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Influencers on Instagram and their portrayal in South Korean drama *Celebrity*  
Influenceři na Instagramu a jejich ztvárnění v jihokorejském dramatu *Celebrity*

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## **Abstract**

Title: Influencers on Instagram and their portrayal in South Korean drama *The Celebrity*.

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The theoretical part of this thesis starts by exploring the significance of internet and social media usage for South Koreans, with special attention given to the social media app Instagram. By distinguishing the various types of influencers as well as the different means of influencer marketing, this thesis establishes the commonly (and academically) accepted understanding of how these influencers exercise their influence on consumers and their purchase intentions.

In view of the theoretical part, the practical part then compares and analyzes the portrayal of influencers in the South Korean drama *Celebrity*. The ultimate objective of this thesis is to investigate how consumerism, in connection with social media influencer marketing, is represented in contemporary Korean screen culture, and how the power held by influencers is questioned by creators of cultural content.

## **Abstrakt**

Název: Influenceři na Instagramu a jejich ztvárnění v jihokorejském dramatu *Celebrity*.

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Teoretická část této práce se nejprve zaměřuje na roli využívání internetu a sociálních médií v životě jihokorejské populace se zvláštním zaměřením na aplikaci Instagram. Dále se zaměřuje na definování samotného slova influencer, typů influencerů, různých prostředků influencer marketingu a zkoumá vliv těchto influencerů na ovlivňování spotřebitelů a jejich nákupní rozhodování.

Praktická část se poté zaměřuje na porovnání získaných poznatků z teoretické části a komparativní metodou výzkumu následně srovnává a analyzuje zobrazení influencerů v jihokorejském dramatu *Celebrity*. Cílem této práce je prozkoumat projevy konzumerismu a manifestaci povrchních myšlenek na sociálních sítích a představit čtenáři jak influencer marketing, tak moc, kterou influenceři mají.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **Transcription**

This thesis uses the Revised Romanization of Korean except for names with an already established transcription of a different kind.

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## **Introduction**

These days, with the rise of social media, influencers are getting increasingly more attention from the general public. They have broken the walls of internet and are nowadays seen at events standing next to celebrities and in traditional medias. Because the general public is only now developing awareness of these influencers, they tend to assign them lower status than to traditional celebrities. However, it is important to understand the marketing potential these influencers hold and to realize how powerful, in fact, these influencers are. Influencers hold enormous power over their audience whose purchasing intentions they manipulate through various psychological effects and marketing strategies.

This thesis firstly introduces the issue of consumerism and its embedment in South Korean society, and then focuses on social media in South Korea, with a special focus on the social media app Instagram. Subsequently, it defines the word influencer itself, and establishes what is secured knowledge about the various types of influencers and their different methods of marketing and the effects they exert on consumers. Finally, this thesis analyzes the portrayal of influencers in the South Korean drama *Celebrity*.

When analyzing the portrayal of influencers in this drama, this thesis highlights the dread of actively following other people's lives on social media and the pressure that arises from doing so. Thus, one objective of this thesis is to explore the manifestation of shallow consumeristic ideas on social media and to raise awareness of the power held by influencers.



## 1. Modern day consumerism in South Korea

In postmodern day consumerist societies like in South Korea, consumerism is also an act of self-identification. In traditional society, an individual's sense of self is formed by their cultural and ancestral heritage, history, tradition, community and other aspects, while in a consumerism fueled society these senses of self-identification are replaced with consumeristic products (Sardar 1988). Additionally, the type of consumerism individuals engage in also defines their social status and the way they navigate in society (Loke 2016). Therefore, individuals living in a consumeristic society that creates even higher division between individuals, despite the ever-growing social inequality already embedded in society, individuals base their own sense of self based on surface-level materialistic objects and values. With the invention of social media, especially the app Instagram, the sharing of consumeristic ideas has never been easier. Instagram can be considered the highest manifestation of consumerism yet with endless exposure to a peek into another individual's life at the tip of fingertips.

## 2. Social media in South Korea

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, South Korea is globally known as one of the most significant technology hubs in East Asia. With its cutting-edge ICT infrastructure boasting the world's fastest internet speed (International Trade Administration 2023) and subsequently being the first country commercially releasing 5G internet connection (OOSGA 2023) it has a reputation of one of the leading countries in global information and communication technology center. According to Datareportal, at the beginning of 2023, 97.6% out of 51.8 million population of South Korea were internet users. South Korea subsequently has the highest active social media user rate in Asia-Pacific region (Asiance 2023). As of February 2023, the count of active social media users in South Korea stood at 47.87 million, an increase of 1.1 million (+2.3%) from 2022, making it 92% of the country's population (Cervi 2020).

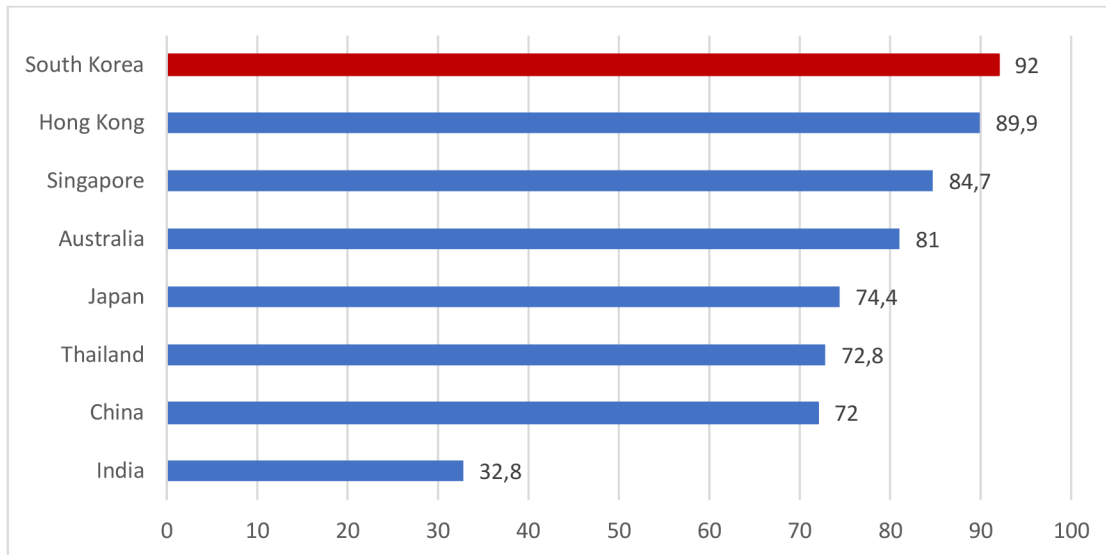


Fig. 1: Active social media users in the Asia Pacific region. Source: Asiance.

As the active user's social media penetration rate stands at the highest in the Asia-Pacific region, it is only natural that social media plays an integral role in the lives of South Korean population. Marketing agency InterAd states that on average, South Koreans spend 1 hour and 11 minutes a day on social media using 4 to 5 different platforms, with the hours spent on social media rising every year.

## 2.1. Social media advertising

With 47% of internet users using Adblock<sup>1</sup> technology, traditional advertising is losing its effectiveness (Weinswig 2016) and given the integral role of social media in everyday lives of South Korean population, advertisement through social media has subsequently become the highest rising means of advertisement overall. In 2020 the growth rate of advertising expenses for social media rose by 18.5% compared to previous year, outnumbering the traditional four medias<sup>2</sup> and consequently showing the contrast of these medias being on a steady decline opposed to advertisement through social media (DMC Media 2020). In 2020, the global social media marketing value has risen to 98,646 billion USD, accounting for 28% of the digital advertising market (Kim 2020).

<sup>1</sup> An internet browser extension forcibly removing ads from user's visited websites.

<sup>2</sup> Print, broadcast, outdoor and internet.

2.2. The most used social media in South Korea

According to a research summary done by a marketing agency InterAd, the most used social media app is KakaoTalk, with its primary purpose of a text messaging app it dominates the market with usage of 85.1% of South Korean internet users and it is the preferred app by 58.3% of the surveyed population. Though it falls under the category of social media apps, KakaoTalk is purely a messaging app with no social feed incorporated into the application and offers advertisements and promotion only via Kakao display ads and Kakao channel. Second most used social media app is Instagram with 62.7% of internet users using the app actively and it is the preferred app by 18% of them (Cervi 2020).

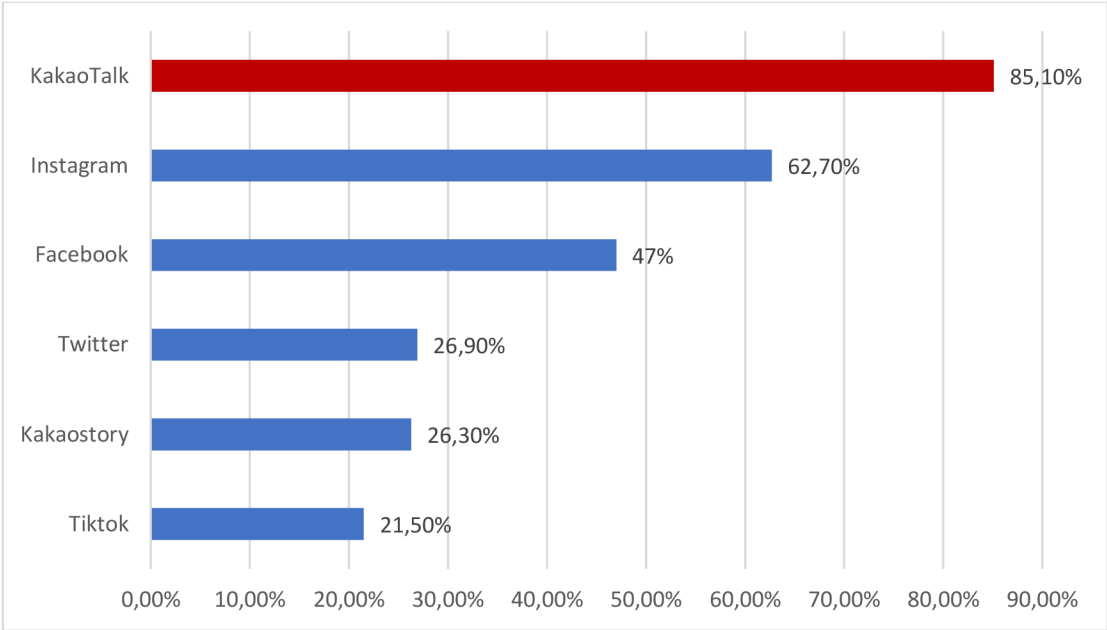


Fig. 2: Most used social media apps as of January 2023 (Percentage of internet users aged 16-64 who use each platform each month). Source: Interad.

As shown in fig. 2, KakaoTalk takes first place as the most used social media application by 22.4% compared to Instagram. However, considering that KakaoTalk is purely marketed as a messaging application, excluding the purpose of exchanging messages, there is no social media app value given to the application. Therefore, in comparison to Instagram, in which case there is not only a direct message exchange function incorporated, but many other functions like posting photos and videos, Instagram stories, live steaming, reels, likes, comments, following and unfollowing accounts, hashtags, saving posts etc. as well, it is logical to assume that Instagram holds a bigger value as a social media application opposed to KakaoTalk. Based on a social media study done by SproutSocial (2023), 86% of social media marketers put their influencer marketing efforts into Instagram. Additionally, Instagram was in this study referred

to as overall first on the list of social media applications chosen for marketing through influencers.

### 3. Instagram

Though the sphere of influence of social media influencers and celebrities is spread widely among all social media platforms, Instagram could be called the fastest growing social media platform (Garifova 2016). In South Korea the app is on a steady rise, with users spending around 6 hours per month on average scrolling on the platform, which is 5.2% more than in 2022 (Cervi 2016). In 2011 Instagram was selected by Apple as the App Store Rewind iPhone App of the Year (Meta 2011). Instagram presents itself to users in a concept definition from 2013 as an ingenious and fun way to share your life and creative concepts with friends and followers through a series of photos or short length videos and as a social media platform that allows users to capture their memories in real time to keep them forever.

Instagram as a social media platform began providing services in 2010. In the early stages of Instagram from years 2010 to 2013 Instagram's influencer marketing value has been notably low given consideration to the social media app's main purpose of personal sharing of photos or short length videos, therefore for brands and companies Instagram had no significant marketing value and was subsequently used by these brands and companies purely as an engagement tool with consumers. In the year 2014 however, the influencer marketing point of view on Instagram has slightly shifted. Instagram as a social media platform has been on a steady rise ever since its release and brands and companies have noticed the potential of engaging with not only celebrity's but also influencer's follower base through partnerships. In 2015 Instagram in started providing advertising services (Jeon 2020). Now companies and brands could upload targeted ads with various formats, including photo ads, video ads, and more. 2015 was a steppingstone towards profiting from a new era of the digital age where people who are not celebrities, however, can attract a consumer base for their products based on their personal brand and engagement rate with a follower base, can remarkably raise their profits with higher engagement rate and at the same time will be remarkably less expensive for the brand or company than partnering up with a celebrity for a campaign (Kim 2022, Brown and Hayes 2008). From this point onwards, Instagram has gained exponential marketing value not only for advertisement directly from the brands and companies but also through partnerships with influencers.

### 3.1. Age groups of Instagram users in South Korea

As shown in fig. 3, the most prominent Instagram user age group are adults between the age of 25 and 34. Second comes the group of young adults between 18 and 24. According to a study by Gottfried and Shearer (2016) millennials<sup>3</sup> and younger generation tend to use social media more than any other consumer age group. Millennials as an age group have experienced the revolutionary increase of internet development in considerable short period of time and started using social media abundantly in their teenage years and are still largely involved in influencer business as consumers. Which is only natural given the fact that the majority of influencers are also millennials or younger. However, younger consumers aged 24 and lower have incorporated the usage of social media in their daily lives since childhood (Global Web Index 2019) and are therefore much more exposed to the influencer culture in their daily lives.

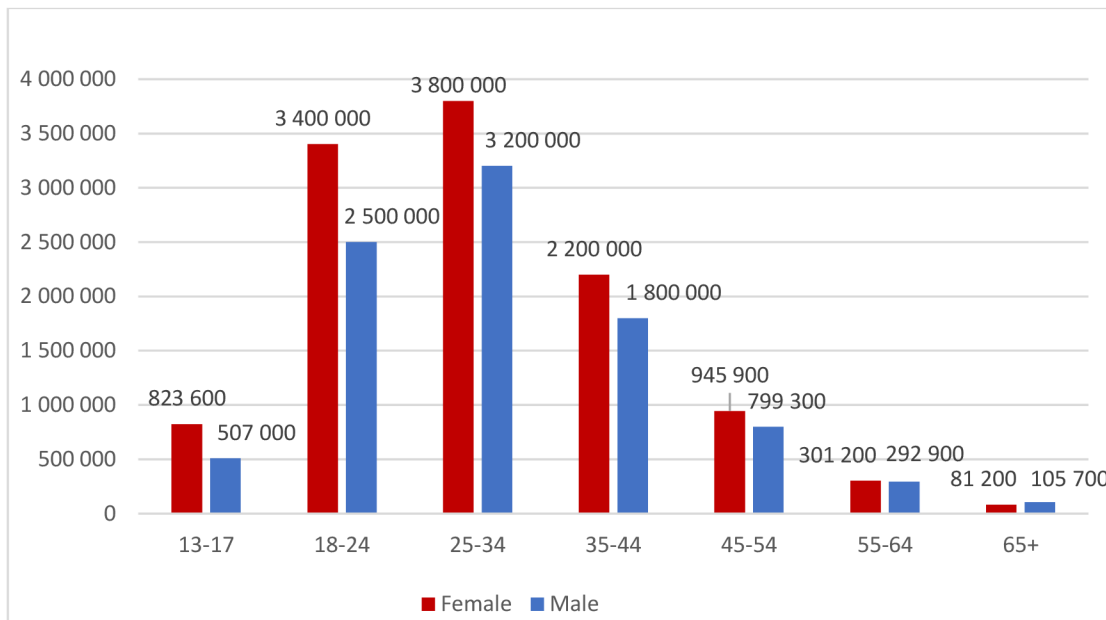


Fig. 3: South Korean Instagram users by age group. Source: OOSGA.

### 3.2. Functions and ads on Instagram

Currently, in addition to main function of Instagram to publish photos and videos on profile, Instagram also offers Stories (publishing a photo or a video on your profile visible for only 24 hours), Reels (maximum 30-second videos appearing on user’s explore page), Direct (purpose of exchange of direct messages), Shops ( place where brands can sell their products and goods) and Search that allows user to reach content from users that the user does not follow, but could be interested in based on their behavior in the application (Meta 2024) via likes, comments, time spent looking at a specific post or interaction frequency with a given account. Algorithm

<sup>3</sup> People born between 1981 and 1996.

of Instagram is its most powerful marketing tool, allowing consumers to reach targeted content in their feed, including direct ad posts from brands or influencers that align with the consumer's area of interest and then tailors the level of exposure based on their previous behavior in the app.

There are six types of possible advertisement on the app. The first form of advertisement is also the oldest one in the form of a published photo. It is simple and straightforward; however, this form of advertisement still has the same visual as a classic internet pop-up ad and if shared directly to the brand's social media page it could bear the disadvantage of failing to expose the content to the intended target audience (Kim 2020). The second form of advertising is a published video. For posted videos, Instagram allows only up to 60 seconds of content to be published, keeping the presentation of the advertisement short. However, this form of advertising is deemed unsuccessful marketing technique due to the low involvement of consumers. Third form is through a direct link on user's profile. Users or brands can externally sell their products via a link leading them to the seller's website. Fourth form of advertisement is a collection ad shown in user's feed. It is a fusion of the photo ad form combined with external link feature, directly redirecting the user to the seller's website — this function is based on the user's previous behavior on the app. Fifth form is advertising through Stories where the user is shown an ad while viewing other users' stories in the form of a short maximum 15 second video or a photo with an option to swipe and be redirected to the product promoted in the ad. The last sixth form of advertisement on Instagram is through Reels. It is the most recent form of advertisement where the ad is being presented through a short, edited video appearing on user's search page (Meta 2024, Kim 2020).

## 4. Influencers

### 4.1. What is an influencer?

An influencer can be defined as “a person or group that has the ability to influence the behaviour or opinions of others” or as “a person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them”<sup>4</sup>. Unlike traditional celebrities or influencers known from traditional media, social media influencers are regular people that acquired some amount of following and recognition online by creating and posting content on social media (Lou and Yuan 2019). Influencers are also online personalities who present themselves and their content on social media with posted content in various areas

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<sup>4</sup> *Cambridge Business English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019), s.v. “influencer.”

of interest, whether that is in fashion, beauty, travel, lifestyle, food etc., showing their expertise in that particular area (Yoon 2019).

#### 4.2. Marketing through influencers

Marketing through influencers means increasing awareness about a brand or a specific product within the intended target consumers (Brown and Hayes 2008). Especially in recent years, brands have been referring to marketing through influencers as a key part of their social media marketing strategy. Based on social media marketing research done by a marketing media company SproutSocial, 81% of social marketers identify influencer marketing as a key part in their marketing strategy.

For brands and companies, it is often difficult to reach high engagement rate of their promotional posts (Campbell and Farrell 2020). Compared to traditional advertising, where the consumer is being confronted by direct advertisements, advertising through influencers is more subtle and does not appear as a direct advertisement to consumers and therefore the consumers react better to the advertisement. As mentioned in chapter 1.1., with the increased usage of Adblock technology by internet users (Weinswig 2016), targeted ad posts are not effectively reaching desired audience and brands and businesses have therefore started seeking out new ways of advertising their product to bypass this loss of potential customers by utilizing the audience of already established social media influencers (Hall 2016) and consequently opt for promotion of their products through social media influencers increasingly more (Mediakix 2017). The global influencer market is now deemed as a multi-billion-dollar industry (Yoon 2019). Additionally, influencers engage themselves in specific areas of interest and can attract a specific group of consumers that traditional online or offline advertising cannot (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

Marketing through social media influencers is advantageous for these brands and businesses because of leverage of the influencer's already established follower base. By exposure to advertising campaign posted by an influencer, the follower base will be transformed into potential customers without the need for an actual propagation from the brand or company and the advertisement will therefore have added value to potential consumers, because the followers already have awareness about the influencer and additionally because of the influence the influencer has over the consumer (Yoon 2019). Relating to awareness from the consumer, another advantage influencers bear for these brands is the authenticity of a statement given by an influencer. The statement given by an influencer about a specific brand, or a product is deemed more authentic than a statement about a product or a brand shared directly by the brand

or business (Campbell and Farrell 2020). Social media influencers have experienced so much success because of fusion of the need of referral from another individual when making a purchase from a trusted source and the boom of social media (Wielki 2020). A social media statistic has shown that 71% of Korean consumers are more likely to purchase based on a social media reference and 86% of women browse social media before making a purchase (Cervi 2021).

Unlike traditional online marketing, influencer marketing is a type of marketing that expects constant engagement, feedback and one that needs a varying marketing strategy that corresponds with the influencer. When conducting a partnership with an influencer, it is optimal to analyze areas of “consumer response patterns and trending topics” (Campbell and Farrell 2020:470). And therefore, contrary to traditional online marketing, each partnership requires more market analysis, not only on the target audience and the expected reach of the advertisement, etc. but on the influencer directly as well. However, even though this type of marketing requires more market analysis, influencers know their audience best and can provide the best insight on information regarding their follower base and their account (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

#### 4.3. Choosing an influencer vs a traditional celebrity for a campaign

Already established influencers with high following are significantly more advantageous for brands to choose for a marketing campaign instead of a traditional celebrity because of multiple factors. Firstly, prime reason being lower cost (Brown and Hayes 2008). Just like traditional celebrities, influencers hold three marketing functions better than traditional advertising: “(1) access to a potentially highly engaged audience, (2) an established endorser persona, and (3) skills in social media management.” (Campbell and Farrell 2020:473). To their followers, influencers promote themselves as ordinary people no different from their audience and their followers relate to them based on the things that align with their own life as well, like the stage of life they are in, geographical location, interest, age etc. (Campbell and Farrell 2020) or because they live the lifestyle the audience admires and desires to live but cannot because of socioeconomic or other factors in their own life.

#### 4.4. Types of influencers

One can divide an influencer based on their following count, an area they interest themselves most in – e.g., fashion, lifestyle, travel etc. For example, marketing agency Upfluence has 7



million influencers spread out into 250 categories in their database. Campbell and Farrell (2020) divide influencers based on their following count into five groups:

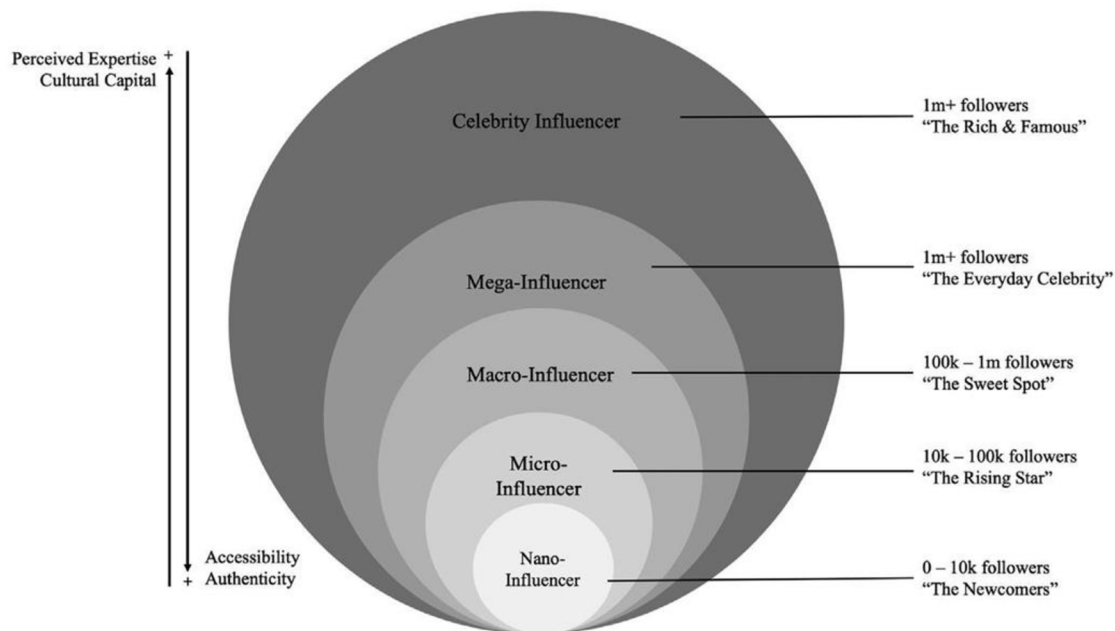


Fig.4: Types of social media influencers. Source: More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020:471).

#### 4.4.1. Celebrity influencers

Celebrity influencers are defined by Campbell and Farrell (2020:471) as influencers that acquired their fame and recognition independently to social media and primarily use social media to further leverage their careers and propagate brand partnerships. By description these influencers have more than one million followers and thanks to the already established influence outside of social media they engage in more exclusive partnerships with luxurious brands and therefore are more expensive for brands to start a partnership with and more difficult to hire as a brand or a product ambassador (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

#### 4.4.2. Mega-influencers

“Unlike celebrity influencers, Mega-influencers [...] are people who lacked celebrity status prior to their becoming social media mavens.” (Campbell and Farrell 2020:471). Statistically speaking, these influencers have a large following above 1 million like celebrity influencers, however outside of social media and their respected follower base, these influencers are not known in the public’s eye (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

#### 4.4.3. Macro-influencers

These influencers following count ranges from 100 thousand to 1 million. They are not yet on the same scale of influence over their audience stemming from large following like celebrity or mega-influencers, however, macro-influencers still hold a significant level of influence, and their engagement rate is seemingly high. “These influencers are dominant within their subject domains (e.g., travel, food, music), and their audiences often aspire to be like them” (Campbell and Farrell 2020:472).

#### 4.4.4. Micro-Influencers

Micro-influencers’ sphere of influence is relatively small, mostly consisting of followers coming from the same geographic sphere or similar area of interest. Additionally, they also have significantly higher engagement rate with their audience, mostly through stories. Due to their significantly higher engagement rate with their audience and a lower following of 10 thousand to 100 thousand, they are deemed by their audience as relatable and authentic (Campbell and Farrell 2020:472), and their promotion of a product is deemed as a “friendly advice” and are trusted that the influencer has a personal experience with the product or brand.

Engagement rate that is directly linked to selling promoted products lies at 25–50%, while for mega influencers the engagement rate lies only at 2–5% (Yoon 2019). Engagement rate is higher, because the influencers followers engage more, and likely follow only one or two other influencers of this small scale (Weinswig 2016). Furthermore, suggesting that consumers tend to react to promotional campaigns more in cases where they feel closeness to the influencer.

#### 4.4.5. Nano-influencers

Nano-influencers are defined as influencers that have less than 10 thousand followers. The influence circle for this type of influencer is quite small, consisting mostly of friends, family, acquaintances or people from the same area of interest. Certainly because of these high levels of trust in these relationships, that nano-influencers have the highest engagement rate from their audience. Partnerships are mostly pursued through unpaid form, promising the influencer exposure, free products or chances to network (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

### 5. Criteria for choosing the right influencer for a campaign

As said before, influencers operate within various markets and areas of interest of consumers, for example fashion, food, travel, lifestyle etc. Therefore, before even scouting a particular endorser for a campaign, it is also important to tailor a message directed towards the influencer

offering a possible partnership (Brown and Hayes 2008). When choosing an endorser for a campaign, it is crucial that brands and companies alter their marketing strategies for each endorser, while considering audience they are trying to reach, product category and use different endorsers accordingly (Chiu and Ho 2023) as well as consider the image of the influencer or area of expertise that the influencer is sharing with their audience to make the best fit for each of the parties involved in the advertising campaign (Brown and Hayes 2008).

One of the most important criteria that are needed to check before starting an advertising campaign with an influencer is looking into the engagement rate of an influencer. A study by SproutSocial (2023) states that 58% of social media marketers claim that doing a background check on the social media influencer's engagement rate is the most important when choosing an influencer for a campaign. Engagement rate helps the brand to identify which influencers have active followers that interact with their content and are therefore going to react more positively to a propagation statement from them. The more active followers the influencer has, the more involved the followers are in the influencer's activities. However, some influencers buy fake followers or likes on their posts to either appear as an influencer in higher category or create the illusion of having a high engagement rate. An example of influencer with high count of fake followers is a South Korean fashion influencer with the username @wonlog on Instagram. As of now, she has 557 thousand followers, however the mean like count of her pinned posts came up to 7127 likes and her posts garner on average around 2000 likes, depending on the nature of given post. Resulting in astonishing 0.01% engagement rate. Based on these statistics, it can be strongly assumed that this influencer bought artificial followers to appear as a different category of influencer. Starting a campaign with an influencer that forges engagement rate like this will result in a low performing campaign for the brand (Alain 2023). An example of a failed campaign because of forged followers and engagement rate is a company called Raw Sugar Living, a beauty product brand. According to a report from Points North Group, Raw Sugar Living saw 46% of their investments on influencer partnerships plummet (O'Malley 2019) because of overlooking forged engagement rates.

Another very important aspect is to check the consumer's trust put into the influencer's statement by checking what is said about the influencer online. Whether they've been involved in a scandal, whether their public reputation has been damaged recently and whether the comments made by their followers on their posts are positive and encouraging or negative etc. (Lou and Yuan 2019).

## 6. Influencers' impact on consumers

### 6.1. Attractiveness

Young consumers, that is those in the age groups 13–17 and 18–24, are especially receptive to endorser's attractiveness (Chiu and Ho 2023). Attractiveness of an endorser plays a significant role (Chiu and Ho 2023) in successful marketing campaign results. The results of study of Chiu and Ho (2023) state that the attractiveness of endorsers remarkably influence consumer's emotional attachment, further affecting their purchase.

In beauty influencer sphere, these consumer age groups tend to base the value of the product based on the attractiveness of the influencer (Chiu and Ho 2023). Endorsers who are attractive have higher persuasive power to consumers, further affecting their purchase intention (Praxmarer 2011). When different effects that influencers have on consumers intertwine, the campaign is more effective as a result. An example of this is when influencers who show a high level of expertise and are attractive, promote products more effectively, since expertise confirms the quality of the product offered and attractiveness helps to gain the consumer's attention and awareness about the brand and the product will therefore by association to the influencer become more memorable (Lou and Yuan 2019). Collaboration with an attractive influencer is highly beneficial for companies especially when it comes to promoting beauty products and clothing items. After all, when the endorser is already attractive, consumers purchase the products with the intention of mimicking the level of attractiveness of the endorser — whether it is about having a clear skin like them, having healthy hair like them or other features.

### 6.2. Trustworthiness

Ultimately, influencer marketing is “based on the economy of trust” (Weinswig 2016). Brown and Hayes (2008:44) propose an intuitive credibility test that determines the validity of the message and the messenger and one of them is “How trustworthy are they likely to be? Do they have a vested interest?”.

WOM refers to word of mouth. It is a concept referring to any opinion or statement shared regarding a product or a company, whether it is in a positive or negative light, made by a former, current or a potential customer (Arnst 1967, Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). WOM is presented as a major key factor in affecting consumer's beliefs, purchase intentions as well as the attitudes towards, for example, the brands itself or a product (Arnst 1967). Traditionally, WOM occurs in real-life interactions with other individuals or small strong social tie groups,

defined as mostly acquaintances, friends or family. Word of mouth has a high value in making customer decisions (Arnst 1967, Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991) due to the high trustworthiness of these relationships.

With the high rise of internet penetration and the vast expansion of usage of internet, a new category of WOM emerged — e-WOM, referring to electronic word of mouth (Cheung and Thadani 2010). In electronic environment, participants of e-WOM are exposed to social influences outside of their social tie groups and have extended their reach to statements shared about the given brand or product from other consumers and has by extension given them the platform to share these statements as well (Cheung and Thadani 2010, Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Either in social media advertising or traditional advertising, the brand's or company's advertisement is met with “wall of indifference” (Brown and Hayes 2008:140) defined by low interest and low involvement rate of the consumers to the advertisement from direct source and influencers are a way for brands or companies to break through the wall of indifference and get potential consumers interested in purchasing their product. An influencer with a devoted and large social media audience can then start a chain reaction from the audience by simply sharing a piece from their daily life, e.g., going to a specific establishment or owning a product and mentioning the name of the establishment or given product. In consequence, if the audience finds the information or recommendation of the influencer positive, they will further share the WOM or e-WOM with their social circle and audience on social media and thus continuing the chain reaction caused by the influencer.

The rise of digital age and advertising through influencers has only proven the fact that trust plays a significant role in purchase making decisions (Brown and Hayes 2008). Influencers, especially those on smaller scale seek to make themselves deemed as a trustworthy source of sharing a statement or an opinion about a given product and to simultaneously be deemed as a consumer like every other internet user (Keller and Fay 2016) that has a personal experience with the given brand or product and is recommending it purely out of their good will and sharing it with their audience.

Younger age group consumers, especially those aged 13–17 and 18–24, value credibility of the influencer more than any other consumer age group (Chiu and Ho 2023). 92% of consumers tend to trust the word of an influencer more than an advertisement or traditional celebrity endorsement (Weinswig 2016). Swant (2016) also suggests that consumers in some cases trust social media influencers similar amount as their friends.

Authenticity plays a crucial role in influencer's trustworthiness. Authenticity of an influencer signifies a genuine intention of promoting a brand where in exchange they get

financial compensation. Consumers are aware of the existence of influencer advertising and may be wary of these advertisements and thus rely on the level of authenticity they think the influencer holds and the influencer's honest opinion on the advertisement (Kim and Kim 2021).

Influencers like to present themselves as relatable, authentic, relishing the same interests as any other individual and present themselves with an expertise in an area of interest. Consequently, users on social media tend to follow other users who relish the same interests or lifestyle and can relate to or compare their own life to. A study on influencer's trustworthiness by Lou and Yuan (2019) states that perceived similarity to the user and influencer's attractiveness and trustworthiness positively influences trust put in the influencer and their statements. The source of strong sense of loyalty and compassion towards the influencer is created towards the influencer through frequent interaction with the influencer resulting in a sense of trust felt towards the influencer (Kim and Kim 2021).

### 6.3. Expertise

Each influencer has their own area of interest or product line they engage in the most and are deemed by the consumer as an expert offering their insight and honest opinion (Campbell and Farrell 2020). Brown and Hayes (2008:44) propose the intuitive credibility test that determines the validity of a message being perceived by a consumer, in this test is a proposed question "Does the person have authority to speak on the subject?".

These days, when considering a purchase, consumers tend to rely on e-WOM regarding a product they wish to purchase and look at claims about the product from other consumers and the proclaimed expertise of the influencer can play a crucial role in making or breaking purchase decision point of the consumer (Brown and Hayes 2008). Brown and Hayes (2008) describe influencers as trendsetters. They are aware of the product earlier than the average consumers and if the product fits in their area of expertise and the lifestyle they promote, they consequently promote the product to their audience. The audience then feels they are being promoted a product that is of good quality and is worth purchasing.

### 6.4. Para-social relationship and attachment of the influencer

Para-social relationships between a known individual and a consumer of media could be described as a one-sided non-reciprocal relationship (Horton and Wohl 1956). Even though this is a description of para-social relationship felt towards a traditional celebrity, this relationship could be incorporated between influencers and followers as well. It is a relationship, where the

influencer provides content for the followers and the followers consume and engage with the content offered leaving comments, messages etc. By influencers sharing their lifestyle and content from their daily life with followers, the followers are faced with the influencer's content every day. By consuming their content every day in their free time, the followers subsequently increase their awareness of the influencer. Because of the shared area of interest between the follower and the influencer and the expertise that the influencer presents in this specific area, the follower then forms a one-sided bond with the influencer, whereby the follower relates to the influencer or aspires to be like the influencer — because of expertise, lifestyle or attractiveness of the influencer — the follower also feels like they know the influencer on a more personal level. With time and stable exposure to the content of influencer, the para-social relationship of the follower grows. Influencers are aware of this phenomenon and are therefore altering their content to appear more genuine and relatable and rely on posting just enough of content from their daily lives to create the illusion of closeness and intimacy between them and their audience, as well as strategically posting engaging content for their followers asking them for advice, opinions, comments on their stories or live streams etc.

#### 7. The influencer as a brand

Social media is a hub for promotion. Not only promotion through targeted ads or paid promotion through influencers but above all personal promotion (Kim 2020). As the main purpose of advertising through influencers is to share awareness about a product or a brand (Brown and Hayes 2008), these days it is getting increasingly more difficult to distinguish the influencer from the brand. In recent development of the influencer sphere, influencers have decided to create their own brands and product lines (Weinswig 2016) and subsequently use their established online persona – their own personal brand – as means of promotion. Followers of influencers with higher following often idolize the personal brand of the influencer and want to become like them (Campbell and Farrell 2020). Personal brand is a series of things that make the influencer unique from other influencers operating in the same area of interest (Park 2022). It is something that keeps the audience entertained and make them like the persona more. It can be their background, their mannerisms, personality, opinions etc. This personal brand that influencer proposes to their audience is an online persona, that is often largely different from the person they are in their everyday life, however this persona highlights the influencer's best bits of their natural personality to be more appealing to their audience, but consecutively from time to time share their carefully constructed opinions or reflect on their mental state, to stay relatable and genuine to their audience (Horton and Wohl 1956). Influencers often leverage

their manufactured personal brand to strengthen the relationship audience has to the influencer (Lou and Kim 2019). The personal brand of an influencer is manufactured either by the influencer themselves or their marketing agency. The promotion of their personal brand on social media inherently means a promotion of their lifestyle – their living situation, the country and city they reside in, their leisure activities, what they eat, how they present themselves with their fashion choices and mannerisms (Kim 2023).

#### 8. Fashion influencers

In 2020 within the COVID19 pandemic period, South Korea's online and mobile shopping transactions reached their peak and online shopping transaction numbers have only been on a steady rise since then. In 2024 South Korea reached 4<sup>th</sup> place in list of largest online shopping markets in the world (Cervi 2020, ECDB 2024). South Korea placed before Japan that reached 5<sup>th</sup> place and behind China (1<sup>st</sup>), the United States (2<sup>nd</sup>) and the United Kingdom (3<sup>rd</sup> place). Combined with psychological effect of influencers on consumers and South Korea's reputation as a tech forward country and having the most active social media users in Asia-Pacific region, South Korea is an ideal marketplace for influencer-owned online fashion stores.

Women of all ages are actively using social media, but especially young women often refer to influencers for fashion advice and follow influencers to catch up the newest trends in fashion without having the need to refer to fashion magazines and instead base their style on the personal style of the influencer (Weinswig 2016). Since consumers idolize the lifestyle or the attractiveness of the influencer and want to become like them, South Korean influencers are aware of these effects they have on consumers and therefore often start their own brands specializing in either skincare, clothing items or healthcare products. An example of this is the lifestyle and fashion influencer turned fashion brand owner @wonlog on Instagram, who has a link on her account leading to her online store, where she sells clothing and fashion accessories. The influencer's Instagram is the main hub for promotion of their own brand. Looking at some examples of these influencers like @wonlog and another fashion brand owner @una\_daily, when posting a picture involving their fashion brand's products, they like to pair their products with luxurious brands accessories, most commonly handbags, shoes and jewelry to possibly consecutively make their own products appear more of higher quality and luxurious.

In some cases, when influencers decide on a partnership with another fashion brand, if the influencer's personal brand – their online persona – aligns with another fashion brand's vision or the influencer's follower base is the desired target audience for the fashion brand, these two parties then start a co-branding marketing campaign, where the influencer not only promotes



the brand, but by default they are the brand. Additionally, the consumer is led to associate the brand with the influencer, giving attention to not only the brand, but the influencer as well (Kim 2023, Brown and Hayes 2008). Individual's fashion style essentially further amplifies one's personal brand. A survey dedicated to the effect that celebrities have on purchase intention of young women in their 20s and 30s revealed that two thirds of the responders bought an item worn by a celebrity or at least considered buying it because they wanted to mimic their personal brand or personal fashion style (Kim 2021).

#### 9. Luxury market and status

Societal status and hierarchy are firmly embedded in South Korean society. Influencers who are well connected, acquainted with other high-status influencers or people of high social status or celebrities, are subsequently thought of higher by others and gain popularity by association (Brown and Hayes 2008). The busier the e-WOM is about influencers, meaning the more the influencer is talked about online, the higher a status is assigned to them by consumers. Additionally, because of the importance of status in South Korean culture, the higher status the influencer holds, the more power the statement holds to a consumer and the more likely is the statement going to affect consumer's purchase decision.

Money rules the world. The more money an individual possesses, the higher he is thought of by society by default. More popular and successful South Korean Instagram influencers with 500 thousand to 1 million followers earn estimate 7.6 million KRW (approximately 5780 USD) per month – before deducting taxation and share for the marketing agency they are under, if they are under any, and present themselves on social media in best possible light living a high-end life filled with head-to-toe designer outfits, expensive lifestyle and association to other high-status individuals (Ha 2022). The adoration and feeling of obsession that audience has over the luxurious lifestyle these influencers share on social media is in actuality a feeling of envy (Chae 2018). Envy can be defined as “the unpleasant emotion that can arise when we compare unfavorably with others” (Smith and Kim 2007:46). The audience witnesses the luxurious lifestyle the influencer leads, wishes their own would be the same and subsequently keeps comparing their own lifestyle to the influencer's. Influencers leading a luxurious lifestyle must maintain some form of relatability and authenticity to their audience to be still deemed as relatable and honest. Important keywords when talking about envy at the lifestyle of influencers are comparison and obsession (Chae 2018). Obsession is a double-edged sword. When audience is obsessed with the influencer and their lifestyle, and the influencer still seems humble, genuine and shows other positive character traits, the audience

reacts positively, showering the influencer with compliments and consequently admires the influencer and wants to mimic their lifestyle. Whether that is trying to engage more in the luxurious lifestyle they see the influencer leading, buying products from influencer's brand or brands associated with the influencer etc. However, when the influencer does not acknowledge the audience enough, does not seem to hold any positive character traits, yet still maintains to live this luxurious lifestyle that the average consumer can only dream of living, the audience reacts negatively and reacts with negative obsession fueled by envy or feeling of not taking enough credit for the support they have given to the influencer thus far (Chae 2018). Envy can lead to aggressive behavior and expresses itself in form of obsessive malice towards the target of envy (Smith and Kim 2007). Which would manifest in individuals leaving negative comments and remarks on the influencer either on their social media profile or other social media platforms and online forums.

Even though comparison on social media, as mentioned previously, lies in the audience comparing their own lifestyle to the life of influencers and potentially wishing their life was the same, comparison additionally stems from similarity between the influencer and the audience (Chae 2018). The more similar the audience deems themselves to the influencer, e.g., their views, opinions, personality, the way they present themselves, fashion taste etc., the more likely they are to compare themselves to the influencer as an individual and the social differences between the two.

## 10. The Representation of influencers in the South Korean drama *Celebrity*

### 10.1. The drama *Celebrity* (*Selleobeuriti*)

South Korean dramas are often times used as a channel for representation and commentary of societal issues. The aim of portrayal and exploration of these issues and topics in dramas is to focus the audience's attention on them and spread these issues and topics in conversation among individuals. There are countless examples of dramas that illustrate and explore topics of societal issues. To provide a few examples, a drama called *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (*Isanghan byeonhosa U Yeongu*) focuses on illustrating struggles of a person with autism, then dramas like *The Glory* (*Deo geullori*) and *Penthouse* (*Penteuhauseu*) that put issue of in-school bullying into spotlight. Another example is a drama called *Somebody* (*Seombadi*), exploring the topic of dangers one may face on dating apps. Very common are also dramas highlighting the theme of social inequality like *Squid Game* (*Ojingeo geim*) and *Hell is Other People* (*Taineun jiogida*). The South Korean drama *Celebrity* focuses mainly on societal commentary on influencers operating on the social media app Instagram and the issues and phenomenon

surrounding these influencers. In this chapter of the thesis, I explore the representation of these influencers in *Celebrity*, linking my observations to the basic knowledge presented in previous chapters.

According to Flix Patrol, the drama ranks fourth in a top 10 list of most trending shows at the time of its initial release. *Celebrity* is an extravagant take on portrayal of influencer world that the main character, Seo Ari faces when she first gets introduced to this new world of Instagram influencers and navigates through it. The director of the drama, Gim Cheolgyu, has previously worked on dramas with more serious topics like murder, suicide, bullying etc. however, even though these violent topics are not incorporated in main plot line of the drama, the theme of suicide and criminal investigation was still incorporated into the drama *Celebrity*. Because it is first and foremost a drama, as the name of this genre suggests, the media serves a purpose of entertainment for the audience and thus the characters are most of the times exaggerated, overly dramatic and fulfill the archetypes of certain influencers and character traits.

## 10.2. Depiction of influencers in *Celebrity*

The drama starts with familiarizing the audience with the main character Seo Ari, whose profession is that of a door-to-door cosmetics product saleswoman. Even though she, over the course of the various events that account for the drama, gains followers and fame online, her personality and values do not change drastically. Seo Ari is a practical person who does not care about materialistic values of the modern world. Even though she originally comes from a wealthy background and became poor because of her father's poor financial decisions, she remains humble, down to earth and is not afraid to speak up for what is right. That is exactly why later in the drama Seo Ari gets scouted by a marketing agency that focuses on influencers and is willing to take her as their client. Seo Ari's likeable personality and attitude of a person who does not put themselves above their audience is what later becomes a part of her personal brand as an influencer. This personal brand of hers deems her as relatable by her audience and as trustworthy because she is not afraid to speak up and is honest. The audience therefore is led to trust her about the products she endorses and the WOM she spreads to her audience. At the peak of her career, she has 1.3 million followers and a promotion of a brand or a specific product by her personally costs approximately 7300 USD for a 30-minute livestream promotion and approximately 3600 USD for paid promotion through a post.

Another character who plays a significant role in the drama is an influencer with the Instagram username @lunachic\_minhye, real name Oh Min-Hye. She has 340 thousand followers and therefore falls into the macro-influencer category. Leveraging the effect of

attractiveness (see above, chapter 6.1.) on consumers, Min-Hye has started her own clothing store called Luna Chic where she sells clothing items and accessories. Her personal brand created by her marketing agency is one of a physically attractive influencer who looks out for her friends and by default for her audience as well, going as far as creating a name for her audience – calling them “Lucys”.

Then there is an influencer with the Instagram username @princesschae, real name Jin Chae-Hee, who has 320 thousand followers, putting her as well into the category of macro-influencer. This influencer in the drama embodies the archetype of a young and “bratty” influencer coming from a wealthy and influential family. She leverages others for her own benefit only and for association to other high-status individuals. Since she thinks so highly of herself, she is a character who sees everything from a hierarchical standpoint and divides other individuals she engages with as below her or on the same level as her. On her social media she offers a fake compassion for her audience, however in reality she looks down on her followers with condescension.

Other influencers shown in the series, who play smaller roles in the storyline and in portrayal of influencers, however, are ought to be mentioned, are influencers with Instagram usernames @angela\_gellatto, in the drama called Angela with 270 thousand followers, @jina\_love\_, called Jina, with 210 thousand followers, making them both macro-influencers, and lastly @yurang.ine, called Yuri, with 63 thousand followers, making her a micro-influencer.

All these influencers have formed a sort of a closed off club called “Gabin Society” whose main purpose of existence is leveraging each other’s follower base for mutual promotion via interaction between each other, livestreaming together, attending each other’s promotional business functions etc. The club appears to the audiences of the influencers as a friend group supporting each other and their businesses with sharing posts with hashtags like #truefriendship, #womensticktogether and #besties. However, the club is based merely on business relationships and operates on a hierarchical level. The influencers with lower following constantly try to please and do favors for bigger influencers in the club. Which further promotes the idea that what influencers present on their social media about themselves, and their relationships is manufactured and entirely a lie. An example of demonstration of the leverage of personal relationships in this drama is displayed when Seo Ari is first introduced to the influencer world by Oh Min-Hye. Oh Min-Hye first approaches her out of selfish intent hoping that Ari could do favors for her in the future. Another aspect that is depicted in the drama and correlates to chapter 9 of this thesis about influencers who are well connected, acquainted with other high-status influencers or people of high social status or celebrities, are subsequently thought of

higher by others and gain popularity by association. This is depicted in the drama by all members of the “Gabin Society” trying to leverage each other’s connections to other individuals. In this club of theirs, not only higher ranked influencers are leveraging the lower ranked ones, but the lower ranked influencers also leverage the higher ranked ones for an opportunity to be connected to and associated with individuals of high status and even traditional celebrities. One depiction of this is when Seo Ari purposefully wears the same piece of designer clothing as a high-status model with 4.5 million followers and mixes the outfit with clothing from her fashion brand in hopes of posting a photo with the model on social media and leverage the model’s audience to get exposure for her and her own fashion brand as well as to be associated with the model. Even Seo Ari’s best friend in the series leverages Ari’s name to sell low quality cosmetics to make profit off her name on livestreams.

### 10.3. The effects of influencer world

Each episode of the drama starts off with a commentary directly from the character Seo Ari on modern consumeristic society as well as on influencers. As talked about in chapter 9 of this thesis, the modern consumeristic society has been built on comparison and curiosity satisfied from consuming media about influencer’s luxurious lifestyle the audience wishes they could lead. As Seo Ari mentions in the first episode of the drama, the audience ask themselves questions like “What kind of job allows them to take vacations four times a year and buy all these expensive items?” or makes the audience wonder about the influencers' backgrounds, whether they come from a wealthy background or whether their spouses are rich and influential and therefore these influencers can afford to live this lifestyle.

As said above (see chapter 7 about influencers as a brand), the drama continuously highlights the use of social media for self-promotion where each user creates their own personal brand based on their area of interest. Since the drama focuses mainly on the luxurious lifestyle of influencers, it is depicted in multiple scenes in the drama, that other individuals on social media tend to mimic this lifestyle of influencers, and doing so through means that can be deemed unnecessary, e.g., borrowing or renting a luxurious item for one-time use to share it on social media, posing in front of another person’s parked car, pretending to own it on social media or forging followers to appear as a different influencer category. In the drama, the marketing agency not only forges followers, but also creates accounts to comment and like the influencer’s posts, giving the illusion of natural engagement rate. Creating a personal brand on social media inherently means manufacturing it. Users and influencers therefore affected by the attractiveness of other influencers they are exposed to on their feed, consequently use filters

and alter their appearance via photoshop to appear more attractive, further supporting the manufactured narrative of shallow values promoted on social media. Another depiction of fakeness regarding personal brand I would like to point out is one of the influencers, Jina, whose personal brand is one of the typical wealthy influencers living a luxurious lifestyle and because she owns, according to her words, “too many” of these luxurious items, she resells luxurious items to her followers, however almost entirety of her designer collection are knock-offs.

The marketing agency in the drama also confirms that influencers can be very beneficial for a campaign (see above, chapter 5). In the drama, Seo Ari is considered as a paid attendee for a launch event of a beauty brand. The agency states that personal brand is important, as well as their public image and demographic. In the case of Seo Ari, her personal brand is also that of an attractive fashion guru and with her demographic mostly being young women in their 20s, that are easily influenced by her and her fashion and beauty choices, proves herself as the perfect fit for the campaign.

In the very first episode of the drama, when Seo Ari visits a restaurant, and at that point is a mega-influencer with the following of 1.3 million, the drama depicts the phenomenon of chain reaction caused by an influencer, discussed in chapter 6.2. of this thesis about trustworthiness. Because Seo Ari is a trusted source of information for her audience, she easily starts a chain reaction simply by sharing a photo of the meal she had at the restaurant with the location of the restaurant tagged. Chain reaction first continues through her followers visiting and sharing the restaurant on their social media with a hashtag and location and the reaction is then continued through e-WOM created around the restaurant. Seo Ari then claims that the promotion the restaurant got from her has given the restaurant around 2 million USD in annual sales, further proving the power of an influencer that is deemed as a trusted source.

Once an influencer reaches over ten thousand followers and goes from nano-influencer to micro-influencer, they are then deemed by brands as profitable and a starting a partnership with them is much more beneficial for brands. The influencers get offered free products and services that fit their proclaimed expertise and area of interest they operate in, in exchange for a promotion on their social media and then sell the products to their audience taking a percentage for themselves and tells the audience, that the influencer got the product “just for them, since they asked”. By this claim, the influencer exerts the trustworthiness assigned to the influencer by their audience and simultaneously the para-social relationship between them.

Para-social relationships between the influencers and their audience is an ongoing theme throughout the drama. As mentioned before, Oh Min-Hye and Angela have established a name for their audience, calling them “Lucys” and “Gellattos” in order to make the audience feel

special and to have a sense of belonging to a community. Additionally, to make the para-social relationship feel more real and further deepen the relationship the followers feel towards them. They mostly leverage these para-social relationships via live streams and active interaction with their audience. They are portrayed talking to their audience as if they are their good friends, giving them their “truthful” opinions, that in reality are, as mentioned in previous part of this thesis, carefully constructed beforehand. They are also often depicted emotionally manipulating their audience saying things like e.g., “You know me Gellattos! Would I ever do something like this?” or “You guys are my Insta buddies!” to get the audience on their side. The drama also depicts a common strategy used by influencers on their livestream, in which they leverage the saying “drunk words are sober thoughts”. They consume an alcoholic beverage on live stream talking to their audience as if they are having a drink together to also create an intimate atmosphere and create the illusion that they are so genuine that they do not have anything to hide from their audience and therefore can afford to be drunk on live stream.

Influencers depicted in this drama mostly use the following ad functions on Instagram: For promotional purposes they mostly use the live streaming function with a link to their online shop. On the live stream they are either alone engaging with the audience to promote their product or they are accompanied by the other members of their club to leverage audiences of all influencers present. Advertisements of brand deals are mostly shared through posts with hashtags to start e-WOM about the product. The influencers that also own their own fashion brands additionally have a separate Instagram account dedicated to their brands with a link to their online stores.

Another topic the drama explores are influencer-owned fashion brands. In the drama both Seo Ari and Oh Min-Hye own their own fashion clothing stores. As it goes with attractive influencers, they both rely on their attractiveness and personas to sell their products effectively. The promotion of Min-Hye’s brand lies in leverage of the “Gabin Society” that she is in and mutual promotion to reach the collected audience of all the members of “Gabin Society” and not only her own audience. Both have a separate Instagram account dedicated to their fashion brands with a link to their online shop and promote their products through active posting of stories and posts. Seo Ari, in order to expand her brand outside South Korea only, made a co-branding campaign with a Chinese influencer to promote her brand on Chinese social media and to have the influencer’s audience associate her directly to Ari’s brand by default. Seo Ari’s audience applauds her on her fashion sense and her products sell out quickly due to her demographic mostly being young women in their 20s, who according to Kim’s previously mentioned survey, are easily influenced to purchase something based on influencers. Though

Seo Ari always tries to offer her customers original fashion pieces, Oh Min-Hye is not so invested in her fashion business and does it simply because it is beneficial for her and her influencer persona. She simply researches which pieces of clothing are trendy at the moment and sells them with slight design alternations.

Referring to the phenomenon of obsession the audience feels towards the influencer (see above, chapter 9), in the drama Seo Ari is always praised by her audience for her down to earth personality, her honesty towards the audience regarding her opinions and views and her humble demeanor where she does not put herself above her audience. Therefore, even though she presents to be living this luxurious lifestyle that her audience wishes they could have, they still praise her and support her because they deem her as relatable. However, at one point in the drama Seo Ari gets overwhelmed by this newfound support from her audience and shares a post stating that she does not like receiving likes and support she does not think she deserves. This upsets her audience, and the positive obsession turns into a negative one. The audience starts telling her to be simply grateful they have been supporting her ever since she became an influencer and asking her who does she think she is to be saying that to her audience that supports her in whatever she's doing. This damages her influencer career greatly. The situation escalated to a point where social media accounts dedicated to sharing hate speech about her were being created and shared around the community. Even Seo Ari's best friend in the drama at one point creates a hate account to share malicious information about her. Additionally, articles on online forums were being made about her claiming to reveal Seo Ari's "True Character" with screenshots of forged conversations altered by photoshop between Ari and self-proclaimed "ex-fan" to tarnish her reputation. She tries to redeem herself by starting a live stream and speaking the truth behind the article, however the members of "Gabin Club" that are at that point in the drama against her, go live as well and manipulatively get the audience on their side by getting emotional and acting on an agreed upon narrative between each of the members of the club, therefore Ari is left at a loss with no proof to prove her narrative. Being constantly told by strangers online to kill herself and being subjected to hate speech about her on social media and on the internet and no way to speak her truth, she is mentally distressed and decides to fake her death to escape it all. The drama then highlights how ignorant individuals are to the consequences of the behavior they exert in an online environment, no matter whether the intentions behind the action were positive or negative. Furthermore, individuals often fail to realize the weight of their words when spreading hate speech about individuals they do not know, thinking it will not change anything. On the other hand, while not being fully aware of this fact, positively reacting to these people they do not know on social



media, only further supports this narrative of fakeness and consumeristic ideas based on shallow values on social media.

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of this thesis was to first introduce the reader to social media in South Korea, Instagram and influencers in order to consequently understand and realize the true influence of influencers, their effects on their audience and consumers. Through collected literature and articles on this topic, the following information was concluded.

From a marketing standpoint, influencers hold immense potential for brands and companies. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers have significantly lower hiring cost, hold power over their audience and already have an established personal brand and established target audience. Additionally, the audience feels attached to the influencer through the para-social relationship created towards the influencer. This relationship forms through the constant exposure to content from the influencer, and through the effects of influencers on their audience – their personal brand, attractiveness, proclaimed expertise, trustworthiness, WOM etc. and subsequently the influencers have the power to influence purchase intention of their audience in a personalized manner that traditional advertising never could.

The shackles of modern consumeristic society on individuals have been manifested the most on social media, especially on the social media app Instagram, where individuals are constantly exposed to consumeristic ideas, shallow values and comparison of lifestyles of different individuals. Consumerism, especially on Instagram has led people to believe, that this manufactured illusion of someone's lifestyle is real life and strive to live that lifestyle as a reaction. The drama continuously highlights the exhaustion falling on individuals from social media to act and dress a certain way, what to do, where and what to eat etc. and comments on the over consumption of these materialistic products that are deemed trendy at the moment. By constant exposure to materialism through social media and in everyday life seeing other individuals engage in trends, one cannot help but wonder whether they should also engage in the culture of ever-changing trends that is so apparent in South Korean society. The drama explores the effects that influencers have on their audience, the leverage of para-social relationships and stresses the superficial side of social media, where users and influencers manufacture every aspect about them and their life that they present online. Though the drama portrays influencers in an exaggerated and stereotypical way, the drama succeeds to shed light on the issues regarding influencers, especially the issue of consumeristic society, its projection on social media and the effect that influencers have on their audience.

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