

Exploring Influencer Burnout through Trans-Parasocial Relationships in the Age of Commercialised Social Media

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Abstract: With the rapid growth of social media, individuals have gained the ability to cultivate large, dedicated audiences and establish themselves as Social Media Influencers. Influencer marketing—a \$21.2 billion industry in 2023 (Statista, 2024)—relies on influencers to promote brands through reciprocal connections with followers, conceptualized by Lou (2021) as trans-parasocial relationships. Unlike traditional parasocial interactions, these connections are more dynamic and involve mutual engagement. In the process of building these relationships and commercializing their influence, influencers must meet strict deadlines and also navigate the demands of followers while remaining authentic. This study explores how the pressures of maintaining these relationships and meeting brand expectations contribute to influencer burnout. Categorising social media influencing as a profession, this research investigates how influencers navigate stress and cope with unique career demands. By highlighting Social Media Influencer burnout, this research seeks to bridge a gap in the theoretical understanding of influencer well-being, offering practical insights for fostering resilience and prioritizing mental health in the ever-demanding world of social media marketing.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Parasocial Relationships, Social Media Burnout, Brand Pressure, Burnout, Stress, Coping.

1. Introduction

The influencer marketing industry has witnessed remarkable growth, reaching a market value exceeding \$21.2 billion in 2023 (Sprout Social, 2023; Statista, 2024). This rapid expansion is largely attributed to the persuasive influence that social media personalities exert over their audiences (Casaló et al., 2020; Colliander and Dahlén, 2011). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often cultivate more reciprocal and personal relationships with their followers, which enhances brand engagement and purchase intentions (Abidin, 2015; Lou, 2021). However, this growing industry is not without its challenges. Influencers frequently face stress resulting from limited creative control, as collaborating brands often dictate content production. Such constraints can undermine influencers' perceived authenticity, a key driver of their influence (Later, 2023; Willment, 2022).

The increasing commercialization of social media influencing (Abidin, 2015; Mardon et al., 2023), coupled with brand pressures (Later, 2023; Levesque et al., 2023), further exacerbates this issue. As influencers' audiences grow, maintaining intimate and authentic relationships with followers becomes increasingly difficult (McQuarrie et al., 2013), which can contribute to burnout. Despite the prevalence of these challenges, the stressors faced by influencers remain underexplored in academic literature.

This research categorizes social media influencing as a career (McCormick, 2019; Suciu, 2020) and employs the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2014) as a theoretical framework to analyse influencer burnout through the trans-parasocial relationships they maintain with followers. Additionally, the Transactional Stress Theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987) is utilized to examine the subjective nature of stress, highlighting that stress responses depend on individuals' appraisal of stressful events and their coping mechanisms.

1.1 Aim and Objectives

This research aims to investigate the interplay between influencer marketing commercialization, the dynamics of reciprocal intimacy, and the emerging concept of trans-parasocial relationship, and to assess their collective impact on influencer well-being. Considering this, the primary objectives of this research are:

- To explore the influence of brand pressure on outdoor and fitness micro-influencers over time and how it interacts with their commercial and trans-parasocial relationships with followers to contribute to burnout.

- To understand how personal and organizational resources influence or mitigate burnout among outdoor and fitness micro-influencers, within the context of influencer marketing and trans-parasocial relationships
- To explore the coping mechanisms employed by outdoor and fitness micro-influencers to manage burnout associated with commercialized influencer marketing, reciprocal intimacy dynamics, and emerging trans-parasocial relationships.
- To provide recommendations to brands, micro-influencers, and social media platforms on better practices to enhance Social Media Influencer well-being based on the research findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Influencer Marketing

The rise of social platforms has allowed individuals to cultivate large audiences, develop loyal communities, and position themselves as influential figures, commonly known as Social Media Influencers (Appel et al., 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021). Abidin (2015) describes influencers as everyday people who share their lives online, building substantial followings and monetizing this by seamlessly incorporating brand promotions into their content. Influencer marketing involves brands compensating these influencers or offering incentives to promote products or services (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Studies have found that influencer marketing drives consumer persuasion and purchase decisions, largely mediated by Parasocial Interactions—one-sided but seemingly personal connections between influencers and followers (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; Escalas and Bettman, 2017). These relationships enhance endorsements' effectiveness and help shape a collaborative brand image (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2020). However, influencers must balance authenticity with commercial obligations, as strong influencer-follower bonds resembling friendships can mitigate perceptions of self-interest (Aw and Chuah, 2021).

2.2 Parasocial and Trans-parasocial Relationship Theory

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced "parasocial interaction" as a phenomenon where individuals feel personally connected to media figures, despite one-sided communication. These bonds are reinforced by perceived mutual awareness and behavioural reciprocity (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011). Contemporary research extends these findings to social media, emphasizing how influencer distinctiveness, relatability, and status contribute to audience engagement (Hsieh et al., 2023; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Parasocial relationships significantly affect brand trust, awareness, and purchase intentions (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Aw and Chuah, 2021; Lou et al., 2022).

Modern contexts demand an update to parasocial theory. Lou (2021) proposed "trans-parasocial relationships," acknowledging the reciprocal, co-created nature of interactions between influencers and followers. Unlike traditional parasocial ties, these relationships are bidirectional, as influencers actively engage with followers, shaping content based on audience feedback (Lou, 2021).

Despite extensive research in influencer marketing on factors like influencer credibility and emotional connections (De Jans et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2019), gaps remain in understanding how parasocial relationships impact influencers' well-being. Most studies have focused on followers' perspectives, leaving influencers' experiences underexplored (Eyal and Cohen, 2006; Hoffner and Bond, 2022; Mardon et al., 2023).

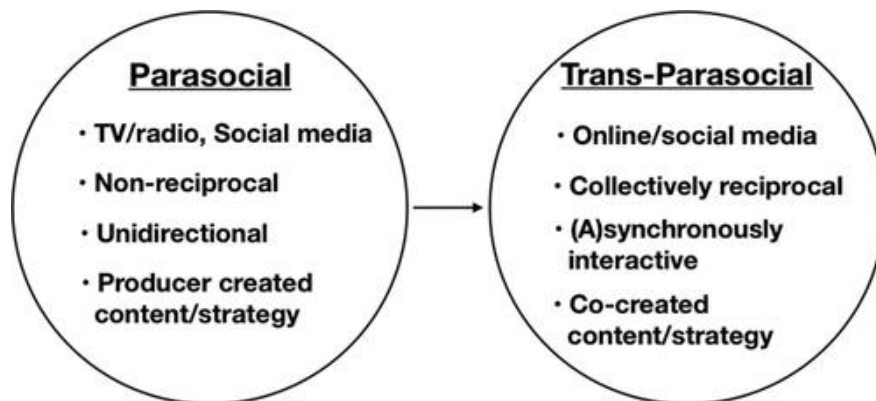


Figure 1: Parasocial Relationships vs Trans-parasocial Relationships (Lou, 2021)

2.3 Social Media Influencers Stress

Social media influencers face significant stress due to brand demands for consistent content and their own efforts to maintain commercial and reciprocal intimacies, often resulting in burnout (Abidin, 2013; Later, 2023; Levesque et al., 2023). To engage audiences and differentiate themselves from traditional celebrities, influencers use four intimacy types: commercial, interactive, reciprocal, and disclosive (Abidin, 2015). Disclosive intimacy, involving personal content, fosters authenticity (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2018), while reciprocal intimacy relies on direct engagement with followers. However, this intimacy can feel commodified as influencers engage in paid endorsements, risking perceptions of inauthenticity (Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Cocker et al., 2021). This commodification can erode trust followers have on influencers (Mardon et al., 2023).

In addition, brands increasingly control influencers' content to align with marketing goals, ranging from gifting products to enforcing contractual obligations (Audrezet et al., 2020). While effective for product promotion, such practices can compromise influencers' perceived authenticity (Russell and Stern, 2006; Liljander et al., 2015). Overemphasizing branded content can violate ethical expectations, particularly for Gen Z, who view it as a breach of trust (Pradhan et al., 2022). This violation can result in followers actively avoiding or unfollowing influencers, a phenomenon the researchers tagged as "influencer avoidance" (Pradhan et al., 2022). This "influencer avoidance" phenomenon is exacerbated when brand-driven demands lead to excessive workloads and burnout (Later, 2023; Bakker et al., 2014).

Also, maintaining intimacy with followers is crucial for influencers' engagement and commercial success, yet it heightens performance expectations (Mardon et al., 2023). Failure to meet these expectations can lead to feelings of betrayal and backlash (Hartmann, 2008; Jennings and Alper, 2016). Trans-parasocial relationships, which emphasize reciprocal connections, further intensify these pressures (Mardon et al., 2023). When expectations go unmet, the intimacy that once fostered loyalty becomes a source of disappointment.

2.4 Influencer Burnout through Theoretical Lens

The rise of social media influencing as a career driven by Influencer Marketing (McCormick, 2019; Suciu, 2020) could come with unique stressors, yet academic research is yet to apply established burnout theories like the Job Demands-Resources model to this profession. The JD-R model identifies high job demands as primary contributors to burnout, with insufficient resources exacerbating the problem (Bakker et al., 2014). Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) Transactional Stress Theory emphasize coping strategies as critical to managing stress.

Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson, 1981), manifests uniquely among influencers due to their dual roles as public figures and private individuals. For example, depersonalization may arise as a coping mechanism to manage audience expectations. Coping strategies—problem-focused (e.g., resolving stressors) or emotion-focused (e.g., distancing)—play a pivotal role in mitigating burnout (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988).

Despite advancements in burnout research across various fields, influencers' burnout experiences remain underexplored. While the JD-R model has been applied to professions like nursing and sales (Dall'Ora et al., 2020; Peasley et al., 2020), its adaptation to influencer careers is limited, especially as influencers must navigate between trans-parasocial relationships and brand demands while engaging in Influencer Marketing. Similarly, while coping mechanisms like job crafting and peer support mitigate burnout in traditional roles (Roczniewska and Bakker, 2021), their applicability to freelancers like influencers is unclear.

3. Research Philosophy and Methodology

This study adopts a subjective and constructivist philosophical and ontological approach, which posits that the subject matter - social media influencers, as individuals and institutions - fundamentally differs from the natural sciences (Bell et al., 2019). The chosen constructivist framework aligns with the study's focus on subjective experiences and individual interpretations of stress and burnout (Beck Holm, 2013; Bell et al., 2019; Gergen, 2015). Previous studies have recognized burnout as a highly subjective phenomenon, advocating for qualitative methods such as diary studies to gain a nuanced understanding of stressors and coping mechanisms (Almeida, 2005; Lazarus, 2000). Quantitative surveys, in this context, could be less appropriate because the stressors and coping strategies specific to social media influencers remain underexplored and inherently subjective.

3.1 Sampling, Data Gathering and Analysis

This research employs a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit a target sample of 25 lifestyle social media influencers relevant to the research objectives. Snowball sampling will be utilized to identify and recruit participants. The study targets outdoor and fitness micro-influencers on Instagram with follower counts ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 (Campbell and Farrell, 2020), who actively promote products or services for brands (Wissman, 2018). This study focuses on micro-influencers, who uniquely balance strong follower relationships and brand partnerships (Park et al., 2021). As research on Influencer Marketing has primarily centered on fashion and lifestyle influencers; this investigation diverges by examining outdoor and fitness influencers, exploring how their authentic engagement, brand pressures, and stress management strategies contribute to burnout and well-being.

The data collection process will involve the use of digital diaries (audio voice notes) recorded at least once per week over eight weeks, combined with semi-structured interviews. This approach ensures the generation of rich, rigorous, and in-depth qualitative insights. The two-month timeline for diary data collection aligns with Diener et al. (2006), who suggest that this duration is sufficient to capture significant fluctuations in well-being. Ethical approval for the research has been granted by the Ethics Committee at Edinburgh Napier University.

After data collection, Thematic Analysis will be used as an analytical framework to systematically identify, analyse, and interpret recurring patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). As Castleberry and Nolen (2018) note, Thematic Analysis relies heavily on textual data, and NVivo software will be utilized to organize and manage the data efficiently. Additionally, Sequential Analysis will be used to examine the progression of stressors over time and trace how stressors accumulate and evolve into burnout (Langley, 1999).

4. Conclusion

This study seeks to address the under-explored phenomenon of social media influencer burnout, positioning influencers as an emerging professional demographic (McCormick, 2019; Suci, 2020). The research examines how brand pressures and trans-parasocial relationships interact to influence the well-being of social media influencers.

By advancing the understanding of job stress and burnout theories within the context of influencer marketing, this study aims to provide meaningful insights for social media platforms, brands, and influencers. These findings could help develop strategies to effectively manage stressors, mitigate burnout, and promote the overall well-being of influencers in this evolving professional landscape.

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