrepreneurially to build their "human brand" in a monetised social media attention economy (e.g., Ashman et al., 2018; Campana et al., 2020).

Self-determination theory is a framework for the study of human motivation and personality. The theory is based on three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy refers to experiences of volition, i.e., it represents an individual's need to feel that their actions are self-directed. As such, autonomy involves acting from one's integrated sense of self and reflects humans' desire to self-organise their experiences and behaviours to be congruent with that integrated self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence relates to the experience of effectiveness and mastery, and the ability to engage in activities that use and extend a person's skills and expertise. Relatedness refers to the human need for connectedness with others, and feelings of being cared for. SDT posits that the fulfilment of those three basic needs is essential for a person's psychological growth, integrity,

and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). SDT is placed within the organismic-dialectical tradition where people are seen as active and growth-oriented organisms. Thus, the concept of self in SDT focuses on intrinsic activities / intrinsic motivation, where human beings are assumed to have innate tendencies to engage in activities that help them refine their inner representation of themselves and the surrounding world (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT emphasises the importance of peoples' natural inclination towards integration of their self, which includes both a unified sense of self (i.e., acting according to their own volition, values, etc.) and integration into larger social structures. In SDT, to the extent that the social environment provides nutriments for the satisfaction of the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, individuals will experience positive psychological functioning and well-being. Conversely, the inhibition of the fulfilment of those needs in the social environment will lead to less-than-optimal functioning and well-being.

In the marketing literature, building on SDT, Thomson (2006) argues that "human brands" (influencers) who are able to encourage basic human needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence among their followers cultivate the development of strong attachment bonds to the influencer. Thomson's results confirm that feelings of autonomy and relatedness have a significant impact on consumers' attachment, trust, and commitment towards the influencer. Similarly, Ilicic et al. (2016) found support for the importance of autonomy and relatedness in the interactions between consumers and "human brands", especially among younger consumers.

While extant research in marketing has examined how the tenets of SDT can affect followers' daily lives and aspects leading to well-being (e.g., autonomy, relatedness), and consequently the success of influencer marketing campaigns, less attention has been devoted to influencers' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness while exercising the labour

of influencer marketing. Both in and out of the marketing field, scholars have problematised the supposedly democratising effects of influencer marketing, pointing to the necessarily market-driven and self-promotional aspects of the work of influencers, as opposed to the desire for autonomy and authenticity (e.g., Duffy, 2015; Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Ferguson et al., 2021). A neoliberal market logic can impose a "sense of straitjacketing" (Ashman et al., 2018, p. 480) requiring influencers to follow prescribed norms if they are to be "successful" by the measures of the attention economy, which can have an impact on their emotional state and feelings of well-being. Scholars have also highlighted the constraining self-monitoring (and peer-driven surveillance) aspects of social media and apps, especially with regard to the female body commodification (Lupton, 2016; Elias & Gill, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2021) and how influencers are involved in shifting cultural norms around body "management" and marketisation (Drenten et al., 2020). Instead of autonomy and agency, the marketplace can lead them to a misplaced sense of empowerment (Ferguson et al., 2021; Rome & Lambert, 2020). Such self-monitoring and straitjacketing based on the rules of the neoliberal marketplace, inevitably conflict with feelings of autonomy and alter the way influencers interact and relate to their audiences (Ashman et al., 2018), and as such can affect their well-being.

Influencer marketing is a demanding and competitive job, as influencers compete for attention and followers that they can monetise via brand sponsorships (Abidin, 2016). A study of a thousand influencers with 50,000+ followers found that on average, they spend 9 hours 2 minutes per day on their mobile device (Austen, 2020). Depending on the platform and the number of followers, an influencer can earn several thousand dollars per sponsored post (Hadouni, 2021). At the same time, although influencers act as digital "microentrepreneurs" involved in content production and "human brand" creation, their labour is still largely insecure

and unregulated (O'Meara, 2019). All of this can have a profound impact on influencers' self-perceptions, and their well-being. This situation was further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic during which uncertainty and changing rules of engagement were a part of daily life. As such, to inform our study, we used SDT to guide us in several ways. First, the theory informed our interview guide with influencers. During the interviews, we included questions about the relationship between their role as an influencer and other aspects of their life (e.g., being an entrepreneur, a mom), as well as how their well-being has been affected and whether or not they perceive changes in how they project their persona and their role as an influencer during the pandemic. Second, during the interview data analysis, following an iterative process of going back and forth between data and existing literature, the theory helped refine our conceptual categories emerging from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Third, the theory also informed our netnographic analysis by providing a lens to juxtapose the narratives of the text and the images accompanying the text, by focusing our attention to the tensions and contradictions of trying to project an image that is both "marketable" and authentic, while maintaining a feeling of autonomy and relatedness.

Methodology

The methodology consisted of a combination of (1) semi-structured interviews with influencers and (2) netnography (Kozinets, 2015). This methodological approach allowed for deep, rich insights into influencers' lived experiences. Indeed, the floor was given to influencers to express themselves on their daily experience in connection with their posts relating to COVID-19. Our interest therefore focused on the subjectivity and reflective capacities of influencers (Gaudet & Robert, 2018), because they are in the best position to explain their experiences in the face of their personal feelings and those of their followers during the pandemic.

While the first part of our methodology (in-depth interviews) allowed for a more active engagement with influencers to understand their motivations, the second part relied on netnography, where the researchers monitored the communication and interaction of community members / followers while occasionally engaging with the content through likes and comments. As opposed to "lurking" (Jeffrey et al., 2021), where the research intent is covert and the researchers are passive, in this study, the influencers provided informed consent to participate, and the researchers engaged in the content. This aligns with Kozinets (2009; 2015) conceptualization that netnography requires participation. Lurking has been viewed as a continuum (Jeffrey et al., 2021), and while some studies employ unobtrusive netnography (e.g., Azer & Alexander, 2018; Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2020), in the present study, the researchers were engaging in the conversation through likes and comments and formalised their role with participants. According to Kozinets (2009), netnography provides information on the symbolism, meanings and modes of consumption of online consumer groups. Moreover, what is particularly interesting in relation to the use of netnography is that it allows us to capture details such as captions and emojis which we included in our analysis following the approach of other researchers (e.g., Jeffrey et al., 2021). The combination of interviews with influencers and analysis of actual posts online thus helped to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the issues related to how and why COVID-19 was addressed by the influencers and their followers, and the resulting implications from engagement with the topic on social media. The use of multiple data sources also ensured triangulation and sound interpretation of the data. Figure 1 offers a chronological representation of our data collection process.

Sample and data collection

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with eleven influencers (6 females, 5 males) located in Canada and the United States, with a mix of nano-influencers (< 10k followers) to macro-influencer (100k-1M followers) (Ouahi & Melghagh, 2020). Table 1 provides the respondents profiles. We followed a purposive sampling approach, similar to other studies focused on an in-depth understanding of influencers (e.g., Campana et al., 2020; Pemberton & Takhar, 2021). The purposive sampling allowed for focusing on a sample of influencers who had actively engaged with COVID-19 related topics on their social media posts, represented a range of industries (e.g., fitness, beauty, health), and included a gender-balanced sample of female and male influencers. Hashtags have been used in previous literature to identify relevant influencer posts (Locatelli et al., 2017; Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017), and we also used hashtags related to our study such as #covid19 #stayhomestaysafe and #vaccinated. Participants were recruited according to the following selection criteria: age (18+), location (Canada and USA), and actively engaged with COVID-19 (all participants had posted on the topic at least once a month for the past 8 months). Then, the researchers contacted the influencers directly via their private messages on Instagram (DM) to offer them to be part of this research.

Before beginning data collection, we obtained research ethics board approval. Each participating influencer signed a consent form, which described the study, informed participants that they can withdraw from the study at any time, and explained how interview quotations will be used. All participants were assigned pseudonyms for the purposes of reporting the results of the study. Participants who indicated that they are comfortable being named were further asked to confirm if we can use their Instagram posts in the article. Only participants who indicated that they agree were considered for inclusion of their posts in the article. The interviews were conducted online between November 2020 and February 2021, they were audio-recorded, and

subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis (Joffe, 2012). The interviews started with questions about "life as an influencer" and continued with questions about pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic interactions with followers. The interviews also addressed motivations to post about COVID-19 on social media, the effects / impacts of engaging with COVID-19 on interactions with followers, and influencers' own perceptions about the effect of those interactions on their lives and perceptions of well-being.

The interview data was complemented with observation of the social media activity of each influencer as well as analysis of the social media posts by influencers and the reactions of their followers online. We focused on Instagram, as this platform has emerged as the dominant one for influencers. With over a billion users per month (Newberry, 2021) and 4.2 billion likes per day, industry reports estimate that Instagram is included in more than 90% of influencer campaigns, and most influencers use Instagram as their primary social media platform (Williams, 2018). In addition, Instagram, the social network that centres on images, is the strategic self-promotion tool for influencers (Jin & Ryu, 2019). It offers an instant way to showcase slices of life, while facilitating followers' engagement (Hu et al., 2014; Marwick, 2015). Thus, Instagram is the platform most loved by influencers because of the immediacy and creativity it offers, as well as the ability to foster community (#Hashoff, 2017).

Figure 1. Chronological representation of the data collection

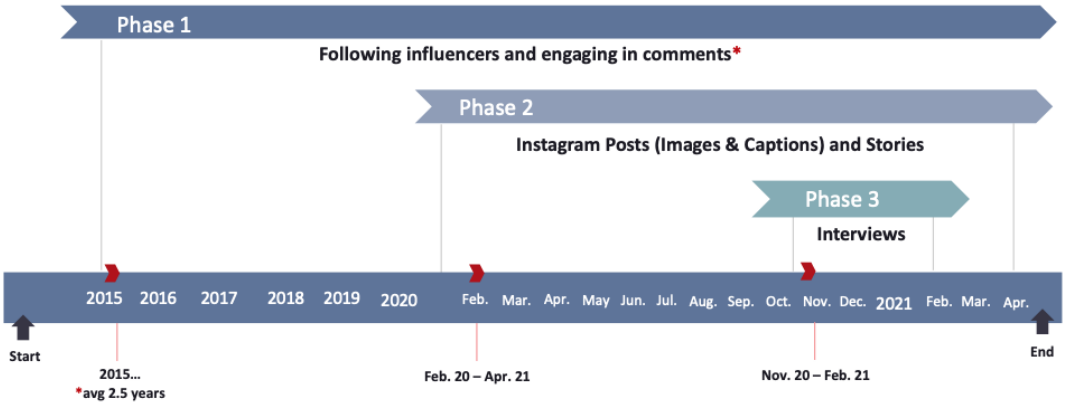


Table 1. Participants profiles

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Industry	Followers*
Anthony	M	30	Health and Fitness	7 000
Andrew	M	27	Sports	27 000
Bella	F	31	Beauty and Wellness	1 603
Jade	F	32	Media	1 904
Stephen	M	26	Entertainment	74 000
Alyson	F	22	Entertainment	131 000
Oliver	M	29	Health and Fitness	9 349
Cara	F	38	Interior Design	82 700
Genevieve	F	32	Healthcare	84 700
Harlie	F	26	Academia	1 221
Raynold	M	44	Entertainment	201 000

Note. * Number of Instagram followers at time of data collection.

For this part of the methodology, we followed the netnography approach (Kozinets, 2015). At least one of the authors had been actively involved with observation of and participation in the online posts and comments of each influencer's social media posts for an average period of 2.5 years before the formal interview data collection. This helped build familiarity and position the resulting insights within context. Additionally, we used social media scraping software to systematically collect all Instagram posts by the influencers for a period of 14 months (from February 2020 to April 2021). We also collected the number of comments and likes for each post. We analysed a total of 1,328 posts. There was a large range in the frequency of posts; at the lower bound, one influencer only posted 20 times in the 14 months, and at the upper bound another shared 408 posts in this timeframe. The average number of posts in our sample was 120.7 in the 14 months. This is consistent with the average Instagram activity of influencers; in 2020, influencers posted to Instagram an average of 2.3 times per week (~138 times in 14 months) (Trösch, 2020). It is also noteworthy that the influencer with the fewest posts was a professional athlete and the one with the most posts made her living on social media. In addition to the posts (images and captions), we also analysed Instagram stories of the influencers, as well as the comments of the posts. An observational logbook was used to take notes on Instagram stories, saving details such as the specific verbal / written text, filters and emojis in real time (Creswell, 2009; Jeffrey et al., 2021).

Data analysis

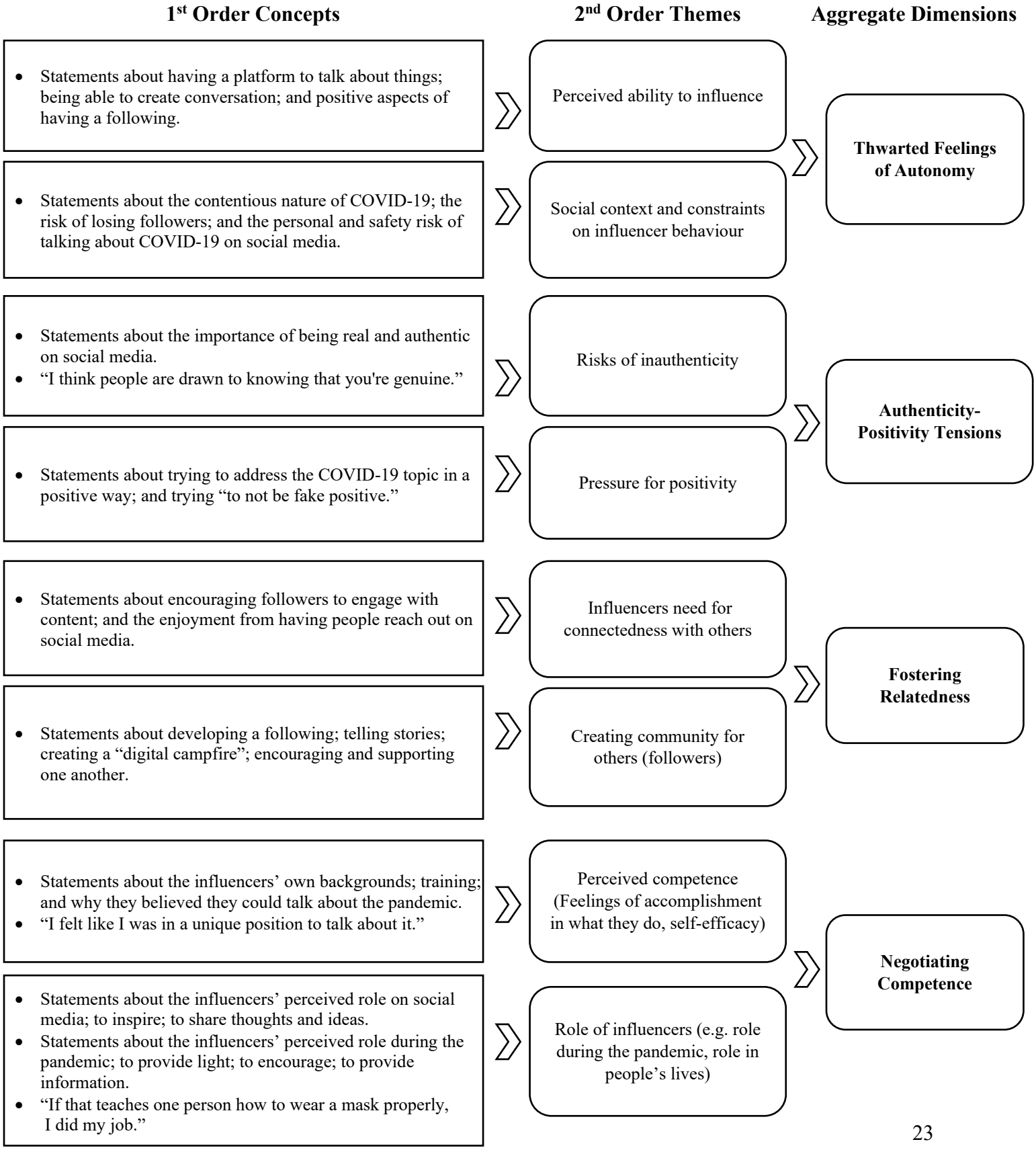
We first analysed the interview data thematically following open coding procedures and the constant comparison method. Such thematic analysis is recommended for studies based on social representations (Joffe, 2012). Thus, as codes emerged from the interviews, coders compared them to see what trends emerged, while exploring the links between the different codes (Corbin

& Strauss, 1990). This led to the identification of common themes and emerging patterns that were further reduced to major categories (Charmaz, 2006). This coding process was driven inductively by searching for emergent themes as well deductively informed by the theoretical concepts identified in the literature and conceptual framework (e.g., autonomy, authenticity). Throughout the coding process we sought to understand what factors affect influencers' perceptions of well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview transcripts were therefore analysed both on themes linked to the theory and emerging themes from the data collected by the researchers (deductive / inductive) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cocker et al., 2018). Moreover, and following the conventions of netnography, the analysis and interpretation of data followed an iterative process of going back and forth between literature and data (Kozinets, 2015).

Additionally, we analysed influencers' posts on Instagram, including both images and text. Bateman (2014) suggests that with storytelling, the visual and verbal elements are interdependent and that there can be a "text-image" divide among these modes of communication. Taken together, they can create "meaning multiplication" (Lemke, 1998). Previous research has employed this approach when working with social media data. For instance, Gurrieri & Drenten (2019) sought to understand the visual storytelling of breast cancer patients and survivors, examining both the visual and text elements of each post. Following this approach, the images and captions in our study were analysed separately and together. Throughout the analysis of the social media data, we sought to understand consistency / inconsistency of messages sent via images and text (to identify if there are tensions between words and images), as well as how this data relates to the themes emerging from the interviews. For example, during the interviews, participants reiterated their desire to be authentic in their

interactions with followers (including projecting real struggles and tensions in their lives during the pandemic), and how this desire clashes with the expectation of the "attention economy" to project a positive image that brings more followers / brand endorsements. This tension between authenticity and positivity was also evident when analysing Instagram images and text, where some influencers open up about their daily struggles in the text, but the pictures accompanying the text project a pristine / positive image. Thus, both interview data and netnographic data informed the development of the aggregate themes resulting from our analysis. For all emerging themes, we moved between the different sources of data to identify patterns that were evident across the data (i.e., interviews, netnographic data) and across participants. Themes were labelled based on their meaning (as opposed to "in-vivo" coding) with attention to represent participants' ideas while simultaneously bridging them to theoretical concepts. Finally, through axial coding we sought to identify linkages among the emerging themes. Table 2 presents the process of data analysis moving from first order codes to second order categories and finally aggregate theoretical dimensions, following the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013).

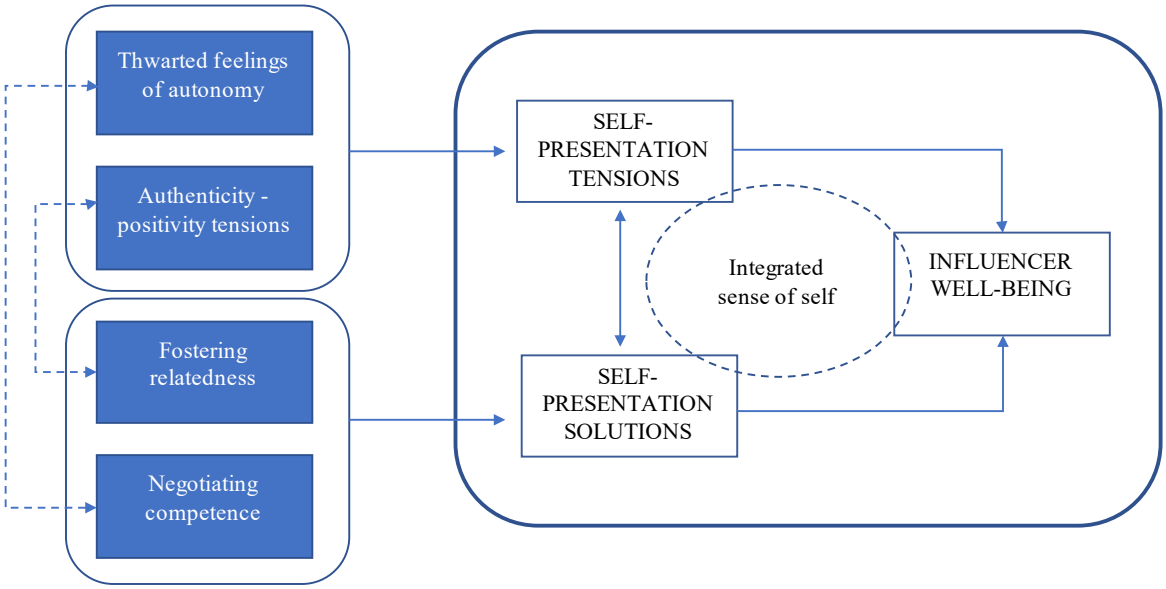
Table 2. Data Structure



Findings

The conjunction of the interview analysis, as well as the data from the netnography resulted in four themes that elucidate how influencers project themselves and the subsequent impact on their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) thwarted feelings of autonomy; (2) authenticity-positivity tensions; (3) fostering relatedness; (4) negotiating competence. Figure 2 offers a graphical representation of the findings. As depicted in figure 2, the four themes are clustered into two groups: self-presentation tensions and self-presentation solutions, both of which are seen to shape influencer well-being. Thwarted feelings of autonomy and authenticity-positivity tensions are themes that generate self-presentation tensions, and in the lexicon of SDT, can inhibit people's integrated sense of self, and their well-being. On the other hand, self-presentation solutions arise from the themes of fostering relatedness and negotiating competence, which can help influencers deal with the tensions and provide pathways to a more unified view of the self, and thus enhanced well-being. Figure 2 also demonstrates circularity through the link between authenticity-positivity tensions and fostering relatedness, as their fostered community positively contributes to the influencer's sense of well-being (a self-presentation solution), it also leads to tensions as they navigate how to communicate publicly amid opposing social pressures (treading the line between authenticity and positivity). Meanwhile, thwarted feelings of autonomy and negotiating competence are also related, as influencers are seen to navigate their constrained autonomy by rationalising their competence and thus creating solutions out of the tensions they experience. As such, this graphical representation demonstrates how social media influencers navigate well-being in troubled times.

Figure 2: Factors affecting well-being for influencers during the pandemic



(1) Thwarted feelings of autonomy

Autonomy is a basic psychological need, whose fulfilment is said to be necessary for a person's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In our study, feelings of autonomy for the influencers were thwarted as a result of perceived risks if they commented about COVID-19 on social media. Even though our study participants did post about the virus, they were concerned about the consequences of engaging with the topic because of the polarity of opinions, risks for their careers and / or personal safety, and the need to maintain their personal / professional identity.

In the interviews, the participants discussed some of the reasons they believe many influencers elected not to engage in the COVID-19 conversation altogether. A participant shared, "if you think something that is contrary to what is popular right now, it is a huge risk to say anything. And if you say something opposite of what you believe, it's disingenuous, and social media is supposed to be genuine." Echoing the sentiment, another participant noted:

> I find that you kind of have to remain unbiased so you can't say that you're pro one thing, or against another. So, to talk about it, you would have to remain very neutral, and that might have been hard to do for some because there's very big opinions one side and the other about COVID-19. So, by refraining from saying anything, I think that was the safest way to play that.

Thwarted autonomy also stemmed from the participants' offline lives. Many of the influencers interviewed had careers that are independent of their social media following, and the interviews revealed tension between their online and offline identities. For example, a participant shared that if she wanted to continue advancing in her career, it may be better to reduce her presence on social media.

Influencers also reported feelings of thwarted autonomy based on subject matter. Some topics the participants felt they were uniquely able to address, and others they felt they needed to avoid altogether; not based on their level of competence but based on their unique world view and/or personal experiences. While the influencers approached the pandemic online in a myriad of ways, there were also comments about feeling that they were unable to address other controversial topics. For example, in an interview a participant explained, "when Black Lives Matter hit, that was like I can't really post anything because what can I say about Black Lives Matter. I can't say anything." This quote demonstrates that influencers felt thwarted autonomy in other troubled times beyond the context of COVID-19. In this instance, the influencer felt restricted in their ability to address this topic because of their perceived outsider perspective on the topic.

Furthermore, some influencers brought up the subject of COVID-19 in their posts and reluctantly quit for safety measures. During the interview, a participant shared:

> I got some threats on Facebook, really bad ones and one of the most concerning my family so I had to call the cops and I had to give them my password and they had to go through my whole Facebook… You know what, I said, I'm done telling people stay home and to wear their masks… and I am never going to do that again and it was sad because I love taking that role and that position where I could use my influence for something good, I still do it for Black Lives Matter and all matters that to me as a human being are unacceptable and I will keep on doing that but anything that has to do with politics and taking sides on what I believe during this pandemic, I took myself out of the game, I said 'bye'.

Unfortunately, this is an example of thwarted autonomy because of the risk to personal safety, and for this reason, the influencer censored himself to broach the subject with his

followers. This feeling is supported by literature, the act of communicating in public is particularly fraught with risk and includes the potential for criticism, hate, and harassment (Duffy & Hund, 2019). When influencers perceive their role as one in which they can have a positive social impact, but situationally they are forced to play down or avoid the topic altogether, this can lead to negative consequences for their well-being, because it precludes their need satisfaction for autonomy. While extant research has examined how influencers can create stronger bonds with their followers if they help them cultivate feelings of autonomy (Thomson, 2006), our findings point to the importance of assessing the (lack of) fulfilment of influencers' basic psychological need for autonomy in their daily interactions with followers, and the resulting impact on their well-being and consequently their ability to contribute to the well-being of others.

Influencers act much like entrepreneurs (and have been called micropreneurs and autopreneurs) in their self-directed goal pursuit (e.g., Ashman et al., 2018). They can exercise the autonomy to decide what to post, how often to post, how to manage their self-presentation online, how to interact with their followers, and which brands to endorse. According to SDT, such autonomy is a key element whose fulfilment brings well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). As such, processes that forestall autonomy can negatively affect influencers' well-being. Our findings exemplify how navigating the attention economy in troubled times can lead to tensions between the desire of autonomy and the pressures of the external environment, and thus challenges the ability of influencers to achieve an integrated sense of self. Specifically, we add to the literature by illustrating how "thwarted autonomy" forestalls the self-directed goal pursuit of influencers, and consequently presents tensions to their self-presentation and interactions on social media.

(2) Authenticity-positivity tensions

Our findings reveal tensions between influencers' desire for authenticity in their interactions with followers and the expectation for constant positivity that they felt was imposed on them (e.g., due to market-related expectations of growing a large number of followers). Even if the influencers give an altogether authentic voice to the brands they represent and thus demonstrate real people using the products mainly in real time (Childers et al., 2019), the market mechanisms to which the influencers are subjected are a cause of tensions and contradictions (Duffy & Hund, 2019). As an example, in an interview a participant explained, "for me personally, I do want to keep things positive and keep things relatively light and not get too deep with what I share, but COVID-19 is and was such a huge part of our life that it was really hard." She added that this is a common mentality among influencers, "I think, and I completely respect that a lot of creators [influencers] want to keep their content extremely positive and some even really light-hearted." As another example, despite the desire to maintain a positive tone on her channel, like other influencers, a participant opened up about her personal experience in managing the challenges she faced during the pandemic, as is demonstrated in figure 3.

Figure 3. Post by a participant on March 13, 2020

Post by a participant on March 13, 2020. 693 likes, 50 comments. "... With two kids at home very sick today and news of Coronavirus spreading, I spent most of the day cleaning and sanitising all our door knobs, kitchen and bathrooms... and the rest of the day trying to both care for my girls and meet deadlines for work. It was exhausting. We're trying to be wise by practicing good personal hygiene and limiting social interaction, but I also don't want to spread panic to my children (or my naturally anxious brain)."

When examining both the text and the image in figure 3, there is a stark contrast between the visual and the caption. The image captures a pristine, orderly, and well decorated dining table, while the caption depicts the influencer's struggle to keep up with life's demands amid the pandemic; sanitising doorknobs, meeting deadlines for work and not spreading panic to her children. The image portrays a perfect home, while the caption showcases an entirely different narrative; creating a juxtaposition between an orderly life and one that is "exhausting". Another participant in the study similarly echoed the struggle in aligning text and images on social media, saying, "I feel like I have ideas of captions that I want to post, but what picture goes with it? It is a lot harder than I thought and it is very time consuming." Social media involves semiotic hybrids, communicating not solely through verbal discourse but also through visual means of communication. Therefore, it is valuable to examine the message that is shared through the caption and the one conveyed through the image. In these aforementioned examples, authenticity is presented through the text while positivity is portrayed in the image.

Dealing with this tension and ensuring the follower's perception of authenticity in interactions with the influencer is a crucial aspect that can help influencers regain their autonomy and feelings of decisional control. Additionally, if the followers perceive genuine influencer authenticity (and not the influencers doing what market pressure requires them to do), it also helps build better relationships, and as such enhances the relatedness aspect of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2001), and consequently well-being, for both influencers and followers.

Our study participants managed the inherent complexities between projected authenticity (including negative feelings and emotions) and positivity. For instance, some participants clearly expressed their dismay related to the COVID-19 to their community but emphasised the

positives and the importance of staying together. For example, a participant discussed how much he wanted to be authentic and transparent with his followers:

> I want to show them the failures, the hardships… to help them realise that I am only human, and I go through my own struggles as well… A lot of people think that I'm always happy which is not the case; I am also feeling the COVID-19 down and I want to share that with my followers.

He believes he can encourage his followers by showing that he is vulnerable as well. Other influencers also reported the importance of maintaining a very close and genuine relationship with their followers. A participant in our study did a story recap on Instagram and showed photos of herself sad and crying when reflecting back on 2020 and the pandemic. Echoing the same tension between authenticity and positivity, another participant shared that "my goal on social media is to not be fake positive."

This is in line with past studies which have shown that posts where influencers cry or admit to being anxious about a situation have shown that followers consider them "real". This suggests that accounts operate in a burgeoning affective labour economy where tears, sobs, and struggles cement authenticity and strengthen the bonds of digital intimacy between influencers and their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2018; Reade, 2021). Authenticity can therefore be obtained by a work of displaying a vulnerable self (Aziz, 2018). Clearly, the endorsement of social movements and public opinion has a direct impact on influencers' human brands, follower engagement, and perhaps even their careers. Thus, from a critical angle, one can wonder about the real storytelling behind the narrative of influencers during the pandemic. Do they make calculated statements to win the approval of their community and thus preserve their public image? With the pandemic being an unusual situation, it is plausible that influencers are paying

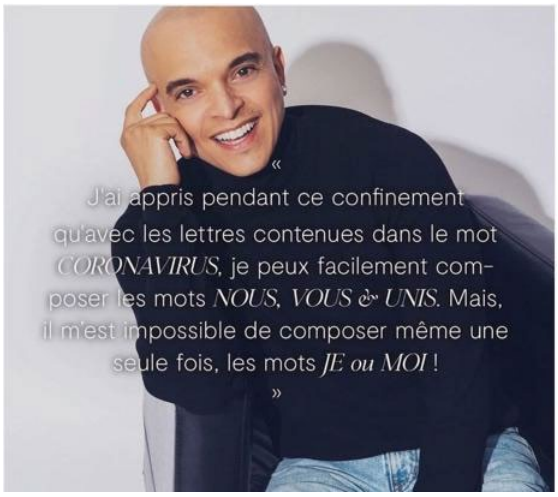
close attention to how they negotiate between their mediated and authentic selves offline. This is consistent with the ideas of strategic image management and behind-the-scenes identity performance of Goffman (1959) and with what Abidin (2017) termed "calibrated amateurism". Image management is a key consideration for influencers looking to maintain and grow their social media following because the influencers' image is the focal point in managing their human brand (Argyris et al., 2020). In this sense, influencers engage in strategic management of their human brand in line with Goffman's (1959) impression management theory, where actors (e.g., influencers) present idealised impressions to their audiences, and adapt their "performances" to fit the expectations of the context and the societal values. However, such impression management in a digital context is necessarily embedded in the broader socio-cultural structures that constrain the self-presentation of influencers (O'Leary & Murphy, 2019; Cocker et al., 2018) based on the expectations imposed by the neoliberal attention economy (Ashman et al., 2018). Insofar as influencers' self-presentation brings tensions between the projected / idealised impressions designed to influence the audience (Goffman, 1959) and the internal self-view, it bears the potential to negatively affect influencers' well-being. Conversely, managing to align the internal self-concept and externally projected image can lead to enhanced well-being. Importantly, from the perspective of SDT, the tensions between authenticity and positivity can lead to the fracturing of influencers' expression of their "unified self" by means of suppressing their innate desire to act according to their own volition and inability to feel that they are meaningfully integrated into the larger social structure, and as suggested in SDT, this presents a significant challenge to the well-being of influencers.

(3) Fostering relatedness

The well-being of a human being depends on their social interactions with other humans in ecosystems (Russell-Bennett et al., 2019). The importance of the relationship aspect of well-being is clearly illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular by the increased use of social media to connect with others (Newberry, 2021). Thus, the context of isolation imposed by the pandemic increased dependence on social media (Rogier et al., 2021). Previous research has indicated the importance of online interactions for followers (Thomson, 2006) which can help in such situations, but research has neglected the influencers' need to fulfil the relatedness dimension of well-being. While influencers are used to interacting with their followers, their need for relatedness has intensified with the arrival of COVID-19 just as it has for their followers. In fact, Nowland et al. (2018) found a positive impact on the psychological well-being and sense of social connectedness of people who used social media. Influencers discussed how they felt that they needed to be truly connected to their followers, and messages shared on Instagram reflected this desire.

In a quest for fostering relatedness, many influencers took advantage of their platform to share positivity and messages of love. An example is what a participant posted on his account that demonstrates the impact that words can have (see figure 4). In these words, we can feel a real psychological need to relate all together for the collective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In fact, the fulfilment of the need for relatedness results in increased positive affect, such as feelings of attachment and love (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Figure 4. Post by a participant on May 20, 2020



Post by a participant on May 20, 2020. 5,795 likes, 81 comments. (Translated from French), "I learned during the lockdown that with the letters from CORONAVIRUS, I can easily compose the (French) words: WE (NOUS), YOU (VOUS) & UNITED (UNIS). But it is not possible to compose I (JE) or ME (MOI). #WeHearThatMyWifeHelpedMeWithThatQuote🤷‍♀️(#OnSentendsQueMaFemmeMaAidéAvecLaCitation🤷‍♀️"

In the interviews, influencers also shared the challenges they personally faced amid the pandemic and how the reactions from their followers affected their personal well-being by increasing feelings of relatedness. For example, in an interview, a participant shared how there were times she found mentally challenging, but also how she was able to benefit from the pandemic through social media. As another example, a participant had created a series of COVID-19 journal prompts to share with her followers. In an Instagram post, she opens up about her experience with her online community: "It feels like a social distancing digital campfire 🏕… Thanks to everyone who has chimed in so far by leaving a comment or saving a journal prompt to use on your own, you're making this time a little less isolating…" (see figure 5). According to SDT, people need to feel a sense of belonging, and this quote by a participant signals how she was able to experience connection through the social media following she fostered as an influencer. It is a noteworthy demonstration of how an influencer's followers can contribute to their own personal well-being by nurturing their needs for relatedness.

Similarly, an influencer in our study shared an Instagram story about her volunteering for one of the vaccine rollouts, and discussed the positive feedback she received about volunteering, adding "you do not get the same level of thanks and appreciation in grad school, so it is nice to get it somewhere else in life." She mentioned the positive comments and thank you messages she received when she shared a humorous post of her dog demonstrating how to wear a mask properly. The influencer added that a lot of people had asked her if they could share her post and noted, "if that teaches one person how to wear their mask properly, I did my job".

Figure 5. Post by a participant on April 15, 2020

Post by a participant on April 15, 2020. 256 likes, 10 comments. "Just over a week ago I decided to start posting journal prompts because I became convinced this is a historical time that we need to document for ourselves, children and grandchildren to look back on! How cool will it be to give our grandchildren a journal📜 or video diary 📹about this moment in time and our thoughts as it happened? Well, since then a lot of new people have started following along! 🤗I'm not talking influencer status amount of followers or anything like that, but people who I didn't previously know have started to find the journal prompts and respond to them... and it's been the best thing!!! I've thoroughly enjoyed getting to know people who have left comments about the prompts I've suggested. It feels like a social distancing digital campfire🏕 that my neighbours around the world are stopping by to contribute to. Thanks to everyone who has chimed in so far by leaving a comment or saving a journal prompt to use on your own, you're making this time a little less isolating. For any newcomers, welcome on in 👏 and I'd love to hear your stories. Almost makes me feel like I'm hosting a party and have a bunch of new friends. 🙌#coviddiaries #quarantinelife #covid19"

This interview example demonstrates how these COVID-19 posts were not necessarily intended to just help grow a following but rather to connect and make an impact, and the feedback that was received contributed to the influencer's own well-being. This reflects the tenets of SDT which assumes that a person whose need for relatedness is satisfied is more likely to feel connected and cared for by another person (Thomson, 2006). Thus, our analysis indicated the need for influencers to relate and create connection, not just to encourage followers but also as an outlet of creating well-being for themselves (see figure 6). While extant research has pointed to the role of influencers in helping the social connectedness of their followers (e.g., Thomson, 2006) for example by offering a community, the posts during the pandemic were an indication of the influencers' inherent need to achieve relatedness in their daily lives.

(4) Negotiating competence

Competence is an intrinsic human need and expresses people's tendency to seek feelings of achievement and effectiveness in their lives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is one of the pillars of SDT, and as such is a major factor influencing well-being by the feeling of achievement (Ilicic et al., 2016). While previous literature on human brands / influencers has not found the role of competence to be as strong as the role of autonomy and relatedness in fostering strong influencer-follower attachments (Thomson, 2006), our findings - from the point of view of influencers and their well-being - present a different picture.

Figure 6. Post by a participant on December 22, 2020

Post by a participant on, December 22, 2020. 58 likes, 2 comments. "As much as I'm at a loss, emotionally, I am encouraged and motivated by the spirit and enthusiasm of my local community and loyal clients. Your support has been nothing short of inspiring, I am so so humbled…"

During the pandemic, influencers found opportunities to work on their feelings of competence by carefully treading the line between what they believe, what they post on social media, and what they feel competent to participate in. Thus, in this process of "negotiating competence" they were encountering (and dealing with) tensions in both finding pathways to well-being and their perception of self. In our study, influencers often used their influencing role to raise awareness about the pandemic and / or to address other social issues stemming from the pandemic. In this sense, their status (and perceived role) as an influencer makes them feel competent to help society in the pandemic situation. For example, during an interview, a participant mentioned trying to be a good role model and share with her followers any new set of rules related to COVID-19. She is not hesitant to say that she believes in science and pandemic-related safety measures. In Quebec (Canada), the provincial government called on influencers to promote the wearing of masks and distancing. One of the influencers agreed to participate and said, "I accepted the campaign with the government because it was something that I was already saying. I was already saying in my stories "wear your mask", so they were just asking me if I could say it again and that was perfectly fine with me."

In understanding their role in society and the social impact they can make with their platform, the influencers in our study had reflected on their level of competence before posting to social media. In an interview with a participant, she addressed the reason for feeling she had the level of competence to contribute to the COVID-19 conversation:

> As the news started coming out about the different technologies they were using to develop the vaccine, I found it very interesting because it is definitely what my department does, which is to create Delivery Systems. So, I felt like I was in a unique position to talk about it.

She also reflected on her experience negotiating competence or recognising what she felt uniquely equipped to share, and the type of content she deferred to other experts to speak on. A participant added:

> I do not have a strong background in virology or immunology, so I comment when I know what I'm talking about, and if I do not know what I am talking about, I defer to others who are experts in that field because there is nothing worse than somebody who has a scientific background giving false information because they do not have a strong sense of that subject matter.

In the interview she recognised the impact false information can have when it is shared by someone with scientific training and credentials, noting that this type of content shared by a scientific expert can be especially harmful. She described it as "a fine line to walk." The participant further noted that:

> I think influencers can play an important role, but I also think that people need to be very understanding of what that role should be and when it is appropriate to comment on certain topics, for lack of a better phrasing, 'like stay in your lane'… you really should not be commenting if you do not have a strong background in a scientific field or you know a lot about the process.

This example showcases the influencer's process of negotiating competence and recognizing where she could effectively contribute to the COVID-19 conversation based on her education and experience. Competence is an intrinsic need that stems from cultivating achievement and effectiveness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The process of her negotiating the scenarios in which she could be effective is demonstrated through each of the aforementioned quotes.

In an interview, a participant described how she found a creative way to give back to the community during the pandemic when she learned that her local blood bank was in short supply. She explained how she felt she had the opportunity to use her platform to share ways her followers could help during the pandemic:

> I realised that it is a really simple way to give back. Everyone is looking. I need to tell people they can give blood because a lot of people are cancelling their blood appointments [as] they are afraid to go in, so I was like yeah, I can put some other ideas out there of how people can help…

This example suggests that having a following contributed to her sense of competence. Unlike prior research which demonstrates that competence pales compared to autonomy and relatedness in building attachment between followers and influencers (Thomson, 2006), this example portrays how the influencer recognized that her following provided a sense of competence. This following allowed her to feel equipped to contribute to the COVID-19 conversation and make an impact. The influencers in our study also used their platform to support other causes; as another example on is Instagram page an influencer in our study generated awareness to the fact that food insecurity was at an all-time high and called her followers to support Food Banks Canada (see figure 7).

A participant used her platform to share content related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the reasons behind her decision to get the vaccine. Her post and some key comments can be found in figure 8. In her Instagram stories, she shared how she felt hours and days after receiving the vaccine, posting regular updates for her followers.

Figure 7. Post by a participant on April 7, 2020

Post by a participant on April 7, 2020. 50 likes, 10 comments. "Big night out of the house at Club Blood Bank. I've always wanted to give blood but been too nervous. I only got over my fear this week since it's an easy way to help right now - the blood bank always needs donors! It turned out to be no big deal and I'm totally giving blood again as soon as I can! #quarantinelife #quarantine #quarantineandchill #covid2020"

Figure 8. Post by a participant on, December 18, 2020

Post by a participant on, December 18, 2020. 19,592 likes 744 comments. "I got the COVID-19 vaccine to protect my patients, my family, my friends, my neighbours, and even strangers. I got the COVID-19 vaccine because I believe in science. I got the COVID-19 vaccine because I have hope for the future post this virus. I believe and will continue to follow social distancing, wearing masks, proper hand hygiene. I'm even more hopeful of a world without COVID-19 thanks to this vaccine. Grateful for @medstarhealth for making this vaccine a priority and giving me this opportunity. Finally, this is not a political conversation or debate. I see covid patients all day and know first-hand this virus doesn't decide who to effect based on your views."

[@commenter] "For some reason I trust [name of the influencer] from a reality T.V. show… more than the government!! Way to go [name of the influencer] !!

A participant discussed the motivation and the impact she felt she could make with her COVID-19 content, she explained that she was hoping to create more normalcy to talk about the vaccine and share her experience so her followers could see that it is safe and perhaps feel less hesitant about the unknown. Reflected in her motivation to post about COVID-19 is her self-awareness of the level of knowledge and mastery that she has from her profession; she recognises that she can apply this competence to create a social impact by sharing her vaccine experience with her followers. This highlights that competence is an important driver of SDT and an innate need for the well-being of both influencers and followers (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within SDT, competence is crucial also in processes of internalising regulations coming from external sources, and as such contributes to achieving an integrated sense of self, because their behaviour becomes more self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2000). We observed this process of using competence to increase self-determined behaviour with our participants. Deciding on the level of competence they feel equipped to tackle and using the "power" of their following to augment competence, influencers were able to counterbalance the negative effects of thwarted autonomy. Thus, a continuous process of negotiating competence was important to finding solutions to their self-presentation online and dealing with the tensions imposed by pandemic. Ultimately, this process contributes to an integrated sense of self and enhancement of well-being.

Discussion and conclusions

The emerging literature on influencer marketing has not paid sufficient attention to the well-being implications resulting from life as an influencer during troubled times. Building and negotiating an integrated sense of self as a "human brand" that can be monetised can have major implications on the ability of influencers to achieve personal satisfaction and well-being, especially if influencers rely heavily on the income from their brand sponsorships, and as such

are dependent on the "straightjacketing" of the market norms (Ashman et al., 2018). By focusing on a sample of influencers who chose to engage with the topic of COVID-19 on Instagram, this research offers insights to the literature on influencer marketing, with a special attention to the aspects that impact well-being of influencers. Our findings offer two main theoretical contributions, which we elaborate below.

Theoretical contributions

Research in marketing has used self-determination theory (SDT) to examine followers' attachment to their favourite "human brand" and has established the strong relevance of autonomy and relatedness, specifically the ability of influencers to foster those two drivers of well-being among their followers (Thomson, 2006; Ilicic et al., 2016). The focus of those studies has been on how influencers can foster better relationships with their followers, which can then be monetised. In contrast, we focus on how the tenets of SDT manifest for influencers' own well-being. As our results demonstrate, in troubled times, influencers feel pressure between their role as brand ambassadors and their desire to express their authentic selves. Thus, this theoretical angle fills a void in the literature on influencer marketing where it is rather the well-being of followers that is studied (e.g., Lutkenhaus et al., 2019).

Thus, in our *first* contribution, we bring attention to the interplay of the various aspects that form the basis of healthy psychological functioning and well-being as stipulated by SDT for the well-being of influencers. Our findings offer insights into all three of the well-being drivers, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. First, with regard to *autonomy*, we uncover that while influencers could have a positive impact on the well-being of their followers during a pandemic (Ellis et al., 2020), attention should be paid to influencers' own feelings of autonomy (or lack

thereof) and the tension between the desire for authenticity and externally imposed views on what content is appropriate to post. Authenticity appears to be valued by followers and influencers alike, and there is a limit of "how fake one can be" in influencers' projected self on social media. Our findings underscore the desire for authenticity and the struggles of trying to maintain autonomy in influencers' interactions with followers (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). As postulated in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), autonomy is a critical aspect of a person's well-being. The participants in our study described how they are trying to find a balance between the need to maintain their desired projections of self on social media with the inherent need to feel that their actions and decisions are self-directed. This tension between projected self and authentic self is continuous for social media influencers but intensified during the troubled times of COVID-19 due to increased social pressures.

Indeed, looking outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, studies show that broaching a topic on troubled times represents palpable tension among influencers (e.g., Mendes et al., 2018). This stress is tied to the desire to project an authentic self, the pursuit of influencer autonomy, and externally imposed opinions on what content to post. For example, this tension has surfaced among some influencers using the hashtag #MeToo. They were torn between the desire to create a strong connection with their community, around a societal cause of the utmost importance, and their anxiety linked to publicly addressing this delicate subject (Mendes et al., 2018). It should be noted that this tension is coupled with possible collateral effects on their integrated self, projected within their community. Similarly, in our study participants discussed feeling a form of fear due to a variety of risks related to the controversial nature of COVID-19. For example, the loss of followers, but also a risk related to their safety and the perception of their authenticity by addressing this subject on social media platforms. The influencer has no obligation to bring up

the subject if they are not comfortable doing so. Thus, the autonomy to decide to participate in a conversation is partly restrained by the expected social pressure on influencers, who are influential public figures, to take a stand in troubled times. Autonomy being one of the keys to well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the influencers must internalise the fact that they have the choice to approach a problem or not during troubled times, with the corresponding consequences for their integrated sense of self and well-being.

In addition to autonomy, we add to the understanding of SDT by specifying the role of *competence* that influencers feel, and the way that feelings of competence (being knowledgeable on a subject and having the platform for sharing information) can affect the expression of autonomy for influencers (e.g., posting about a subject). While extant research has examined the impact of influencer characteristics such as competence and expertise on consumer trust and purchase intention (Crisafulli et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021), our study contributes to how these characteristics impact the influencer directly and their feelings of autonomy. Influencers in this study described their experience in negotiating competence and how they determined what aspects of the pandemic they felt they could speak to based on their knowledge and training. Previous research in the context of influencer marketing has not found competence to be a significant factor in influencer-follower relationships (Thomson, 2006; Ilicic et al., 2016). We contend, however, that the changing dynamics during the pandemic pushed the boundaries of what competence means, as some influencers started using their platforms to spread public health messages and relate to their followers. Thus, we exemplify how during troubled times, influencers can help both their followers and themselves by using the "power" of their following to augment feelings of competence and counteract negative effects of thwarted autonomy. Troubled times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, call on influencers to renegotiate what

conversations they feel equipped to participate in. The literature to date has explored how influencers approached topics such as #BLM (Wellman, 2022) and #MeToo (Mendes et al., 2018) and the extent to which they feel comfortable and confident to engage in those discussions. The participants in our study found they had the competence to address the subject of COVID-19 despite its contentious nature. Internalising the newfound competence stemming from their status as influencers, participants in our study were able to project self-cohesion in the continuous internal work of learning and adapting to challenges in changing contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Our findings also highlight the importance of another key dimension of SDT - *relatedness* - for influencers' well-being. While extant research has emphasised the role of relatedness (Thomson, 2006; Ilicic et al., 2016) for followers and their attachment to influencers (and by implications, the success of their brand endorsements), the relatedness aspect of well-being is crucial for influencers too. Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the desire for relatedness was augmented (Taylor-Jackson et al., 2021) and influencers used social media as their platform to both give and receive feelings of closeness with others. Recent studies on the use of social media specifically to build and maintain relationships have found a positive impact on psychological well-being and sense of social connectedness for users (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018; Taylor-Jackson et al., 2021). In a similar vein, our study underscores the critical role of relatedness for healthy psychological functioning and well-being for influencers. Thus, we open up new important research paths to understanding the road to well-being for influencers who must balance the pressures of a monetised market economy model with their inherent need to maintain positive relationships.

In our *second* contribution, we uncover how SDT allows us to unpack the shifting dynamics and the struggle for influencers to stay true to an authentic self while managing an

expected social projection of self, and the consequences of this tension for influencers' well-being. From a socio-cultural perspective, our research exemplifies the interplay of external social expectations (with the accompanying culture of monetisation of personal lives, Ashman et al., 2018) and internal authenticity struggles that ultimately impact the well-being of influencers (O'Leary & Murphy, 2019; Cocker et al., 2018). Marketplace motivations for maintaining their source of income are intermingled with the need for community building for the sake of support and well-being. The desire to connect pushed influencers to renegotiate their perceptions of competence, or what they thought they could talk about on social media. Many opted to spread messages related to public health, even if hesitant about how their own background relates to the issue of COVID-19. Embracing new purposes with a focus on helping the community (broadly defined) gave influencers a path to well-being. Indeed, it allows them to satisfy the need for relatedness and competence, two important aspects of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, our results elucidate the shifting ground of an influencer's role from a daily entertainer persona on social media to an important standard-bearer for better global well-being. It is also an interesting way of mobilising influencers, which appears in recent literature (e.g., Levesque, 2022), as a positive intermediary for society. As individuals whose livelihoods depend partially on their social media persona, during the pandemic our influencers reflected on a process ranging from losing their sense of autonomy and self-determination of their actions, to renegotiating what is possible, to maintaining and growing their following. In this process, there were a variety of tensions on a continuum from thwarted feelings of autonomy and negotiating competence to a felt need for positivity and authenticity. Our findings, thus, point to the importance of attending to the entrepreneurial process of positioning and repositioning a "human brand", while maintaining a human struggle of building an integrated sense of self in an industry that imposes

neoliberal measures of success based on the currency of attention (Khamis et al., 2017). While the context of our study was COVID-19, we can relate this struggle to troubled times other than the pandemic. During troubled times, influencers are no longer necessarily in their comfort zone (e.g., Mendes et al., 2018). A tension therefore arises between the desire to present an authentic self and the perception of competence in relation to the given subject, along with societal expectations imposed on influencers. Thus, our findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Rivera et al., 2019; Arriagada & Bishop, 2021) that during troubled times, many influencers struggle to maintain their personal well-being and authentic sense of self. However, it is essential, because both the influencers and their followers have conveyed that sharing on social media about COVID-19 is a source of mutual well-being.

Building on the interplay of external social expectations and internal authenticity struggles, our model schematizes the factors affecting the well-being of influencers. The model contributes to our understanding of influencers by presenting both tensions and solutions they face when navigating well-being and developing an integrated sense of self. These include self-presentation tensions influencers may experience such as thwarted feelings of autonomy and opposing pressures between authenticity and positivity. These self-presentation tensions may inhibit well-being and progress toward building an integrated sense of self. At the same time, influencers may experience self-presentation solutions such as pathways to foster relatedness and negotiate competence, both of which may provide influencers an avenue not only to overcome the tensions they experience in their roles, but also to contribute to their well-being. Our model can be applied in other contexts of troubled times because it consolidates the theoretical

foundation of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and its main aspects (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) in relation to the well-being of influencers.

Practical implications

The findings provide practical implications both for marketing managers and influencers. Influencer partnerships are a cutting edge and lucrative opportunity for organisations that marketing managers seek to optimise. Influencer marketing offers three times the return on investment of any other form of digital media (Geyser, 2021). But what are the parameters of influencer contracts? Should influencers share a rose-coloured promotion, or should these contracts allow room for a more nuanced message that emphasises the influencer's own views and voice? Our study suggests that influencers need to express their true self, and be intrinsically motivated, even in the face of a pandemic (Moulard et al., 2016; Audreze et al., 2017), and not perform or calculate authenticity as a marketing strategy (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hurley, 2019). Moreover, when pursuing authenticity, it is valuable to give consideration to aligning the message in the caption and the image. While influencers discuss the challenges of capturing a photo that reflects a caption they wish to share with their followers, mixed messages may come across as inauthentic if the text and image are contradictory. When influencers convey an authentic rather than a picture-perfect self (i.e., by revealing their struggle and fear regarding COVID-19), influencers can increase their feelings of competence and relatedness with their followers while contributing to their well-being and that of their community. This approach could multiply not only their human brand sympathy (Furukawa, 2021), but also credibility (Maares et al., 2021). Thus, it is valuable for organisations to recognize authenticity and influencer well-being when outlining the parameters of an influencer partnership.

The findings also offer practical guidance for influencers. Influencers monetise their following by sharing their lives online leading to pressures to be both positive and authentic simultaneously. Our analysis echoed extant literature suggesting that authenticity is a cornerstone of influencers (Meg Lee & Blasco-Arcas, 2021). But they also experience a felt need for positivity. In halcyon periods of time, the tension between authenticity and positivity may be less consequential. However, history teaches us that our world is seldom predictable, rather we need to understand how to navigate troubled times. When being authentic means forgoing online positivity, what does it mean for individuals who make their livelihoods through their externally projected image? Our research has practical implications for influencers, as it suggests that aligning their internal self-concept and externally projected image can lead to enhanced well-being. Through the lens of SDT, the authenticity-positivity tension can fracture the expression of the "unified self" by barring an influencer to act according to their own volition. In other words, influencers need to be cognizant that foregoing authenticity for positivity may be detrimental to their own well-being. When influencers step out of their comfort zone and engage in contentious topics, they can denote higher levels of authenticity and even reach a new niche of followers. The influencers in this study openly discussed COVID-19 and saw both their follower-count and ability to monetise their channel grow.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the larger understanding of influencers, which has important implications for marketing managers. This paper draws attention to many facets that motivate influencers to create content and build a following; while there are monetary incentives to pursuing a career on social media, the influencer-follower relationship notably contributes to the well-being of the influencer. Developing a further understanding of the social media influencer will help marketing managers understand their value offering and co-create value.

Limitations and futures research directions

We also note several limitations of this study, which offer opportunities for future research. Our focus was on posts related to COVID-19 and the resulting impact on influencers' well-being. Future research can examine how influencers respond to different contentious issues on social media (e.g., BLM, women's rights, ageism, etc.) and how these impact their well-being. Moreover, we chose Instagram, as this is the platform of choice for many influencers (Williams, 2018). However, insightful results can be gained from an analysis of other social media platforms, for example TikTok which has gained many followers since the start of the pandemic (Bump, 2021). The hyper-personalised algorithm to each of the users of this platform presents them with creative and less curated short videos, without the aesthetic that Instagram demands. As a result, 90% of TikTok users log in 5+ times a day and for more than 50 minutes (Findly, 2022).

We also limited our study to Canada and the US. Further research can assess influencers from other regions and / or conduct a cross-cultural study of self-presentation and well-being of influencers. Moreover, although our study focuses on both Canadian and American influencers, and includes both French-speaking and English-speaking participants, narrowing in on possible distinctions between these markets was not the focus of this analysis. With that said, analysing cross-cultural differences among influencers would be a valuable contribution and certainly warrants further study.

In addition, while this study illuminated influencers' COVID-19 content and the process they underwent to verify the information prior to sharing, the extent to which influencers seek to comparatively validate the claims of consumer products they endorse warrants further study.

Perhaps influencers engage in higher levels of verification for some categories of endorsement than others, and this would be an interesting area of future research. Indeed, Audreze et al. (2017) demonstrate that under commercial pressure, influencers manage their authenticity by both communicating their passion and giving a truthful report. So, when involved in a collaboration, they should always verify the veracity before promoting a product.

It should be noted that the participants felt and approached their well-being in different ways. This could be explained by the type of influencers studied which was purposefully varied: number of followers and sector of activity. Indeed, some were primarily small business owners while others endorsed external brands. Those whose income is affected by health measures are therefore more likely to see their well-being diminished. Thus, the structural relationship of influencers with the production of goods and services could be one of the causes of the variation in the well-being of influencers (e.g., less autonomy, Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition, it is shown that the pandemic situation does not affect people uniformly (Ahmed et al., 2020). A multitude of circumstantial factors can come into play, which makes the comparison between two influencers complex. Despite those limitations, our study offers significant implications, as while it is recognized that influencers have the ability to impact the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of their followers, we elucidate how the interactions between the influencer and their followers impacted the influencer's well-being through the fulfilment of autonomy, competence and relatedness, in addition to their search for an integrated sense of self and meaning amid the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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