



Degree Program in Business Administration

Course of Organizational Behavior

# How the Pressure of Maintaining an Online Personal Brand on Instagram Contributes to Stress and Burnout Among Influencers?

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Context and Key Definitions**

In today's digital economy, visibility has become a capital. While many factors have contributed to this evolution, Instagram holds a particularly central position for the development of influencer culture. Initially a site for photo sharing, Instagram has evolved into a multifaceted socio-technical system in which someone can effectively become a branded entity through the constant performance of authenticity, consistency, and relatability (Khamis et al., 2017). The rise of the influencer economy (a sector where attention-seeking, aestheticized labour, and emotional work intersect) has not only transformed the ways people connect and communicate, it also reshapes the way we labour. Success for many influencers rests on the ability to maintain an online personal brand that aligns with both platform algorithms and audience expectations. While this model offers new opportunities for entrepreneurial visibility, it also has a significant emotional and psychological toll, including stress, fatigue, and burnout (Heeris Christensen et al., 2024 & Schoellhammer & Gretzel, 2023).

The concept of personal brand is core to this ecosystem. Personal branding is defined as the process of developing and managing a public identity in ways that maximise personal and professional opportunities. Since the emergence of the digital contexts, personal branding has become a normative behaviour (Gorbatov et al., 2018). On Instagram, personal branding is synonymous with content creation: influencers are tasked with creating a cohesive narrative of self, a continuous aesthetic, and a variety of engaging emotional communication strategies. However, influencers are guided by artificially constructed expectations, shaped according to the algorithm instilled preference of the platform, not organically formed or curated choices (Cotter, 2019). This system forces influencers to embrace the logic of what

Cotter(2019)calls “playing the visibility game,” or a set of adaptive practices meant to optimize for algorithmic favor and manage follower attention.

The emotional toll of this labor is profound. Influencers are expected to remain constantly accessible, emotionally expressive, and aesthetically consistent. This requires not only the production of content but also the performance of personality. Emotional labor—a concept developed by Hochschild(1983) —is thus a defining feature of influencer work. It entails the regulation of internal emotions to meet external expectations, often leading to emotional dissonance(Brook, P.2009). In the context of Instagram, this dissonance manifests as a conflict between the influencer’s internal state and the curated affective tone of their digital persona. As Heeris Christensen et al. (2024) emphasize, influencers experience a dialectical tension between being vulnerable enough to appear authentic and polished enough to remain brand-safe. This tension, sustained over time, contributes to emotional exhaustion and psychological strain.

Additionally, unlike typical employment, influencer work is fundamentally underpinned by the affordances and constraints of each platform. Instagram's design prompts particular types of expression—like visual uniformity, narrative intimacy, and temporal cohesiveness—that become normative over time (Cotter, 2019). These norms not only prescribe how influencers will be perceived, they also discipline their very emotional display. For example, influencers tend to be rewarded for presenting a seamless string of positivity and well-being, even when they are, internally, distressed or experiencing a mental break (Schoellhammer & Gretzel, 2024). This expectation creates the so-called "health paradox," where influencers are legally mandated to perform wellness and resilience while experiencing symptoms of detrimental burnout, stress and emotional fatigue created by increasingly digital performance (Heeris Christensen et al., 2024).

The algorithmic logic of Instagram exacerbates this strain. Since algorithms are opaque, influencers must constantly juggle elements to stay visible and often without feedback or stability (Cotter, 2019). This produces a variant of algorithmic anxiety where the instability of engagement metrics creates compulsive

checking behaviors, feelings of self-doubt, and loss of creative autonomy. Influencers find themselves hyper-visible yet structurally precarious and their sense of worth commonly becomes connected to metrics that they do not control. The sense of disempowerment brought upon by algorithmic volatility leads to burnout and issues with mental health especially when success on the platform is linked to economic livelihood (Azayem et al., 2024).

The influencer, as a role, has settled into a recognizable form of digital labor. While the work was often interpreted as a personal or leisure activity, it is now widely recognized as a livelihood that is embedded in effort, planning, and engagement (Szcurski, 2021). Influencers curate the personal brand, effectively engaging audiences and securing partnerships, with little support to institutionalize or professionalize these kinds of roles in creative practices (Bishop, 2023).

Influencers, as Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) characterize them, are “micro-celebrities” producing value for their audiences through ongoing interactions and negotiation with platforms and brands. Influencer practices operate as a type of labor that merges affective engagement, digital content production, and identity performance into a daily, self-managed engagement which serves as labor and functions as a full-time job. Increasingly, influencing is less likely to be supplemental work among multiple jobs, and more likely to be its own occupation shaped by a state of economic instability and emotional toll (Soriano, 2023). This shift reflects a wider process of change in the digital economy, where visibility has become a form of capital.

## **1.2 Aim, Research Question, and Method Overview**

Despite the centrality of these processes to digital labor, much academic writing has foregrounded the strategic and commercial considerations of influencer marketing and discounted the affective and psychological dimensions. A considerate amount of scholarship has examined influencers in terms of how they generate audiences, build relationships with brands, and generate authentic selves as a marketing technique (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Vasconcelos & Rua, 2021). There is a limited body of work that

considers the aggregated emotional costs of structuring long-term personal branding on social media facing algorithmic pressures, although there is a study that suggests that influencers who produced higher income and screen time also had greater emotional distress, even burnout, and interpersonal disassociation (Azayem et al., 2024). This study suggests that the emotional burden of personal branding persists despite levels of success but also that more careful, empirical attention should be given to influencer's wellbeing.

This thesis aims to address these gaps by examining how the pressure to maintaining a personal brand on Instagram contributes to stress and burnout among influencers. using a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research focuses on the lived experiences of influencers to explore the emotional, psychological, and structural implications of online personal branding. By investigating the perspectives of those engaged in this form of labor, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of personal branding as a form of emotional work shaped by platform logic, economic precarity, and visibility-driven demands. Ultimately, this research aims to centre influencer well-being as an important aspect in broader conversations around digital labor and platform economies.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Influencers as Personal Brand Workers**

Influencers are individuals who develop online identities in a way that allows them to gain visibility, engage with followers, and profit from their influence through partnerships with brands, sponsorships, and/or directly monetizing their followers (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Unlike traditional celebrities, whose fame often originates from mass media or specific talents, influencers cultivate socially from within social media itself and are able to become arrays of identity in social media by consistently producing relatable, aspirational, or niche content, and then from those various relationships have a public. (Szcurski, 2021).

Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) referred to influencers as "micro-celebrities" who have social capital which is appropriated for platform affordances and audience anticipations. This process, despite not being passive, necessarily requires the influencer to be actively and continuously involved in what has been labelled by scholars as digital labor. Soriano (2023) has detailed that influencers are required to create content, engage with audiences, optimize their profiles for the platforms, negotiate terms with brands, and monitor analytics, among other things, in order to sustain visibility and relevance in a temporal context that is strictly bound to algorithms. As Soriano (2023) states, none of these tasks are conducted as external labor, or contracted out, but are instead managed by the influencer, and often without institutionalized labour protections.

Influencers are defined as a category by a monetised affective relationship. They work to create content, but also to create perceived authenticity and emotional proximity to their followers (Szcurski, 2021). An influencer's value consists of their reputation, authenticity, and consistency for the purpose of audience engagement, which is then converted into currency for their branding partnerships. Although influencer

partnerships may not always resemble traditional forms of commerce, they often require a careful negotiation between self-presentation, audience expectations, and market opportunities. (Szcurski, 2021)

Influencers can come in many varieties of focus, from fashion and beauty to gaming, wellness, politics, etc., but all have a dependency on attention and visibility that must be earned. In fact, as opposed to assumed visibility, influencer visibility is contingent, structured by algorithm, trend, and audience behavior while positioned at risk (Richter & Ye, 2023). Soriano (2023) introduced the idea of "digital labor bayanihan" to highlight "the way in which influencers engage community strategies to mitigate risk and visibility, such as cross-promoting peers or creating collectives" .

Another defining aspect of influencer labor is it is largely self-directed and sometimes invisible. Influencers are often given flexibility in choosing their own hours; however, even self-managing expectations might include near-constant engagement and availability. Soriano (2023) argues a defining factor of influencer labor is the ambiguity of boundaries, where influencers are expected to stay active, engaged, and emotionally reachable during times of rest .being "always online" is a central feature of influencer labor in the platform economy. They must consistently remain relevant and find ways to do so by updating the status, making timely responses, offering some insights into trends, and quickly adapting to platform changes/frequency of feature updates or operating procedures.

This labor model creates an expectation of unpaid or speculated work. Influencers will often spend countless unpaid hours growing their audience and personal brand before they are offered any monetary exchange. As Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) assert, much of what influencers do - editing, analytics, scripting, and responding - is unpaid work to sustain a platform and create a viable personal brand. Soriano (2023) recognizes that influencers also took on the work entirely for platform teaching, and are constantly figuring out how to adapt to platform changes or working with new formats without any

support or payment . This makes their labor deeply embedded in the logic of digital capitalism, where visibility becomes both a reward and a resource

Further, influencers are subjected to performative expectations that extend beyond the act of content creation. As Richter and Ye (2023) says, influencers are sandwiched in expectations on one side for aligning their identities with platform norms on marketable traits, while also maintaining an authentic identity to followers. The result can be identity strain among influencers and especially for those who must navigate marginalization, underrepresentation, and/or the volatile reception of their audiences.

To conclude, influencers should not be merely seen as popular users, but as digital workers, whose success comes from their ongoing ability to navigate and negotiate authenticity, marketability, and platform norms (Richter & Ye, 2023,). Being an influencer is a full-time, self-directed job that offers little security and a lot of emotional labor.

## **2.2 Platform Logic: Instagram Algorithms and the Economy of Visibility**

Instagram was created in 2010 and is an example of huge popularity, growing rapidly on a global scale over the past few years (Khamis et al., 2017; Pereira, 2017). The photo-sharing network has increased in terms of users. People can share with their followers their photos and videos to which they can add captions, hashtags, tag other accounts and it is even possible to edit photos through available filters on the app. The platform also allowed a different engagement between celebrities, influencers, and brands with their consumers, with that the relationship has become closer and more active (Woods, 2016).

Social media is not a neutral site for self-expression, but rather an ecosystem of digital spaces in which an algorithmic system determines what content is seen, who sees it, and under what conditions. Instagram is one of the most important platforms for visual self-presentation; for influencers, learning about - and working within - the various algorithms driving Instagram is not just encouraged; it is necessary (Duffy & Meisner, 2022,). The platform uses a range of algorithmic metrics to surface content, including likes,

comments, saves, shares, and time spent viewing the post (Cotter, 2019,). To be clear, when content scores highly on these metrics, it receives more visibility through the feed, Explore page, and Reels tab. However, Instagram does not reveal its exact formula, which leaves the visibility of content uncertain and forces creators to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty (Cotter, 2019).

This relationship with algorithms creates a particular state of not knowing what works and does not work as Duffy and Meisner (2022) explain . Because creators do not know much about how the platform determines visibility, they can only rely on secondary and limited types of knowledge such as what their peers say, gossip on online forums, or from the experiences of creatives. Cotter (2019) refers to this information retrieval process as algorithmic gossiping —a shared cultural practice among influencers, involving speculation, trial and error, and pattern recognition. The strategies employed are less about creating things for creative sake but aligning with what users think the platform will reward.

The positive impact of algorithms on visibility has implications for how influencers construct their self-presentation. Richter and Ye (2023) note that successful influencers have learned to present themselves through the aesthetic and emotional signals that the platform prefers. Using highly visual, curated images, emotionally driven captions, and professional storytelling are all strategies aimed at gaining visibility in a crowded and saturated space (p. 10). Over the long-term, a feedback loop has developed regarding what “works”, and there is a tendency for the influencer to feel the psychological pressure to comply with platform expectations, even if these expectations feel disjointed from their true self.

Moreover, the algorithmic system manifests an unequal pattern in the provision of visibility. Cotter (2019) contends that creators who are able to build momentum in the early stages of content development are rewarded with more visibility, thereby entrenching their position through a process of “cumulative advantage”. For those at the margin or first starting on the platform, the odds of being seen were slim no matter how strong the quality of the content was. Influencers experience a “precarious interdependence”

in which they rely on the platform for visibility and, presumably, income while having little power to shape its logic and rules (Richter and Ye, 2023).

In order to respond to these various factors, influencers must engage in an ongoing effort of “algorithmic work.” Cotter (2019) recognizes algorithmic work as a specific kind of labor including “strategic experimentation, metric tracking, and responding to aesthetics introduced through emerging formats”. For example, when Instagram began as primarily a photo-sharing platform, the shift to prioritizing short-form video through Reels was quickly adopted by many creators— even if the format diverged from their normal tone. This responsiveness is described by Duffy and Meisner (2022) as “algorithmic attunement,” the process of influencers attempting to anticipate, and adapt to, any shifts in priorities of the algorithm (p. 7). These antithetical behaviors do not occur infrequently but become normalized as part of the process of creating content and managing a digital identity.

This continuous process of work creates emotional tolls for influencers. Ongoing cognitive and emotional labour related to the demands of an algorithmically controlled environment creates fatigue, stress, and burnout over time. It is critical to see how the algorithm has implications for visibility but does not exist in isolation. For influencers this means existing in a system that offers opportunities but which must be constantly adhered to. In short, it is an extremely high-stakes environment predicated not only upon creativity but also upon the invisible rules derived from algorithmic control.

### **2.3 Fundamentals of Personal Branding**

While personal branding may appear to be a more recent phenomenon, it is with historical associations with the oldest conceptualizations of self-presentation and identity construction. Goffman (1959), with his conceptualization of identity as performance conditioned by how others define us through interaction, provides the social theoretical foundations for understanding how people manage impressions. Current frameworks of self as performance are newly relevant in the digitally mediated context of validating one’s identity. Indeed, the greater cultural shift across western society towards individualization, combined

with the affordances around impression management associated with social media can have implications for the importance of personal branding within personal and professional contexts (Popescu, 2022).

Personal branding is defined as an ongoing, deliberate process of managing one's image and reputations, often compared to branding for products and organizations (Khamis et al., 2017). Personal branding is a "strategic process of creating, positioning and maintaining a positive impression of oneself based on a unique set of individual characteristics, which convey a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated story telling and imagery" (Gorbatov et al., 2018). This definition is useful in considering the expressive and instrumental contexts of personal branding as a site of self-realization through branding, and a positioning device for branding within social spaces.

The importance of visibility, coherence, and consistency in personal branding is frequently emphasized across the literature.. According to Vasconcelos and Rua (2021), personal branding consists of more than self-promotion. It is about generating value, establishing credibility, and developing trust in a particular social or professional terrain. Personal branding requires that individuals develop an indissoluble story that resonates across disparate contexts. This requires individuals to be reflexive and communicative. Additionally, Chall (2021) points to the tension between authenticity and performance in a personal branding framework. Individuals must negotiate this tension to demonstrate and activate their coherent identity within particular social sites because social sites and situations are dynamic.

As self-presentation moves increasingly to online environments, Scholars have developed the idea of online personal branding (OPB) to describe how individuals construct and manage their digital identities with intentionality. OPB takes the constructs of personal branding- strategic positioning, crafting a distinct "value proposition," and structuring a narrative- and applies them to a digital world where both the personal and professional can meet and be displayed at the same time, all of the time. It is important to understand that Vasconcelos and Rua (2021) noted that OPB is an "intentional and continuous process of identifying, positioning and promoting oneself in the online space" that is concerned with building a

positive image and attempting to influence audiences.. Importantly, this does not simply mean creating content, or creating visibility, it means that one is working to balance their perceived identity with audience expectations and digital etiquette, while simultaneously recognizing and keeping one's own personal coherence over time.

Online personal branding, In contrast to traditional self-presentation, is time-limited and contextualized; it reflects a durable, visible, searchable, and replicable set of representations. Popescu (2019) says that the online self derives from a combination of self-curated and technologically-mediated identity in which identity is constantly filtered through design logics, audience feedback, and the permanence of data—therefore, a personal brand becomes a public, semi-permanent construct that communicates not just who the individual is, but who the individual would like to be or how the individual wants to be perceived. As Ruzic et al. (2022) observe , OPB can be seen as a type of long-term investment strategy for our reputation capital in an attention economy. OPB typically involves choosing a unique value position to be understood for, deciding which channel(s) to express the brand through, and maintaining a coherence over time and context.

While the process of personal branding may provide individual empowerment, it does not place people or their mental health at the forefront of influence. As Zimmermann et al., (2025) acknowledge, for a lot of influencers, their branded persona and their real identity may become indistinguishable. This mixing of personas can make it difficult to not just be alone with yourself, but to not identify with the branded persona entirely. Furthermore, maintaining alignment with a branded identity over time, but within changing audience expectations, demands self-regulation and self-adaptation—all of which can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout. As PA Popescu (2019) says, subtle and frequent adjustments to remain visible in alignment with one's brand may have an incremental impact on emotional balance and overall wellbeing.

## **2.4 Emotional and aesthetic labor**

While the process of personal branding, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, relies on content production or the curation of an aesthetic self-presentation, it also includes significant emotional management and emotional work. Hochschild (1983) described this as emotional and aesthetic labor—forms of work central to managing personal brands and engaging with an audience.

Emotional labor was first proposed as a form of emotional management by Hochschild (1983). Hochschild explicated how workers manage emotional regulation to adhere to their job responsibilities and performance. He, like Grandey and Sayre (2019), crystallized emotional labor as a form of work requiring the regulation of internal and external emotional states to produce a particular emotional experience for another person. Grandey and Sayre identify two primary emotional labor strategies: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is managing one's outward emotional expressions, while keeping one's internal emotions intact; for instance, a person could feign a smile while feeling annoyed. Deep acting is attempting to feel the emotion that one is expressing; for example, a person could try to be genuinely excited or calm. Consequently, these outward emotional displays of the self are determined by the "display rules," which are socially and organizationally defined rules that provide guidance on which emotions to display, in which manner, and how deeply (Grandey & Sayre, 2019).

Initially emotional labor researchers focused on traditional service roles such as airline attendants, call center agents, or retail workers, whose jobs could prescript in expectation delivery of emotions like positivity, patience, and politeness as a measure of quality service (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor was closely related to customer satisfaction and was seen as part of the commercial exchange between the organization and the customer in these contexts, but with changing workplace environments (especially social media and online self-presentation), emotional labor has evolved out of formal employment contexts and into new and more fluid and less regulated forms of labor, such as influencer work. Influencers complete emotional labor not as part of an institution, but as freelancers working within visibility industries that are often competitive. According to Heeris Christensen et al. (2023), influencers perform "dialectical emotional labor," which means they perform and negotiate internal authenticity based

on the emotions their audience expects . This form of labor becomes especially complicated when the emotional expectations and types of emotional labor have no established rules or institutional veracity.. As Sheane (2012) describes, emotional labor in these contexts requires enrolled self-awareness and authenticity of emotion and expression, which is a constant performance of emotion, shaped not by an institution's rules but by the influencer's brand.

In the case of influencers, emotional labor is also related to aesthetic labor. Aesthetic labor is described by Sheane (2012) as managing what you look like, what you "do" (gestures, social performance), and how you present overall to meet the audience/market expectations . For influencers, this means curating not just what they say or feel, but also what they look like, how they act, and how they move within the visual norms of social media. Influencers are expected to demonstrate naturalness, style, healthiness, and some emotional intimacy. While aesthetic labor may seem effortless, it is premeditated and influenced by platform cultures, and especially by the cultures surrounding platforms prioritizing visual perfection (Heeris Christensen et al., 2023).

This raises the question of authenticity, as a target and requirement, in personal branding. Influencers are expected to show up as “authentic”—that is, authenticity as emotional sincerity and personal consistency, even though much of their identity is premeditated. Not In the sense and perspective that Bishop (2023) explains, authenticity is both an aesthetic and a strategic decision. Influencers have to make their content feel personal and unstudied, while it is actually studied and edited . This expectation to be "real" comes from followers and the algorithm, both of which reward vulnerability, relatability, and emotional transparency. But authenticity is not fixed or straightforward. As Heeris Christensen et al. (2023) indicate, nevertheless influencers are continuously negotiating their authenticity with their strategic decisions. Influencers work at familiarity, while being, or appearing to be, relatable to audiences, while also trying to maintain an element of personal integrity. This negotiation is labor itself. This work is invisible, often unremunerated and self-managed; yet it is integral work to personal branding.

The friction between authenticity and performance has led to a paradox. Influencers need to be authentic and at all times "on," offering their private life, but controlling their image. Heeris Christensen et al. (2023) argue this is a dual burden, and that influencers need to constantly manage emotional risks while also dressing up their brand. Eventually, this paradox creates emotional resilience. The emotional burden is internalized, as influencers feel responsible for maintaining their brand authenticity, but the labor itself is even minimally seen by audiences and little valued by the platforms benefiting from the labour.

The invisibility likely increases the emotional burden. Bishop (2023) highlights the experience of influencers doing "invisible work" to uphold an appearance of authenticity, this includes emotional management, selective exposition, and managing audience engagement. This labor is invisible work, and goes unrecognized and unpaid, but often forms the emotional labor field of influencer branding. As Sheane (2012) claims, this is a labor that becomes embodied, and separated from work from identity, and performance versus real feelings. The ongoing labor of being authentically oneself and responding to expectations may lead to stress, Exhaustion, or burnout; these challenges will be examined in the following sections.

## **2.5 Understanding Stress in the Context of Influencer work**

Stress is a complex and well-researched concept in both psychological and occupational sciences. Instead of simply an emotional reaction, stress is considered a dynamic process that develops in situations where an individual feels the demand exceeds their ability to cope. Goodnite (2013) believes that "stress" refers to when an individual perceives a stimulus as overwhelming and may be experiencing emotional, cognitive, or behavioral change. Goodnite's definition further articulates that stress is not simply a consequence of external events but rather collectively defined by how an individual perceives or interprets that event and lastly, how they decide to respond or engage in coping them. Thus, when someone believes they do not have the resources to cope with the demands of a stressor, stress becomes more likely to occur.

stress is made recognizable through emotional symptoms, cognitive symptoms, and behavioral symptoms. From an emotional perspective, the person may experience anxiety, irritability, or emotional overwhelm. From a cognitive perspective, the person may find it difficult to remember, concentrate, or make decisions. Behavioral manifestations include withdrawing from others, avoiding tasks, or sustaining decreased performance (Goodnite, 2013). They are often interconnected and can exacerbate each other. If a person feels emotionally exhausted, cognitive reception can be impaired leading to frustration and potentially decreased productivity. Over time this can create a cycle, which can lead to burnout without a deliberate recovery process and support.

Expanding on this understanding, McEwen and Akil (2013) explain that stress is part of the normal process the body employs to adapt to change (e.g., work, school, life). In their view, small amounts of stress can be beneficial to help motivate a person to change or adapt. However, over time, repeated exposure to stress may lead to, among other things, "allostatic load," or the state in which the body starts to show negative sequelae of prolonged, taxing attempts to manage our environmental demands. This process may lead to depressed mood, poor self-regulation of emotions, and cognitive difficulty. When there is insufficient time or space to recover, the experience of stress may build upon itself, leading to negative health and performance consequences.

Workplace or Occupational Stress becomes particularly relevant under conditions of high demands and low available resources. Rukhayati and Prihatin (2023) describe this as a condition faced in the workplace that impacts emotional stability and job performance, emphasizing it as cause by pressure, uncertainty, or lack of support. One explanation can be illuminated using the Job Demands–Resources (JDR) model, which explains how circumstances develop into identifiable patterns. The JDR of the model specifies that stress will occur when the worker is continually faced by demands of a job (e.g., significant workloads, emotional obligations, timeliness) that exceeds the available resources to meet those demands, generally describing the resources as meaningful feedback, rest, and autonomy (Schoellhammer & Gretzel, 2023).

Without sufficient resources or when the resources are depleted, meaningful work can itself become a stressor.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory supports this idea by describing how individuals will protect and build resources that are valuable, important, and finite by nature (time, energy, and emotional strength). Given the theoretical background, stress can exist if an individual feels threatened in resource loss (e.g., fear), experiences resource loss (e.g., exhaustion), or fails to regain precious resources after investing considerable effort (Dutta & Mishra, 2024). In fast-paced work environments where workers are expected to remain active and responsive at all times, it is conceivable that these losses can quickly snowball. Individuals who do not have an opportunity to recover can become more vulnerable to stress-related health consequences—emotionally and physically.

With increased work occurring in digital spaces, a form of stress, which we can refer to as technostress, has gained greater attention. Dutta and Mishra (2024) define technostress as an experience created by overexposure to digital tools and the stressors created from using them, including managing the continual pressures. The authors identify five categories of technostress. These are: techno-overload (being expected to work harder and faster), techno-invasion (being unable to disconnect from work), techno-complexity (struggling to use a new technology), techno-insecurity (worrying that better tech users will take your job), techno-uncertainty (technology always changes). Each of these pressures is exacerbated in positions that require an employee to be continuously engaged with digital work.

In sum, stress in the workplace can be understood as a lack of resources (both psychological and physical) to cope with continual demands that exceed available resources, particularly when opportunities to recover are limited. In specific digital work environments, like the one experienced by influencers, this condition often becomes commonplace. Over time, if such stress becomes a sustained everyday experience, it may turn into more serious psychological outcomes (first and foremost, burnout). While the

two terms may be used interchangeably, burnout is a specific condition that has a deeper emotional and cognitive disruption, as distinct from stress. The following section discusses burnout further.

## **2.6 Burnout as the Outcome of Personal Branding Pressure**

Burnout is a psychological condition that occurs following long-term exposure to stress that exceeds an individual's coping abilities. Maslach and Leiter (2016) identified burnout as a syndrome that evolves through chronic work-related stress that has three primary dimensions: emotional exhaustion; depersonalization (sometimes referred to as cynicism) and feelings of decreased personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is regarded in terms of feeling overextended and drained emotionally. Depersonalization, on the other hand, is a sense of detachment or negativity toward one's work/audience, and the decreased feeling of accomplishment is often connected to diminished confidence and diminished sense of values in one's work.

While burnout was initially studied in a few professions like healthcare and education, it has now been recognized as a phenomenon that can impact people in all lines of work including those in digital spaces. A harmonized definition achieved through international consensus describes occupational burnout as “a state of physical and emotional exhaustion that consists of a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity” (Guseva Canu et al., 2021, p. 100). This definition encompasses the broad experience of burnout that is reflective of emotional, cognitive, and identity dimensions. Under this definition burnout is not weakness or failure of the individual but a response to prolonged and sustained external conditions, especially in times where there are limited resources to facilitate coping. Studies have shown that burnout can occur when there is a persistent mismatch between what the work demands and what the individual is able to realistically deliver (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). These demands could be emotional, cognitive, or even moral, which can cause burnout to increase, especially when workers are expected to deliver at a higher level but insufficient time or support to recharge.

As Maslach and Leiter (2016) state, individuals may arrive at a point where they believe their contributions are unrecognized, or that they have lost all control of their workload. These senses may compel Human Beings to initiate some form of emotional distancing that prevents engagement, motivation, or both. In extreme situations, disengagement may serve as a form of protection, enabling people to shield their hearts and emotionally detach from their work in a way that mitigates the influence of prolonged and continued stress. But disengaging comes at the expense of low Job Satisfaction, feeling more fatigued, and being disconnected from others, among many other costs.

These components of burnout are particularly relevant to influencer work. Influencers do not operate in traditional work environments, yet they face pressures that are equally intense, if not more so. As Bishop (2023) explains, their work demands a continual cascade of emotional and interpersonal “streaming” because of what she calls parasocial creep: the expectation of maintaining social and responsive relationships with their audience while also performing for that same audience. Thus, the work does not allow for the recovery or disengagement as is needed for their wellbeing, contributing to their risk of burnout.

Moreover, the influencer's identity is often intimately bound to their brand and their public persona, leaving little room for empathetic privacy. According to Chukwudi et al. (2024), influencers can find themselves burning out due to the demands of both emotional and cognitive labor in an effort to remain authentic, sociable, and commercially relevant. In their study into trans-parasocial relationships, they outline how influencers can feel “trapped” into performing and meeting the expectations of their followers and simultaneously performing their commitments for brand deals, both of which rely heavily on emotional visibility and availability. This type of labour dissolves interpersonal constraints around influencers’ personal explanations of themselves and commitment to their audiences (Weber & O'Sullivan, 2023), causing burnout to be much more complex and unwieldy.

Influencer burnout is defined by the personal intertwining with performance. Unlike employees, who physically leave the space of work, influencers take work with them everywhere and through ever-changing temporal and life events. This span of being “influenced,” as Maslach and Leiter (2016)

call it, creates "high involvement without adequate recovery," a central condition for burnout to embed itself in one's life.

To deepen this understanding, the next chapter outlines the qualitative methodology adopted in this study. Through interviews with influencers, the research seeks to capture their lived experiences and attempt to articulate some of the mental health issues they face.

### **3. METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research strategy selected for this thesis is a qualitative and exploratory study based on open-ended interviews that allow respondents to respond as openly as they prefer, and more importantly in their own words. This type of study centers on individuals' subjective experiences, and will be useful for understanding the complex emotional and psychological components involved with social media self-presentation and identity work.

This is particularly pertinent because this type of methodology concentrates on how people feel, act and reflect when creating a personal brand on Instagram, and to recall, being an influencer is shaped by platform pressure, emotional labor, algorithm-related demands, among many other visible (and invisible) demands - which are challenging to capture with quantitative approaches, at this time. The objective, here, is not to quantify influencer burnout or engagement through a number, but to understand how influencer burnout is lived, expressed and experienced.

The study examines how influencers wrestle with the pressure of maintaining visibility, authenticity, and consistency, which can lead to emotional labor and possible burnout. Therefore, it is important to focus on their words-- how they communicate about their rituals, routine, feelings, and strategies. A qualitative design would therefore facilitate a much clearer and deeper understanding of these processes, facilitating the identification of patterns that would not be easily detectable (Creswell, 2012).

Provdanov and Freitas (2013) specifically clarify that qualitative research is utilized when the goal of the research is to examine human behavior and its emotional variances in as natural and flexible way as possible. As this thesis is aimed at exploring the emotional and personal complexity that is digitized labor, qualitative exploratory design is the most fitting approach.

#### **3.2 Participants & Recruitment**

In a scientific investigation, the sample is a portion of a population from the universe, and it can use two sampling approaches: probabilistic or non-probabilistic (Bryman & Bell, 2005). The sample selected in

this study was by non-probabilistic sampling for convenience and was subsequently not representative of the wider population.

There were requests for interviews sent to 35 influencers identified as active content creators on Instagram. Out of the influencers contacted only 7 participants agreed to participate and complete the interview process. Although the sample is small, this is quite normal in qualitative research, particularly in in-depth exploration of emotional and psychological experiences.

The potential participants were identified as active Instagram influencers who regularly engaged in personal branding activities, such as creating content, maintaining a consistent online presence, and interacting with their audience. While it was not possible to know in advance whether they had personally experienced stress or burnout, they were considered suitable for this study because the nature of their work exposed them to pressures associated with maintaining a personal brand. The final sample were individuals aged 19-35 years, from diverse personal and professional backgrounds and who came from or were living in countries including Iran, Italy, Turkey, Serbia, France, and the Netherlands. Most of the participants had amassed a following on Instagram between 5,000 and 200,000, many had also developed a presence on YouTube and TikTok.

There was considerable diversity in the themes of the content participants developed, including fashion, lifestyle, mental health, travel, make-up, film reviews, and international student life. The majority of the participants developed content in English, a few used Persian, Italian or French, depending on their audience and community.

The diversity of the different styles of content and cultures experienced by the participants created a unique opportunity to explore how influencers face and manage the emotional pressure of personal branding across distinct niches and contexts.

### **3.3 Interviews' Structure & Procedure**

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are often utilized in qualitative research (Heath, 2019). The purpose here is to obtain richer and descriptive responses, and since this topic is new and not widely studied, the amount of information available for it is not very in-depth, thus having more representations and details of it can help in knowledge generation and filling in the gaps.

To expand on this point, the interview guide was drafted using the theoretical concepts discussed in the literature review of this project; which include emotional labor, authenticity, platform logic, and influencer burnout. The interview guide was developed with specific questions to explore how participants perceive the pressures associated with maintaining a personal brand on Instagram, how they manage visibility and audience expectation of them, and how all this is related to their emotional wellbeing. The guide referred to both psychological and platform specific aspects of influencer work.

In this study, participants responded to the interview questions from their perspective as real influencers, which helped produce rich and emotionally located responses while being consistent in structure. The interview guide included ten open-ended questions focused on exploring detailed insights on identity performance, interactivity with an audience, and emotional exhaustion.

Out of the seven interviews conducted five of the interviews were done in English and two in Persian, based on what the participant preferred. Since Persian is the author's mother tongue and English a language of fluency, the transcripts in Persian were translated into English by the author and then reviewed against the original transcript as well to ensure that the participant's words and meaning were accurately translated. Six interviews were conducted live on Zoom, and one was completed in written format. This mix of formats also helps ensure flexibility while also producing depth in responses.

All interviews took place the first week of August 2025, lasting about 30 minutes each. Participants were made aware of what the purpose of the study was before they participated, and participation was fully voluntary and confidential.

This structure of the interviews provided a more open and reflective atmosphere for participants to share their accounts in-depth while addressing all the core areas of the study.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

This study used a systematic six-step thematic analysis approach for data interpretation. The thematic analysis process was developed by Naeem and Ozuem (2022a) and extends traditional thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by providing a structured and flexible approach to interpreting the experiences of participants and included a conceptual model developed from the data.

Being immersed in the data occurred in the first step, as the transcripts were read multiple times prior to interpretation. First key quotes were noted and extracted. In the second step, keywords were taken note of within each transcript based on common language, emotional triggers, and relevance to topics such as stress, burnout, managing identity, and algorithmic pressure.

In the third step, keywords were manually coded into different groups. The coding took place in a color-coded spreadsheet that could also help to visually trace and analyze across interviews. Once the codes were finalized, they were categorized into three themes (step four), themes concentrated on a reoccurring emotional or structural dynamic in the experience of participants.

The fifth step focused on the conceptual interpretation of these themes. Rather than presenting them as isolated findings, this stage involved analyzing the emotional and mental patterns underlying participants' experiences and to refine each theme into a clearer and more meaningful concept.

The final step (sixth step) involved bringing together the meaningful concepts developed through the analysis into a conceptual model. While the sixth step usually involves a formal model development, the final step for this study involves linking the findings with existing theoretical models. This will be discussed further in next sections.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.0 From Codes to Themes (Analytic Bridge)

All seven participants conveyed that managing a personal brand on Instagram is not simple. It requires constant work, emotional management, and working with content and audience engagement. They stated that this type of work is not simply “posting pictures” — it is work, and involves strategy, discipline, and emotional engagement. Simultaneously, some participants also expressed that they enjoy the work they do. For many, they started creating content from a place of passion, with passions regarding things like fashion, makeup, psychology, travel, or storytelling. Many used words to describe their feelings such as “fulfilling”, “meaningful”, and “creative.” However, even for those who love the work, they also described how the pressure to maintain a brand can lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, or burnout. Most of the participants felt as if outsiders underestimated how intense this type of work really is.

As one participant summarized, “People think it’s easy, but it’s not. It’s always work — emotional, mental, creative. It can feel heavy sometimes.”

This chapter has shared the findings of the thematic analysis and is organized around the three major themes from the last process. Each theme is about a core challenge in maintaining a personal brand. The first step was to identify recurrent keywords and expressions across the interviews such as "refreshing my feed all the time", "guilty when I stop", "fear of losing momentum", "being me, but polished", "always on", "scrolling for hours on one reel", "feeling like a machine", "three deadlines in a single day." These words and phrases were then coded into more general meanings.

Similar codes then emerged in this step, and themes were organized into three larger categories. Codes connected to instability of engagement, self-worth connected to metrics, and guilt about stopping, came together related to algorithmic anxiety and visibility pressures. Codes illustrating tensions between

curated authenticity, blurry lines between brand, and self, and performing polished identity formed topical dissonance about authenticity, and identity drift. Lastly, codes notating a sense of intensity about production work, a continuous need to perform, and feelings of being dehumanized came together to form performative and aesthetic labor.

#### **4.1 Algorithmic Anxiety and Visibility Pressure**

All of the participants mentioned the pressure to remain visible on Instagram. They described how visibility was determined by an erratic algorithm, thus, they were unsure whether their work would reach audiences. The inability to predict or control this dynamic created ongoing anxiety and contributed to an overall sense of instability within their daily routines.

As one participant said, “You spend the whole day making a perfect reel... and then Instagram just decides that it will not show it to anyone.” Another described that, “If I take a couple of days off, I feel guilty. I know the algorithm is going to punish me.” One participant noted she feels guilty when visibility declined for whatever reason and blames herself for that decline.

Many participants spoke about their anxious, compulsive behaviors as they responded to these pressures. “I just find myself refreshing my feed, over and over. If a post doesn't do well, I feel like a failure.” added one influencer. Another expressed that, “Taking a day off gives me anxiety. Like people will just forget me.”

The pressure to be visible was not limited to gaining followers; it also shaped how the participants interacted with their audiences, as well as how they rested. One participant noted, “If I stop posting, all my work disappears. Like I'll become irrelevant.” While some expressed short term exhilaration from tackling the challenge, the rest admitted that over time the feelings of anxiety from being forgotten led to fatigue and burnout.

#### **4.2 Authenticity Dissonance and Identity Drift**

The participants valued authenticity very highly but almost all described in detail the tension, stress, and adjustment they felt when balancing being “authentic”, and being flexible and adaptable as they

considered the expectations of their audience and the platform. Some participants simply accepted this negotiation as part of the workload, but others did not.

One influencer shared, "Being too vulnerable usually results in lower engagement, so I try to be as real as possible, but also think about what people like to see." Another influencer said, "I am always myself, but it's the most polished version." These reflections showed the ways in which authenticity still had to be curated and filtered.

For some influencers, the constant shifts and adjustments and compromises of performance blurred the boundaries between self, selfhood, and brand. "I feel like I've changed, but my brand is still who I was a year ago," shared one influencer. Another said, "Sometimes I don't know when the brand stops and I start." one participant said, "Sometimes the numbers give me anxiety, like I'm not good enough." The stress of balancing this labor left a few participants feeling anxious and disconnected.

#### **4.3 Performative & Aesthetic Labor**

Participants described different steps that were involved in creating content — planning, filming, editing, and reviewing. They stated that producing something very simple could often take quite a while, and was often very draining. Many said that they easily spent hours creating content that they ended up changing or scrapping altogether.

As one influencer described, "It can easily be a whole day for me to put together a 30-seconds reel. I plan, then I film, and then I edit, and then I see if it fits on my page." Another influencer described, "Sometimes I redo the entire thing because it feels off brand." The repetitiveness and perfectionism of many creators' actions in these processes caused many creators unnecessary stress and fatigue.

The short-form content labor extended beyond production time and into everyday life. "Even when I'm out with friends, I'm like — should I film this? Should I post something?" one participant said. Another participant described it as "work is always on my mind, even when I try to rest."

The emotional cost of always performing was severe. "I felt like I was a content machine — not a person," said one influencer. Another influencer stated another excerpt, "It's so stressful when I think

about how many hours I put into it and then the post doesn't perform." Most influencers expressed pride in sharing their creative work; however, these reflections emphasized how the stress of everyday production and the anxiety of always performing led to feelings of work overload, stress and burnout symptoms.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Summary of Key Findings**

This thesis asked how the pressure of maintaining an online personal brand on Instagram produces stress and, ultimately, burnout for influencers. Sustaining a brand is not a single creative act; it involves a persistent work routine of planning and scheduling content, curating appearances, interpreting shifting algorithmic signals and updating audiences, working toward brand-safe “authenticity,” and monitoring performance. In practice, this is continuous emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic work organized by the platform and calibrated by fluctuating metrics. Over time, that mix turns creative practice into burnout (Cotter, 2019; Bishop, 2023; Sheane, 2012).

### **5.2 Theme 1 in Relation to Prior Literature**

Visibility work and algorithmic change as stressors. Prior work describes Instagram as a “visibility game” that pushes creators to adjust behavior to opaque signals (e.g., format shifts, recency, watch time) (Cotter, 2019). The interviews confirmed—and extended—this: what began as strategy became an emotional obligation. Participants described feeling “punished” for resting, continually checking numbers, and worrying that a short break would erase progress. This pattern reflects technostress: techno-uncertainty (unpredictable outcomes) coupled with techno-invasion (work spilling into off-hours) that keeps people vigilant and preoccupied with work (Dutta & Mishra, 2024). Psychologically, unstable feedback triggers perceived threat (“I am falling behind”) and self-blame (“I did something wrong”), both precursors to stress.

### **5.3 Theme 2 in Relation to Prior Literature**

Authenticity works under commercial and algorithmic limits. While classic emotional-labor theory differentiates surface and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983), newer scholarship shows that “authenticity” has become a strategic display that must feel honest and remain brand-safe (Grandey & Sayre, 2019;

Heeris Christensen, Gyrd-Jones, & Beverland, 2024). The data support this and clarify the cost: being “myself—but polished,” holding back when vulnerability “didn’t perform,” and, over time, drifting from a clear sense of self. Repeated readjustments of “acceptable” authenticity create cognitive dissonance and strain on identity—even when engagement is high—making it a consistent source of anxiety and fatigue (Heeris Christensen et al., 2024; Bishop, 2023).

#### **5.4 Theme 3 in Relation to Prior Literature**

Perpetual performance and boundary blurring. Influencers described days spent creating short videos, refilming to remain “on brand,” and mentally preparing posts while with friends. The point is not only workload but the erosion of boundaries needed for rest and recovery. Even when not producing content, participants reported thinking about what to post, whether it fit the brand, and how it might perform—i.e., cognitive performance persists. This aligns with studies on techno-invasion and emotional entanglement showing how digital labor seeps into everyday life (Dutta & Mishra, 2024; Schöllhammer & Gretzel, 2024).

#### **5.5 Integrating the Themes: Implications for Stress and Burnout**

Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) helps explain the mechanism. Burnout occurs when high, sustained demands meet limited resources. Here, demands include algorithmic uncertainty; continual management of “authentic” self-presentation to satisfy audience and platform; and ongoing creative, aesthetic, and emotional performance. Resources are thin: minimal clarity about algorithm rules; few supports; unstable reinforcement (likes, reach); and limited opportunity to step away. This structural imbalance maps onto burnout’s core elements—exhaustion (energy drained by vigilance/performance), depersonalization (withdrawing when expression no longer feels one’s own), and reduced efficacy (when effort no longer matches outcomes)—as identified by Maslach and Leiter (2016) and consistent with JD-R logic (Schöllhammer & Gretzel, 2024).

Instagram personal-branding demands generate persistent stress through algorithmic uncertainty, strategic authenticity work, and perpetual performance. When recovery is constrained and reinforcement remains volatile, this sustained stress can lead to burnout.

This study reframes influencers' personal branding as continuous labor shaped by platform logic rather than sporadic creativity, specifies how algorithmic volatility, "acceptable" authenticity, and boundary blurring affect everyday emotions and sense of self, and clarifies the mechanism linking these demands to stress and, over time, to burnout.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Overall Conclusion**

This thesis shows that maintaining a personal brand on Instagram is not a single activity of posts, but rather an ongoing pattern of emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic work. The interviews conducted with these seven influencers illustrate how the components of shifting visibility and unclear signals create an ongoing stress cycle. To sustain their personal branding, and reach, creators track their metrics, respond quickly, and remain present even during rest. This pressure turns “being authentic” into careful performance. Over time, free time becomes work, self-worth leans on numbers, and normal declines in engagement feel personal. These routines align with the experience of stress and the signs of burnout: emotional exhaustion, doubt about one’s value, and the sense that effort is never enough.

The findings make the mechanism clear. Unstable visibility leads to vigilance and self-comparison. Vigilance turns “being real” into performance. Performance extends into daily life, leaving little room for recovery from stress in an ongoing cycle. Guilt around disengagement and anxiety about being forgotten keeps the cycle going. What begins as branding becomes a way of living under constant evaluation. The outcomes are stress across emotional, identity, and everyday routines that can contribute to burnout.

This thesis adds to a growing body of knowledge about the psychological costs associated with online personal branding and raises questions about the sustainability of influencer work. The process of naming and defining these pressures is an important first step towards developing better strategies for support for influencers in a platform space that offers few buffers to cope with these pressures.

### **6.2 Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

While this study has illuminated the emotional impacts of an influencer's personal branding, there are limitations that must be recognized. First, the sample size was small ( $n = 7$ ), and while typical in

qualitative research creates limits on generalizability of the findings, future studies could extend a much larger pool of participants based on multiple factors (e.g., influencer type, follower count, cultural context) to investigate potential differences in experience. Second, the majority of interviews were conducted in English, a second language for all participants. Interpretive effort was taken to ensure clarity and accuracy, but either through misinterpretation or even language arranging content, there is a possibility that some nuances were lost or came across differently for each participant. Finally, this study sought to articulate lived experience rather than assess solutions. However, a common need expressed by multiple participants for access to coping resources including therapy, peer support, platform algorithm policy reformulation. Future studies may extend this idea more comprehensively in terms of how these support structures may help alleviate emotional strain and improve wellbeing for content professionals.

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## APPENDICES

**Table 1**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>location</b>	<b>language</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Target population</b>
1	20	Female	Iran	Persian (first), English (second)	12,000	Middle Eastern & international audience
2	19	male	Iran (living in Turkey)	Persian (first), English (second)	200,000	Iranian audience, LGBTQ+ community
3	30	Female	Iran	Persian (first)	15,000	Persian-speaking mental health community
4	26	Female	Netherlands	English (first)	25,000	International students
5	25	Female	Italy	Italian (first), English (second)	13,000	International tourists & locals
6	33	male	France	French (first), English (second)	5,000	Global cinephile community
7	22	Female	Serbia (living in Italy)	Serbian (first), English (second)	8,000	fashion & lifestyle

Note. This table summarizes the demographic background of the seven interviewed participants, including their age, gender, location, primary language(s), follower count, and target audience.

## Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your experience as an Instagram influencer?
2. How would you describe your personal brand, and how much effort goes into maintaining it?
3. Do you feel pressure to present yourself in a certain way to keep your audience engaged?
4. Have you ever felt anxious, overwhelmed, or emotionally exhausted from working on your Instagram presence?
5. How do you feel about Instagram's algorithm and how it affects the visibility of your content?
6. Do you ever feel like you can't take a break or go offline? Why or why not?
7. How do you handle negative feedback, low engagement, or a drop in followers?
8. In your opinion, how does being 'authentic' on Instagram relate to your mental health?
9. Have you ever experienced burnout? If yes, how did it show up for you?
10. What kind of support (personal, professional, or platform-based) would help you better manage the emotional demands of your work?
11. Do you think maintaining your personal brand on Instagram has ever made you feel stressed or burnout? Can you describe that?

