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SO CLOSE, YET SO FAR AWAY: THE PARADOX OF STATUS AND DISTINCTION AMONG INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS

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Introduction

Founded in 2010 as a platform for image-based sharing among friends, Instagram has recently evolved into a locus of economic activity due to the emergence of 'Influencer marketing' (Phua, 2017). In the tradition of 'micro-celebrities' (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013), a subset of users have become 'Instagram Influencers' who monetise their follower base by integrating sponsored 'advertorials' into their posts (Abidin, 2016, 2017; Marwick, 2015).

Reflecting the hierarchical nature of the platform, paid opportunities increase proportionally as Influencers achieve a bigger audience. However, the economic potential of such marketing has motivated industry stakeholders to create guidelines for these paid advertorials, requiring explicit admission of compensation through appropriate hashtags such as #sp, #sponsored, and #sponsoredpost.

By cultivating a façade of honesty when making product recommendations to their audiences (Kozinets et al., 2010), Influencers leverage their perceived intimacy and relatability into profit in a process referred to as 'calculated authenticity' (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017). As part of this 'self-branding', Influencers largely frame their success as

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merely the result of self-motivated perseverance and as a decision to 'follow their passion' (Abidin, 2014).

However, framing success as a universally achievable goal obscures the offline-capital necessary for emulation (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Further problematising the notion of universality is the widespread procurement of professional management services for account curation, including the use of professional photography (Abidin, 2016, 2017).

Success and opportunities for sponsorship are thus largely limited to those who can afford the outlay of money and time required, continuing the Internet's ability to perpetuate offline social inequalities (Duffy, 2016).

In line with previous research, we propose that Instagram is a highly unequal platform, reproducing or even reinforcing status hierarchies through subtle mechanisms. Our particular contribution explores the paradoxical nature of the 'Instagram Influencer'.

Becoming an Influencer requires different forms of capital to succeed. However, Influencers must suggest counterfactually that there is only limited distinction between them and their personal audience, maintaining the relatability and authenticity required for Influencer marketing.

Our research questions are thus concerned with how Influencers negotiate this paradox: *Do Instagram Influencers display status markers of socio-economic elevation? How do Instagram Influencers normalise their status markers as ordinary, maintaining relatability with their audiences?*

Methods

To address our research questions, we conducted a mixed-methods empirical investigation in February 2017, relying on user-generated data. To select monetised Influencer accounts, we queried three appropriate hashtags in Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016): #sp, #sponsored, and #sponsoredpost. The data from #sp revealed too much noise and was accordingly excluded, leaving the data from #sponsored and #sponsoredpost. 10,000 and 4,555 Instagram posts were extracted respectively. An initial SNA was conducted for each hashtag and the 50 accounts with the highest indgree values were selected, excluding company accounts and bots.

We then collected the 'bio' of each Influencer as well as the quantitative data concerning number of posts, followers, and following. The visual and textual data from the most recent 12 posts was collected, compiling a total sample of 600 posts. We conducted a preliminary textual analysis for most common terms and hashtags, followed by in-depth qualitative coding of both the textual and visual data, as informed by grounded theory.

Findings

The SNA revealed a scattered structure with low density and a large number of individualized interactions (see Appendix), indicating that sponsored posts on Instagram are used more for broadcasting than discussion.

Qualitative coding of the textual and visual data revealed thematic diversity with fashion as the most popular topic, followed by lifestyle, fitness, and travel. A prominent recurring theme in the data was wide proliferation of markers of socio-economic elevation, suggestive of the offline-capital necessary to succeed.

Economic capital was evoked through hashtags such as #luxury and references to high-end fashion brands (e.g., Gucci, Prada). One of the most frequently used hashtags, #ootd [outfit of the day], indicated the availability of sufficient funds to maintain a daily changing wardrobe. A recurring theme was the use of expensive professional services, especially photography. We also noted the prevalence of luxury travel as a motif across multiple categories, not limited to travel-focused Influencers.

“Miami soon again 🌊 but first Munich then Paris Fashion Week 🍷 #miami #beachbabe #bikinigirl #miamilife #miamibeach #pool #poolparty” (@marinathemoss)

Cultural capital markers appeared frequently, particularly among the travel, food, and parenting Influencers who revealed extensive background knowledge and distinct tastes.

“I’m in Toulon and up the road from here lives Reynald Delille [...] Many say he produces the best rosé in the world at his vineyard in Domaine de Terrebrune” (@paperboyo)

Influencers across categories also used certain cues to indicate their *social capital*. Large follower numbers (median = 12,750) alongside high follower-to-following ratios (up to 1017:1) indicated elevated network positioning and high social desirability.

Exclusive invitations, trips, and events, as well as personal relationships with other Influencers or celebrities, marked certain Influencers as part of an élite social milieu that could be viewed, but not experienced by the audience.

“Today was insane in the best way possible! I have not stopped smiling since we got the news that my husband is now an Atlanta Brave” (@thegoldengirldiary)

Corresponding to the need for Influencers to maintain relatability despite their evident status elevation, there was, however, limited ostensible distinction in the data. We did not note instances of overt snobbism or elitism. Rather, sponsored posts were framed as sharing a secret among friends.

Influencers also engaged very directly with their followers. Language such as 'sharing' and 'love' was employed and private details about life events or emotions were presented in a 'blog' style, to suggest a personal, almost intimate relationship. An interesting theme that arose was the concept of a 'shared journey', proposing that the Influencer's success was almost a joint endeavour among quasi-equal partners.

"I have some major things coming up and couldn't be more excited to share with y'all soon. Thanks for following along this journey with me! (Dress courtesy of @shoppinkblush)" (@liveiscivil)

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Appendix

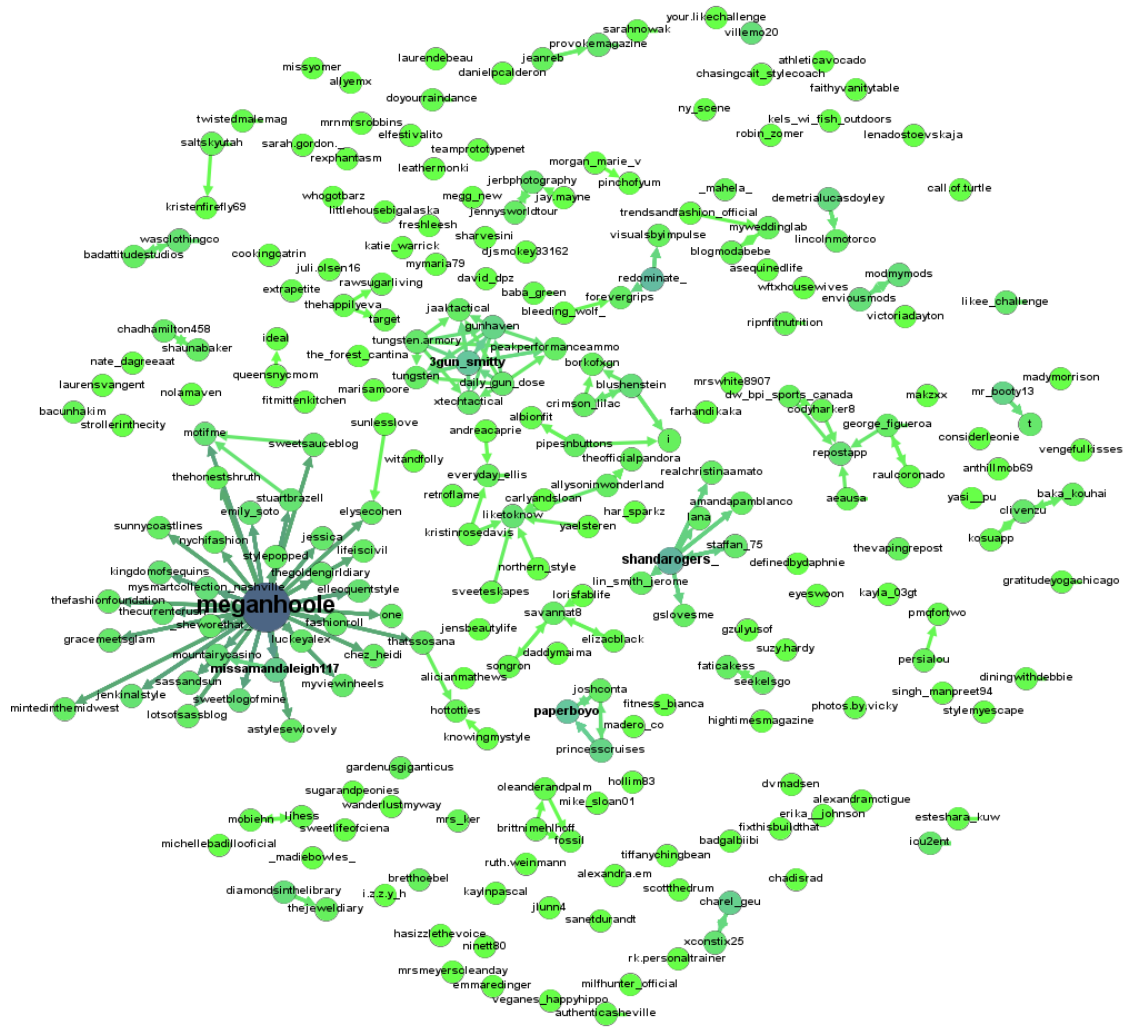


Figure 1. Network for #sponsored

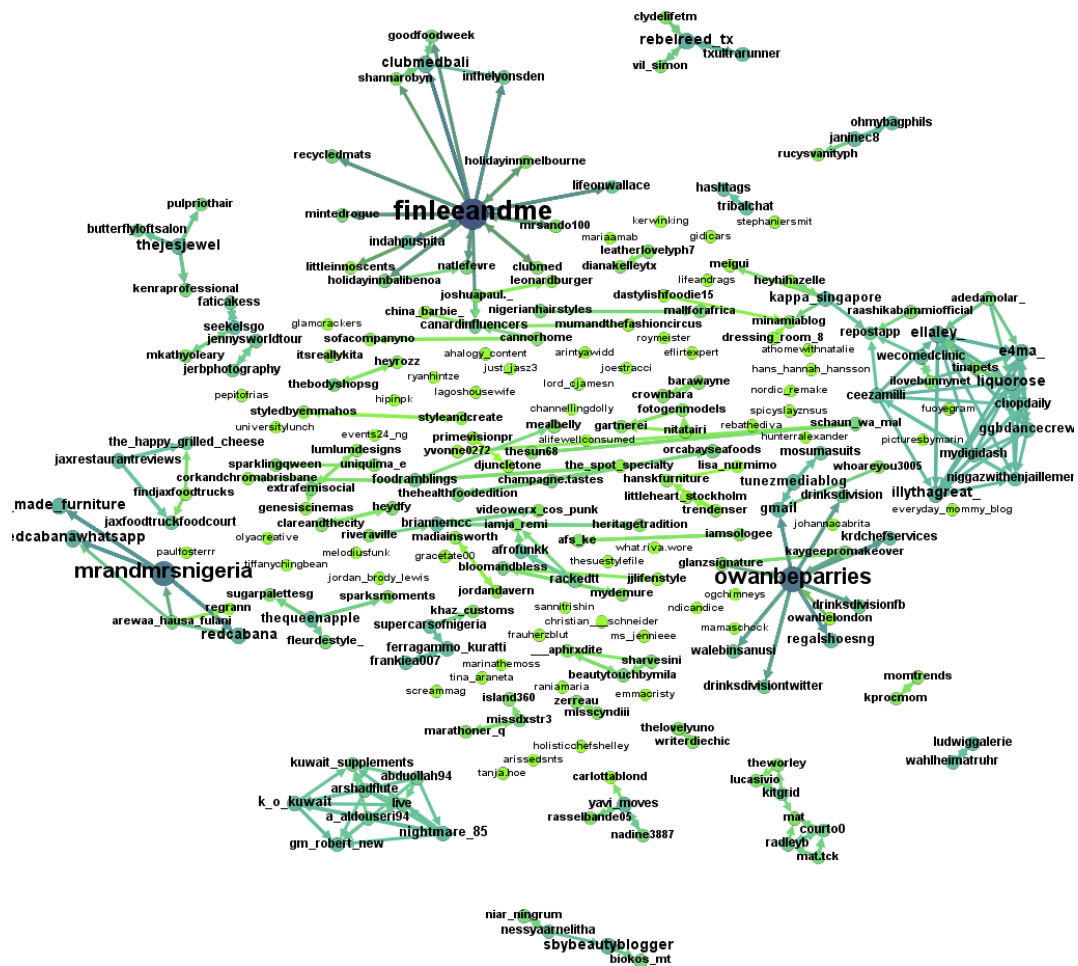


Figure 2. Network for #sponsoredpost