Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Shifting Leader-Follower Power Dynamics in a Social Media Context

Parisa, Gilani,[1] Elvira Bolat,[1] Donald Nordberg,[1] and Claudia Wilkin [2].*

[1]Bournemouth University; [2]Manning Gottlieb OMD

*corresponding author

ABSTRACT

The democratisation made possible by social media presents leadership studies with an opportunity to re-evaluate the often-neglected role of power in leader-follower dynamics. Drawing on Critical Leadership Studies and using a hybrid qualitative methodology, we discover that relationships between social media leaders (SMLs) and followers (SMFs) are co-produced and largely accompanied by continuous shifts and re-negotiation of power between SMLs and SMFs. We show that social media platforms and their metrics play an important role in such power shifts by granting equal access to communication while potentially tilting information asymmetries in favour of the follower. The study also shows how these relationships can affect and even pervert the leaders' problematic search for a 'true self'. From this observation we draw attention to wider challenges in the social media context, which poses important questions for the leadership field.

Keywords: social media, power, identity, Critical Leadership Studies, followership

INTRODUCTION

Most mainstream discussions of leadership in the literature have largely neglected power dynamics (Collinson, 2011; Gordon, 2011), and where they do discuss it, it is typically in relation to the power that leaders have over their followers. But what happens when followers have equal, even unfettered access to one of the most important instruments of power – the ability to communicate directly with the community at large? What happens when followers become 'influencers' and any distinction between influence and power blurs?

It has been suggested that leaders only exist when they have followers (Grint, 2010); however, followership has gained a somewhat negative connotation (Carsten et al., 2014)

with the word 'follower' carrying with it notions of inferiority to the leader and thus reinforcing a power imbalance in the leader-follower relationship (Jackson and Parry, 2018). Nevertheless, there is an increasingly blurred line between leaders and followers in some contexts (Bennis, 2008), with the latter being arguably afforded more power by non-traditional means, such as anonymous blogging. According to Kellerman (2012) and Belk (2013), an increased power of followers can be partly attributed to technological imperatives and cultural constraints. We build on this work by focusing on the role of social media, where the term 'follower' has become part of the accepted language of sites such as Twitter and Instagram, but where the effect now includes more than the passivity associated with the term.

The world of the Instagram influencer has grown exponentially in recent years. It's now a billion-dollar industry, based on advertising revenues, with a value projected to double by 2020 (Statista, 2019). Social media is increasingly being exploited by users to build their brand, digital celebrity identity and followership (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). These individuals are using their skills, knowledge and expertise to become social media influencers (hereafter social media leaders – SMLs) and can be defined as content creators who have established a solid base of following through their social media activities (De Veirman et al., 2017).

SMLs are able to drive the attitudes and behaviour of SMFs by pushing content at them, an aspect of social media leadership has received considerable attention (i.e. Daniel Jr et al., 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). Huang et al. (2017: 181) claim that SMFs *"are not as important"* because they are simply being influenced by SMLs and have no power within the relationship. However, a netnographic study by Cocker and Cronin (2017) reveals that SMLs are new cults of personality co-created by the SMFs. They argue that SMFs are active endorsers and co-creators of SMLs' personal qualities and meta-celebrity identities. This argument seems to be largely in line with the constructionist approach to literature on followership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), whereby notions of a leader and a follower are born within the relationship.

In their theoretical paper Cocker and Cronin (2017) come to the conclusion that in the social media world the success of SMLs depends not only on a charismatic personality of a SML, but also on the active role SMFs community plays in shaping SMLs personality. However, the nature of SMLs-SMFs relationships remains largely underexplored.

Traditional views on leadership suggest that follower behaviour is a direct result of what leaders do and that leaders are the active ones within the relationship, meaning that power is largely positioned within the leaders' hands. In the case of social media influencing, followers have an interactive means of impacting on SMLs' activities (Belk, 2015). SMFs turn into SMLs, while SMLs can lose power over their followers within a matter of seconds.

The politics of social media influencing are complex, as the social media platforms and the sector have a role to play with their power to manipulate content (i.e. fake news), behaviour (i.e. voting) via technologically-enabled opportunities to abuse power (i.e. fake followers and influencer fraud). Social media processes could be more insidious, manipulative and disguised. The social media context raises important questions about power dynamics, particularly within the sector where social media companies are yet to accept any responsibility for multiple online scans. SMLs and SMFs are an important part of the sector and we are yet to discover what it means to be a 'leader' and a 'follower' in the context of new digital technologies and social media. In an attempt to address this question, Cocker and Cronin's (2017) study captures SMFs' perspectives, but as with other studies on social media influencing it fails to capture the SMLs' perspectives.

To help us explore the nature of the SML-SMF relationships by capturing both, SMLs' and SMFs' perspectives, we largely draw upon Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) (Collinson, 2014; Collinson, 2011) to understand power dynamics within SML-SMF relationships, the impact of the social media context on such dynamics as well as the consequences of power dynamics on SMLs.

Our study contributes in three ways to the literatures of leadership, identity and social media. First, it shines a different light on how the technologies of power work to shift the dynamics of power between leaders and followers. Equal access to those technologies means that both sides of the social media 'mirror' can discipline each other. Second, social media interactions do that by making it easier for followers to influence the identities of the 'influencers'. That capability can in some circumstances lead those leaders to pervert their own aspirations to express authenticity. It hollows out their sense of achievement even as they achieve recognition and modest fame. Third, it shows, not just as Grint (2010) and others have suggested that leaders cannot exist without followers, but that followers can co-create their leaders, sometimes with nurturing, sometimes with toxifying effects.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Perspectives on leadership, followership and power

Until recently, power has received only limited attention in the leadership literature (Collinson, 2014; Jackson and Parry, 2018). Leadership approaches viewed power as the property of leaders and have adopted a largely "apolitical orientation that gives leaders a 'voice' while silencing followers" (Gordon, 2011: 186).

Bolden et al. (2011) helpfully divide the leadership and power literature into power as a personal attribute, power as legitimised by followers, and power as embedded within social systems. Power is often seen from an individual perspective (Bolden et al., 2011; Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014). French and Raven's (1959) often cited Social Power Theory is an example of such an approach. This taxonomy asserts that leaders can draw on five different sources of power (reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, referent) to garner influence over others. Informational power was added six years later. Lukes (2004) also takes an individualistic view of power but extends this to include a recognition of politics. According to Lukes (2004), power operates at three levels: the ability to influence decisions, agenda-setting dimensions and an institutional dimension. Although both French and Raven's (1959) and Lukes' (2004) work have been influential not only in leadership studies, but also across a variety of disciplines, they have been heavily critiqued. For example, Morriss (2006) and Béland (2010) draw attention to Lukes's focus on 'power over' and power as domination, rather than 'power to'.

Firth and Carroll (2017) identified three 'root metaphors' to explore the ways in which the relationship between leadership and power has been conceptualised. The first metaphor, 'power as causality' reflects Dahl's (1957: 202-203) historic definition of power as "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something he would not otherwise do." Power in this way, is similar to the approaches above and resides as the property of an individual (i.e. the leader). The second metaphor, 'power as mandate', takes a more inclusive view of power and sees it as residing in a collective. It draws upon Mary Parker Follet's (1995) notion of 'power with', rather than 'power of' (Firth and Carroll, 2017; Follett and Graham, 1995). Firth and Carroll's final root metaphor is entitled 'power as micro-interaction' and draws heavily on the influential work of Foucault (1980). Power is seen as being 'everywhere'. This metaphor "makes visible the lines of power that penetrate social life that have been invisible" (Firth and Carroll, 2017: 134). In this way power takes on a

disciplinary form (Foucault, 1979), shaping the behaviour of 'leaders' and 'followers' in an unconscious manner.

Foucault (1980: 154) draws upon Bentham's idea of the Panopticon to highlight how 'technologies of power' act as a means of surveillance to control, which can lead to self-regulation as a form of discipline. The 'collective and anonymous gaze' that oversees behaviour to such an extent that each person becomes their own overseer, is central to his ideas.

There has been a call within Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) to critique further the power relations embedded within leadership and within leader-follower dynamics. CLS seek to "highlight the numerous interrelated ways in which power, identity and context are embedded in leadership dynamics" (Collinson, 2014: 37). CLS illustrate that within leader-follower relations there is the potential for 'conflict' and for 'dissent' (Collinson, 2011). They also bring to light the importance of followers' agency and the potential for resistance, which can be either explicit or disguised (Collinson, 2014). One such dichotomy is the way in which 'leaders' and 'followers' have been conceptualised in the literature.

Followers and followership have until recently been afforded little attention in the literature compared to leaders and leadership (Bligh, 2011; Collinson, 2006; Ford and Harding, 2018). Our search of Scopus through July 2019 bears this out. In *Leadership Quarterly*, 83% of article titles used the term "leader*" and just 8% "follower*", almost identical to what Bastardoz and Van Vugt (2019) had reported to the end of 2017. For *Leadership*, the ratios were even more lopsided: 89% for "leader*" and just 4% for "follower*". There is still no commonly accepted definition of followership. The term 'follower' has sometimes been viewed in a hierarchical sense and used as a synonym for 'subordinate' (Crossman and Crossman, 2011). Jackson and Parry (2018) have argued that as a term it is often attributed to notions of inferiority and thus serves to reinforce the power imbalance in the leader-follower relationship. Carsten et al. (2014) also highlight the negative connotation of 'followership'.

Gordon (2011: 196) in his critical review of the leadership and power literature, asserts that the relationship between leaders and followers is often presented in 'dualistic terms', in which the power of leaders is normalised, affording them a degree of superiority in relation to followers. However, he suggests that due in part to greater access to information and

technology, the power relationship between 'leader' and 'follower' is changing and becoming increasingly blurred and that more attention needs to be given to exploring this.

Kellerman (2012) echoes these sentiments in arguing the patterns of dominance and of deference have evolved and as a result of the combined influences of culture and technology, particularly social media, followers have gained increased power at the expense of leaders. Social media in particular, she argues allows for dispersion of information, enabling a means of expression and facilitating connection. She proposes that social media "can be thought of as an open resource, available to almost anyone in ways that are historically unprecedented" (Kellerman, 2013: 138). Social media also arguably poses challenges for research on the dynamics between leaders and followers because the term 'follower' has become part of the commonly accepted vocabulary for platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In these contexts, the term followers is not necessarily imbued with inferiority (Gordon, 2011; Jackson and Parry, 2018). This in turn has important, largely underexplored implications for research on leadership, followership and power. Collinson (2006) argues that virtual spaces and the enactment of 'virtual selves' pose important questions for leadership and followership research. Furthermore Gordon (2011: 199-200) suggests that the greatest challenge for those in leadership is "how to differentiate themselves from their followers, maintaining their identity and 'voice' as a leader, whilst at the same time nurturing the ever-increasing empowerment of their followers".

Some recent studies have taken a more follower-centric perspective. These can be categorised into role-based approaches and constructionist approaches (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Role-based approaches act to 'reverse the lens' (Shamir, 2007). Constructionist approaches, drawing on the ideas of Berger and Luckmann (1966), see leadership and followership as being co-produced through 'relational interactions' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Whilst these studies represent an important step in recognising the importance and power of the follower, they reinforce the leader-follower dichotomy. By asking participants to discuss themselves as followers, researchers could affect individuals' self-perception as doing so "actively positioning participants within an identity category within which they must actively constitute their identity" (Harding, 2015: 157). Harding (2015) poses the question as to whether the self-identity of 'follower' exists until someone is asked to discuss themselves as follower. Social media represents an interesting context as 'followers' are simply those that 'follow' social media content (e.g. of an influencer) by a click of the button 'follow', but whether they actually consider themselves as followers is questionable. What the notion of

'follower' means and their impact on the 'leader' in the social media context is largely unknown; the power dynamics are therefore arguably different. Harding's (2015) critique resonates with Collinson's (2006) discussion of the power and identity of followers. We consider next the relationship between power and identity.

Power and identity

Collinson (2006; 2003) suggests that individuals have many different identities and positions and rarely have a singular sense of self. We also draw upon multiple sources of identity to construct such co-existing identities. These identities can be mutually reinforcing, but they can also be in tension, contradictory or incompatible, heightening actors' ambiguity and insecurity. Insecurity is important for understanding the 'subjective power relations' of organisations, particularly in surveillance-based organisations (Collinson, 2003). Collinson analyses three types of 'self' that may be constructed and reproduced in the workplace (2003; 2006): 'conformist', 'dramaturgical' and 'resistant' selves.

The idea of 'conformist selves' draws upon the work of Foucault (1979), suggesting that workplace surveillance systems can have a self-disciplining effect; individuals see themselves as a 'valued object' in the eyes of authority and act accordingly. Organisations can control their employees by shaping and regulating their identity (Collinson, 2003). One of the ways employees may 'conform' is through maintaining a boundary between the public and private self. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) suggest that identity regulation within organisations is an important form of organisational control. This could be engaged purposefully or be the result of other unseen activities such as cultural traditions. Identity regulation is enacted through discursive practices that influence processes of identity formation and transformation. This in itself leads to 'identity work' by employees, which is defined as "interpretative activity involved in reproducing and transforming self-identity" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 627). 'Self-identity is the outcome of 'identity work'. They suggest a dynamic interplay between identity regulation, identity work and self-identity, with each influencing and reinforcing the others. Discourses play an important part in this (Sinclair, 2011); multiple and contradictory discourses sometimes compete as sources of power (Lührmann and Eberl, 2007).

Collinson (2006) sees 'resistant selves' as finding ways of blocking managerial or leadership behaviour. Resistance comes in many forms and can provide ways for followers to construct alternative identities to those prescribed by the organisation or leader. However, potentially

contradictory outcomes and sometimes followers are required to 'self-censor' for fear of repercussions.

Finally, Collinson (2006) explores the 'dramaturgical self', drawing on Goffman's (1959) work on impression management to highlight the ways in which employees (or followers) manipulate their self and identity to present their identity in a certain way. Collinson (2006: 186) suggests that "virtual audiences may provide a new stage for dramaturgical performances." Referring primarily to the developments in email and mobile phone technology, he argues that technologies can enable 'dramaturgical claims' by leaders and followers about not only what they are doing, but also potentially who they are.

It is important to note that followers (and leaders) can enact more than one of these types of identity at any one time. Identities are often ambiguous and fragile (Collinson, 2006; Lührmann and Eberl, 2007). Efforts to try and define one 'true' self may "further reinforce, rather than resolve the very ambiguity and insecurity identity strategies are intended to overcome" (Collinson, 2006: 182). This further highlights the complex relationship between followership, power and identity.

Developing this further Sinclair (2011) suggests that leaders often feel pushed to manage their identities and create a brand, and widespread leadership discourses such as being 'authentic' may add to this anxiety for individuals to 'fix' their identity as a leader. She writes that leaders face a panoply of pressures, including for authenticity. This can in turn lead to an 'authenticity paradox' (Guthey and Jackson, 2005), whereby leaders feel compelled to construct an authentic façade. The fact that it is purposefully constructed means that it cannot be authentic. Sinclair (2011) suggests that 'identity pressures' have been amplified by media channels, which have changed the access we have to the lives of leaders. These observations beg the question of how the recent omnipresence of social media may affect those pressures for authenticity, especially from followers.

Social media influencing

The literature about social media influencing and SMLs is growing rapidly and mostly sits within the marketing domain (Audrezet et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2017). However, most SMLs are labelled either as social media opinion leaders – those who are much more knowledgeable in relation to certain topics and as a result can influence the behaviour of individuals (i.e. Huang et al., 2917; Sihi and Lawson, 2018); brand ambassadors – those who are passionate

about an organisation or its brand and translate this passion to other consumers via social media (i.e. Smith et al., 2018); human brands / celebrities – those who strategically cultivate *"an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status"* (i.e. Khamis et al., 2017: p196); and digital entrepreneurs – those who act on business opportunities based on the use of social media (McAdam et al., 2018). SMLs is a label that defines any form of social media influencing. Why? Despite the fact that most SMLs, just like any other active social media users, are motivated to extend their self-identity to the social world of the Internet (Belk, 2013); those successful in cultivating a powerful and large (in terms of number) following base are considered micro-celebrities (Belk, 2015; Marwick, 2013). Like celebrities, SMLs can lead online communities via influencing the attitudes and behaviours of their SMFs (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). Followers in the context of social media (SMFs) are those who receive and consume content posted by SMLs and as a result of this change their attitudes and behaviours (Burt, 1999).

A major element of social media influencing is SMLs' participation in self-branding. Just as a traditional brand would create an image and personality, SMLs are creating their own public identity responsive to the needs and interests of their target audience – SMFs (Khamis et al., 2017). Gandini (2016) found, however, that there is a key difference between SMLs and traditional businesses, which use self-branding as a tool to stand out amongst competitors. SMLs, as part of a freelance economy of amateurs, use self-branding as a way to collaborate with SMFs and other SMLs, building a network to establish a reputation from recommendations, referrals and encourage electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to gain authority.

Whilst this notion of social media influencing is not new - for years, brands made use of celebrity endorsements - social media has provided a landscape for ordinary individuals to build a substantial social media presence. Moreover, SMLs are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional celebrities and leaders (Bladow, 2017). This encourages a greater peer impact amongst SMFs, stimulating greater influence and impact. SMFs, also generate content, participate in discussions, share knowledge and influence one another (Heinonen, 2011). We could conclude that the impact of SMLs in this scenario is amplified in ways not seen in traditional leadership, where leaders directly influence followers. This then explains why businesses, organisations and institutions see the influence SMLs have on users (De Veirman et al., 2017), and are therefore, seek to use SMLs to talk to their target audiences, generate interest and exert influence.

Having said that, the amplified impact of SMLs on SMFs also suggests a more complex nature of relationships. By analysing social media interactions and comments of SMFs for several high-profiled YouTube SMLs, Cocker and Cronin (2017: 456-457) found that SMFs contribute towards the popularity and commercial success of micro-celebrities.

From this discussion of the literature, it seems than understanding of power has been largely neglected from mainstream leadership studies. Discussions of followers and of followership have tended to see followers as having a largely passive role, something that we argue s not the case in the relationship between Social Media Leaders (influencers) and Social Media Followers. Cocker and Cronin (2017), however have not really explore the nature of these relationships, but instead studied the SMFs' perspective by understanding how the SMFs co-create and empower SMLs. The SMLs' perspective is largely missing from research, perhaps due to challenges linked to obtaining empirical data. This paper, however, aims to address this gap by exploring the SMLs-SMFs relationships and capturing the missing SMLs' stories to understand how followers influence the identities of the 'influencers'.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a hybrid qualitative methodology; a mix of netnographic observations (Kozinets, 2015) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), to explore SMLs-SMFs relationships and power dynamics in such relationships. Netnographic observations, used by Cocker and Cronin (2017) were deemed suitable to capture unbiased reactions and commentary of SMFs, whereas exploratory interviews supported an exploration of SMLs' perspectives and experiences – the ones largely uncaptured by existing research due to data accessibility issues.

The first step of the data collection and analysis involved an observational netnography of the selected SML accounts. Netnography, a term coined to refer to online ethnography (Kozinets, 2015), is commonly used to study online behaviour and virtual communities (Sharma et al., 2018). The netnographic part of the research was non-participatory in nature and involved observation and analysis of publicly available content published by those selected for netnographic research SMLs and comments and reactions made by their SMFs. This enabled us to inconspicuously explore how SMLs are interacting with their followers.

The netnographic part of the research adopted the non-probability purposive sampling method. We have selected three SMLs that use Instagram for their primary social media

influencing activity and post content within a range of lifestyle categories; fitness, food and fashion (see Table 1 for the details on the netnographic sample).

[Insert Table 1]

As part of the netnographic research we collected both qualitative and quantitative data. It entailed gathering 15 posts from each netnography SML at the beginning of their Instagram accounts, 15 from the middle of their account timeline and 15 of their most recent posts – as per content recorded up until 16th February 2018. For each occurrence data was collected on the content type, content message, detailed accounts of the comments along with the number of comments and likes received for each post. A total of 135 posts, accessible and available in the public domain, were collected and analysed using Bolat and O'Sullivan's (2017) three analytical steps: (1) descriptive analysis that entailed recording types of content and number of posts; (2) sentiment analysis – word frequency analysis and semantic analysis of the emotions portrayed and expressed within the posts and comments; (3) network analysis – the basic capture and detailed analysis of SMFs engagement with the SMLs' content via capturing number of likes, views and comments. As no consent has been obtained to present direct quotes from the SMFs comments, we are purely presenting integrated and conceptual results of the netnographic analysis.

The second step of the data collection and analysis involved unstructured interviewing of SMLs. We interviewed twelve SMLs who are part of the Bournemouth Bloggers community (@bmouthbloggers; https://bournemouthbloggers.com) – community of the regional SMLs who mostly blog about lifestyle, food and travelling. All 12 interviewees are micro-influencers; those whose follower count is below 10,000 and all post content in relation to lifestyle with variations across topics such as fitness, fashion and food (see Table 2 for a detailed profile of all interviewed SMLs).

[Insert Table 2]

All, apart from one, SMLs are blogging/vlogging in addition to a full-time job. SML1, however, has blogged for five years and *"inspired by the popularity of"* [SML1] her fitness content she has opened her gym confirming that her social media presence helped her with establishing credibility for accumulating financial investments. All 12 micro-influencers are not directly generating income from their blogging/vlogging but received gifts from the brand and local businesses. They don't make money but are gifted. In terms of the influence

interviewed SMLs make on their SMFs, all of the SMLs highlighted that they often receive "thank you" messages from their SMFs who testify how SMLs' content affected their lives. Moreover, few SMLs (SML1; SML3; SML7; SML12) have 'meet and greet' face-to-face gatherings offering their SMFs the opportunity to connect with their SMLs offline.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, which although was more time consuming, enabled us to gauge a greater response and build a rapport with the interviewees. Interviews took place in SMLs' choice of location – local coffee shops. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then presented as a set of anonymous results to maintain the ethical principle of confidentiality. This was particularly important, as all interviewed SMLs did not want to be exposed to a wider audience as many issues discussed were sensitive in nature and potentially could risk their social media influencing achievements.

In line with the grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), within the process of interviewing and analysing the interview data we have adopted the following five principles: (1) simultaneous data collection and analysis; (2) theoretical and empirical sensitivity; (3) use of a three stage coding process within the data analysis; (4) use of a constant comparison approach within the data analysis; and (5) use of a metaphor to synthesise results. Interview data analysis mainly involved a three stage coding process (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Firstly, interview transcripts were analysed line-by-line, which involved empirical coding using labels derived from the interviews.

This process enabled data reduction and identification of main similarities and differences in the sample. Within the initial open coding we have developed 128 empirical codes – concepts. Through continuous deduction and analysis this was reduced to 78 concepts. Following this, data formed through the open coding and the emerging themes and relationships were grouped into a hierarchical order. This process helped to identify and create 20 theoretical concepts by consulting with existing research. Finally, we integrated the interviews and netnographic results by identifying four core categories arising from the data to build a storyline. We used NVivo 10.2 software to document and carry out and integrate analysis of both netnography and interviewing stages. Results of the research are presented in the next section where begin to discuss the interview results first as the netnographic results are used to accompany the overall discussion.

FINDINGS

Interview results

Each SML we interviewed had their own thematic focus and different journey in becoming an SML, but they shared feelings and opinions in relation to their interactions and relationship formation and management with their SMFs. The overall process of SMLs creation was evident in SMLs' formation of their personality cult, however, with the strategic curation of SMFs' base.

All interviewed SMLs desired greater followership, as they saw it as a source of power. It is also evident that social media metrics such as clear evidence to number of likes and followers enable SMLs to measure such power. SML2 stated that whilst the initial process may start off quick, to gain substantial following after this initial surge requires commitment:

> *"When you start from zero you get up to 500 followers quite easily then you do from 600-1000 because you're new to posting it picks up and people start following quickly".*

A fundamental element towards the curation of SMFs entails engagement. Interviewed SMLs emphasised that if there is a lack of interest or commitment towards interaction, then this will impact on the number of SMFs gained:

> *"I do make sure I proactively engage and like and comment and reply to people and comment on people's posts and ask questions. I try to be really interactive and get people to be interactive with me."* [SML1]

However, interviewees experience so-called 'social media rules' regarding the curation of followership, which demonstrates that the social media context is embedded into social media leadership power dynamics:

> *"With YouTube you get people messaging you saying subscribe to my channel, I'm subscribed to you, there is definitely a follow-on follow."* [SML4]

> *"It is just expected to grow your following not only through quality content and your personality but by simply building your network through your own following activity. I have to follow people and in return they would follow me. Question is to keep them following and this is where personality and content are prioritised."* [SML12]

Expanding followership and engagement is a continual theme throughout all the SML interviews, where SMFs are almost perceived as social media influencing currency and SMLs' gateway to more gains. This is highlighted by SML3, who stated:

> *"There are some apps you can use as an influence. If I want more followers, I have to use such apps".*

This ability to manipulate numbers is an interesting result that is not explored or even present within the traditional, non-social media context. Technological solutions enabling to boost number of SMFs are used widely to increase numbers – a quick fix solution unavailable in the non-digital contexts. Understanding the social media platforms' processes and ability to effectively use social media functionalities is another, complementary to SMFs, source of power for SMLs.

It seems that followership is an interesting phenomenon in the social media context where number gains is a critical part of establishing a leadership position. Consequently, SMLs appear to go through a cognitive thought process of how to curate SMFs and possess more referent power to gain credibility:

> *"I do try and grow my following I think it gives you a lot more credibility."* [SMI1]

The context of social media with its technological menu of cultivating SMFs solutions provides SMLs with a greater power.

However, it is also clear that a quick fix technology-enabled boost to the SMFs number is not sustainable in the long-term and engagement, as well as content, is critical to keep and grow sustainably the SMFs' numbers. SMLs' power resides in the relationships they have with their SMFs. Hence, many SMLs take their relationships with SMFs from an online only context to face-to-face meetings – to build much more personal, deep and non-mechanical relationships with their SMFs:

> *"We've met some of our best friends through Instagram… I'd love to meet more people if we can. There are some YouTube-ers up north who want to meet up in London so that would be good. There are lots of people we would love to meet and have a closer connection with."* [SMI4]

It is evident that maintaining quality of content and having a unique personality are critical to maintaining the leadership status in the social media content – this is similar to traditional, non-social media, contexts:

> *"If your content isn't what I want to watch I'm not going to follow you – that is the rule we have to follow."* [SMI4]

> *"But I am realistic, it is I who keep followers number growing and sustained. If I did not give away my energy, something different, my followers won't be with me all the way through."* [SML10]

SMLs are able to establish a sense of intimacy by posting elements of their personal everyday lives. Power as micro-interaction is easily exercised in the social media context where technology enables SMLs to penetrate their presence to SMFs' lives by continuous flow of content and hence increase their power over SMFs:

> *"I post every day. My followers anticipate content every day and enjoy knowing me through pictures of me without make-up and while having breakfast. I think they can relate to me but also learn from me that it is ok to be yourself. I think without such dedication to full exposure they won't be interested in whom I am and what I post."* [SML6]

It is evident that whilst SMLs' focus may be placed on curating followership, this is not done at the expense of their values. This confirms that in the social media context SMLs are also placing a greater emphasis on maintaining their identity and voice as a leader via content they produce. However, many SMLs do not see themselves as experts in certain subjects of interest (i.e. food, fitness). Instead, the SMLs, we interviewed, appear to be posting what is desired by their SMFs, what is most engaged with and liked:

> *"I kind of notice a trend in posts where people are really engaging and asking more questions and so I'll go down that route of post content more often as it's something they are really interested in."* [SMI1]

> *"Recently we put up a poll on Instagram asking what our followers want to see, so we are gauging what they want and then work with that."* [SMI4]

It is apparent SMFs drive content. This emphasis the significance of SMFs as source of power for SMLs, but it also poses the question of who owns the power in SMLs-SMFs

relationships. However, the complexity of the social media leadership-followership context does not end with this but is largely accompanied by power dynamics with power shifting from SMLs to SMFs and back to SMLs. We discovered that SMLs experience positive and negative consequences from such power shifts. The sentiment of such consequences is largely affected by the power dynamics in SML-SMFs relationships.

To start with positive consequences, each interviewed SML referred to enjoyment from their social media influencing activities:

> *"I've always had a passion for fashion and beauty."* [SMI3]

> *"It needs to be a passion of yours, taking photos here and there it's a lot easier and natural when its' something you are passionate about"* [SML1]

However, it goes beyond having an interest. Passion and thus enjoyment push an individual to participate in a self-defining activity that includes an investment of time and energy. SML2 states, *"I think starting for yourself* [true self] *is a big thing",* and this appears to be an underlying theme towards being a successful SML. Without this initial passion and enjoyment, an individual will find the curation process more challenging and will arguably be less successful as an SML.

In addition to enjoyment as a positive consequence, interviewed SMLs have reported a growth in confidence and a realisation of the power they have over their SMFs: through comments they receive as well as stories their SMFs share during the face-to-face 'meet and greet' gatherings. Such testimonials of influence largely motivate SMLs to continue with social media influencing. In some cases, there is an effect on the SMLs' focus-related activities:

> *"It gave me confidence in my food, I thought OK I can cook something else and try all these new things, and it made me want to keep doing it."* [SML2]

Hence, social media influencing seems to act as a self-managed and self-initiated developmental opportunity. In other cases, there is a psychological impact on self-confidence that affects SMLs' personality - once again demonstrating the power of social media and SMFs:

> *"It's definitely built both our confidence up and I feel a lot more ballsy…you just gain this confidence we didn't have before."* [SML4]

Furthermore, confidence stems from there being a "*more positive than negative*" (*SML1*) reaction from SMFs regarding the SMLs and their activities.

In contrast to this, we found that whilst SMLs are empowered through their increased confidence, they are also vulnerable, facing social media fear and anxiety. Interviews revealed that SMLs at one stage felt social media anxiety in the form of fear of judgement (SML1, SML4, SMLs6-8), or comparison (SML2, SML3, SML5, SMLs9-12):

> *"You fear you're going to get judged and people will think you're self-centred taking a photo of yourself."* [SMI1]

> *"The first few videos or photos on Instagram, we weren't sure what to say, thought about how we looked, what if people didn't listen."* [SMI 4]

SML1 and SML7 showed a fear of follower judgement where they will be perceived as too image-conscious, focusing too much on their brand image as opposed to the community. Social media's ability to capture evidence of such judgments via likes and comments demonstrates the power of social media platforms in the power shifts within the relational social media leadership-following process. SML2, SML3 and SML9 face social media anxiety through comparisons:

> *"I do feel, however, when I post something and it doesn't get many likes I do as much as I don't want to admit, sit and think what about it isn't as popular."* [SMI2]

> *"On Instagram I started comparing myself to others and wondering why my pictures weren't getting as many likes or why it didn't look a certain way."* [SMI3]

> *"I follow people myself who I aspire to be like so when people say to me they've seen me on Instagram and aspire to be like me…"* [SML9]

Internal confidence and social media anxiety, triggered by SMFs and social media metrics, is arguably unique to social media influencing in comparison to traditional leadership-followership scenarios.

Moreover, we discovered that many SMLs we interviewed have conflicting evaluations of their authenticity, which they regard as integral to everything they do on social media:

> *"I need to engage more with more interesting content, something people like to read. I need to give more of me and then it will be more authentic. This is key to being popular and growing number of followers."* [SML2]

One of SMLs [SML3] noted:

> *"I'm never going to post a photo of me crying. Instead, I'm going to post a photo of me at the beach with my friends having a good time".*

The interviewees harbour a belief that 'being yourself' presents opportunities to stay authentic and build closer bonds with their SMFs. However, the experience of blogging also brought a sense that the growth of their social media presence and status had twister their social media personalities. Rather than achieving authenticity they started to portray a more positive, idealistic lifestyles. As one of them put it:

> *"Sometimes I see as living unparallel lives. On social media it is all pink and fluffy with fabulous healthy food I cook and post. I pretend I eat like that every day. Who am I fooling? Sometimes I wonder if I just posted a photo of a big bowl of chips topped with cheese and ketchup, tagging 'best food ever', what would my followers think? A lot of thoughts and editing go into finalising posts. I have an image to adhere."* [SML7]

It seems that authenticity has a different meaning in the social media leadership. In particular, SML's authenticity is based on self-reflection and fearing what SMFs would think and how they would react. Authenticity is twisted and used by each SML to shape their social media identity and presence.

Contrasting but interrelated positive and negative consequences of the SMLs' interactions with SMFs evidence the SMFs' power over SMLs, but also the unique power social media possesses. Our results clearly demonstrate reliance of SMLs on social media metrics but also ability of SMFs to impact the power of SMLs with all the reach that a single comment SMF can make. Such reach is not always achieved in a consistent manner. Social media platforms, their designs and algorithms, have a role to play.

Netnographic results

Table 3 and Figure 1 present the main findings of netnographic analysis.

[Insert Table 3]

[Insert Figure 1]

Netnographic findings suggest that the content type posted by SMLs is driven by the network behaviour of the SMFs, meaning sentiment of engagement as well as behavioural social media metrics (i.e. likes and comments) are guiding social media influencing. This finding was verified and confirmed by the interviews with SMLs. SMLs feed in their content and personality with what SMFs want to see – once again confirming the SMFs' power over SMLs. It seems that SMLs remain in power by constructing their identity together with SMFs.

In addition, the netnographic analysis, which looked at engagement from the perspective of followers, saw imagery to be the most engaged with and created content. Images were the most popular content format (93.3% of all posts), generating the highest levels of engagement (95.58%). Furthermore, most engagement came in the form of likes, not comments, which contributed just 2.1% of total engagement. It seems that SMLs react to engagement analytics and appear to be posting what is desired by SMFs, what is most engaged with and liked.

The word frequency analysis shows when SMFs do utilise comments, it is done to express gratitude "thanks", and admiration, "amazing", "love". Overall it shows that SMFs react positively both to the content and to the observed SMLs. This is perhaps what leads to the positive consequences discussed by the interviewed SMLs – confidence that SMLs gained if positive sentiment toward social media influencing activities was expressed. We now discuss our findings, focusing on the relationship between leadership, power and identity within the social media context.

DISCUSSION

"Mirror, mirror on the wall who is the most popular…"

Social media can act as a means of disguising where and with whom the power lies. Power is embedded within micro-interactions (Firth and Carroll, 2017). We can see from our data that our SMLs are susceptible and influenced by the behaviour of and interactions with the SMFs. The shift in power dynamics between SMLs and SMFs and the complexity that the social media context brings can be conceptualised by looking at the Brothers Grimm famous fairy tale of 'Snow White' where the evil queen possesses a magic mirror, which she asks every

morning to confirm that she is the "fairest of them all." The mirror always tells the evil queen what she wants to hear confirming her superiority and beauty. We discovered that SMLs and SMFs are groups of actors on the social media dramaturgical stage that hold and lose power from time to time. However, what is seen as largely influential in this process is a 'magic mirror'.

Our findings show that in the social media context power is enacted through metrics such as 'likes' and 'shares' but also ability to enable interactions, via comments, between SMLs and SMFs that impact the content and further social media posting activities of SMLs. SMFs are thus empowered by the social media functionalities, and shape SMLs' activities and personalities. This increases as SMLs become eager to grow their status. Often in the mainstream literature, followers are viewed as passive, having little power and conforming to desires and wishes of the 'leader' (Jackson and Parry, 2018; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), that is, to please the evil queen in this metaphor. However, our study shows that SMFs use their own identity, behaviour and engagement to act as a means of control. In the minds of the SMLs, SMFs they as a group hold the power, and not the SMLs. In social media, the technology balances that power through a more even distribution of access to those channels. The interviews illustrate that SMFs considerable knowledge about the SMLs, and that despite the metrics, SMLs know little personally about SMFs. This information asymmetry seems to enhance the power of SMFs and accelerate the dynamism of leader-follower relations. The complexity of social media relations is evident as a 'magic mirror' is no longer just a single character (follower as in the traditional context) but a combination of SMFs (people on the other side of the mirror), empowered and manipulated by social media (the mirror itself). SMFs are the voice on the other side of the 'magic mirror'. That voice has the ability to manipulate the power shifts from SMLs to SMFs and back, although the singularity of that voice belies the multiplicity of the speakers. It arises instead from the 'transparent' metrics-empowered world of social media the power dynamics are easily evidenced. However, as social media platforms design such metrics and algorithms that build them, we wonder who truly holds the power.

In the social media context, power takes on a disciplinary form (Firth and Carroll, 2017; Foucault, 1979; Foucault, 1980). SMLs are not always sure about who is watching what they post and how individuals or groups of individual SMFs will react. We suggest, therefore, that social media platforms act as a way of allowing the 'anonymous gaze' (Foucault, 1980) to

manifest, which can lead to the self-regulation of behaviour by SMLs, which can act as a brake on their power over SMFs and their sense of control.

We have also demonstrated how SMFs (or 'followers') exhibit power over SMLs (or 'leaders') as SMLs reshape their identity in response to the reactions of followers. The content which SMLs post is a way of enacting a form of online identity in a certain way, and it could be argued that they have the power in deciding on what information they articulate and what personality they portray. However, our findings show that SMLs are influenced by the network behaviour of SMFs, meaning sentiment of engagement (attitudes and feelings about SMLs and their content) as well as behavioural social media activities (i.e. likes and comments) are guiding what content SMLs post and how they brand themselves. SMFs comment on the posts of SMLs about the content of the posts and the way SMLs present themselves; that is the identity being portrayed online. This is in line with Cocker and Cronin (2017) who indicate that the bureaucratisation and routinisation of SMLs content creation leads to the ultimate demise of SMLs' power and fading of charisma and authenticity. We found that all SMLs wish to establish a greater followership. SMFs are almost perceived as SMLs' currency. Consequently, SMLs appear to go through a cognitive process of how to curate followership. In the social media context, a greater number of SMFs results in SMLs feeling they have a greater sense of power.

In a mirror image of Collinson's (2006) work on identity, we see that social media leaders, *rather than their followers*, enact resistant, conformist and dramaturgical selves, with the latter two identity responses being the most prevalent in the social media context. Some of the SMLs 'conformed' to the identity pressures being placed on them by setting the boundaries between their 'public' and 'private' selves, but interviewees often felt a blurred boundary between their sense of self and the image they presented to their audience.

However, most of our SMLs responded to the power being exerted over them by the SMFs with a 'dramaturgical' (Collinson, 2006) response. The SMLs attempted to manipulate the version of their self being presented on the public stage in order to appease the SMFs and as a result gain more 'likes', 'follows' and 'shares'. Our netnographic results show that 'likes' contribute more to the statistical sense of self, despite involving a low depth of engagement. Comments, qualitative and potentially rich in meaning, provide high engagement, but with low impact on the statistical sense of self. Overall, however, it could be argued that the power

in the social media context lies with the SMFs who control the behaviour of SMLs through the pressure they place on a different type of identity being presented.

We found that SMLs suffer from anxiety, social media fear and insecurity. Cocker and Cronin (2017) elaborated on the negative effect of a greater power shift to SMFs hands. However, their conclusions were made based on an analysis of the SMFs' behaviour without capturing the true impact of SMFs' power over SMLs. Our interviews highlight how mental issues can be triggered by SMFs themselves, who play an important role in shaping the direction SMLs take. These results demonstrate the impact that SMFs and their voices, in combination with social media that clearly structures such voices via its metrics, have on shaping SMLs' identities. This in turn affects how authentic SMLs see themselves as being, particularly when being pushed to 'impression manage' or present themselves in a way that causes internal conflict. As Sinclair (2011) suggests, leaders are frequently being pressured to 'manage' their identities and create a 'brand'. They are often compelled to try to 'fix' their identity in the search for a 'true self' (Sinclair, 2011). We have found that that SMLs experience this to an even greater extent, where there is a strong 'authenticity paradox' (Guthey and Jackson, 2005) and SMLs arguably lose authenticity in their search for the 'authentic'.

Audrezet et al. (2018) found that authenticity within social media influencing is largely under threat in the SML-brand partnership context where SMLs might use branding techniques to construct their celebrity identity and therefore jeopardise their true selves. However, our findings contrast with Audrezet (2018) in that authenticity can be compromised within SMLs-SMFs power dynamics. This perhaps leads to a greater tension and moral obligation dilemma leading to inner conflict in SMLs' mindset. Today we are witnessing social media platforms constantly experimenting with functionalities and metrics (i.e. hiding 'likes' for the posts' dashboards) (Kumparak, 2019). This could be an attempt to clean their "great hackers" image (Garvan, 2019) as we find that social media plays a powerful role in dynamic relationships and power shifts between SMLs and SMFs.

Furthermore, we found that SMLs start off seeking to project an identity only to find they become a 'self' defined by their followers. SMLs therefore come to exist for their followers. Grint (2010) argues that leaders cannot exist without followers. We extend this by suggesting that the power leaders have is a creation of the followers.

CONCLUSION

Our results demonstrate how power dynamics are embedded in and reshape leader-follower relationships in the social media context. We contribute to the leadership literature by unearthing the often hidden and rarely talked about the role social interaction in the allocation of power. Where power has been previously discussed, it has tended to be in relation to the different forms of power that an individual leader may have on a follower or group of followers. We draw on the social media context to question these assumptions. We argue that the relationship between social media followers and social media leaders can be conceptualised as being a 'magic mirror', which has the potential to influence and control leader behaviour. Power dynamics in this context shift from leaders to followers. This is done largely as a result of the pressure that SMFs place on SMLs, through their 'likes', 'follows' and 'comments', presenting a certain type of identity, which materialises through the content posted on social media. We have shown how influencers – leaders by another name – may adopt a mostly dramaturgical response and impression manage what their followers see, a type of strategy that Collinson (2006) sees as happening among followers. Such brand management has an impact on their perceived authenticity (Sinclair, 2011), and their search for one 'true self' leads to identity conflict and feelings of insecurity.

Our study also raises important broader questions about the use and abuse of power in social media and the politics of social media influencing. Whilst our study draws on data from a small group of micro-influencers, we cannot ignore events in the wider social media context. Social media has arguably been used as a means of manipulating voting behaviour in various national elections and supplying so called 'fake news' to different groups. There have been increasing calls for platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to take more responsibility for the role they play in facilitating and legitimising antisocial forms of behaviour by SMLs and SMFs alike–. Our analysis shows that anonymous or even 'fake' identities in social media communications can act either as an 'anonymous gaze' (Foucault, 1980) in controlling a certain type of leadership behaviour, or, in the wider context the level of anonymity afforded to 'followers', as an accelerant to more toxic and abusive behaviour.

Our study has a number of limitations. The netnographic sample was small and the selection of posts, triggered by the convenience of managing data, might not portray the full spectrum of the SMF-SMLs relationships and power dynamics. When interviewing SMLs we focused on micro-influencers who are part of the Bournemouth Bloggers Community. Large-scale

SMLs and those who do not belong to communities but who are very much independent may express different views. Some large-scale SMLs have broken through to become celebrities in traditional media, which suggests that even in the social media context they may have tipped the power balance back away from the followers.

Despite these limitations, our findings are useful in questioning the traditional notions of leader-follower power dynamics. Importantly, we discovered that SML-SMF relationships are co-produced and largely accompanied by continuous shifts and re-negotiation of power from SMLs to SMFs. The SMLs' perspectives compliment the study by Cocker and Cronin (2017), highlighting that the SMLs-SMFs relationships reside in SMLs and SMFs' power dynamics and as a result lead to an interplay of negative and positive consequences for SMLs. Our paper opens the potential for further critical conversations on the changing and complex nature of leader-follower dynamics in the social media age.

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Table 1. Profile of netnography SMLs

The Tiny Tank - Personal trainer	● Number of followers*: 115K ● Number of posts*: 1607 posts ● Content focus: Fitness
Rhitrition - Nutritionist	● Number of followers*: 75.2K ● Number of posts*: 2244 posts ● Content focus: Nutrition
Chloe Helen Miles - Style blogger	● Number of followers*: 109K ● Number of posts*: 1119 posts ● Content focus: Fashion

*Note: Metrics are recorded on 16th February 2018

Table 2. Profile of interviewed SMLs

SML	Main channels	SML identity / focus	Time spent in SMLs	Gender
SML1	Instagram, Blog, website	Fitness	5 year	Female
SML2	Instagram	Food	4 months	Female
SML3	Instagram, Twitter, Blog	Fashion / lifestyle	1-2 years	Female
SML4	YouTube, Blog, Instagram	LGBT	2-3 years	Female
SML5	Instagram, Blog	Food	9 months	Female
SML6	Instagram, YouTube	Travelling	1-2 years	Female
SML7	Instagram, website, Twitter	Fitness	3-4 years	Female
SML8	Instagram, Twitter	LGBT	1-2 years	Male
SML9	Instagram, Twitter	Travelling and fashion	6 months	Female
SML10	Instagram, YouTube,	Fashion and lifestyle	1-2 years	Female
SML11	Instagram, YouTube,	Food and travelling	6 months	Female

SML12	Instagram, Blog	Fashion / lifestyle	2-3 years	Female

Table 3. Results of netnographic, three-step analysis

Data analysis	SMLs Instagram data findings	Implications for SMLs SML identity / focus
1. Descriptive analysis	Images – made up 93.3% of all posts analysed across each SMI account. Videos – 6.7% of all posts analysed, receiving 4.3% of total likes and 8.9% of comments. **TTT** (The Tiny Tank) – 86.7% of content were photos. Average number of likes per post 1352 and 29 comments per post. **Rhitrition** – Average like per post 506, and comments 42. 93.3% of posts were photos. **CHM** (Chloe Helen Miles) – Average number of likes per post 2077 and comments 24. 100% of post types were photos.	The most popular form of content to post and engage with are images. Thurs SMI's are best to post content in image formats.
2. Text mining – word frequency analysis	Across all SMLs the word frequency analysis shows reoccurring words of 'love', 'amazing', 'thank' demonstrating popular themes of gratitude and affection towards SMLs. Towards each SML there has been a reoccurring theme of acknowledgement towards their looks, 'gorgeous', 'cute', 'looks', 'beautiful' demonstrating the positive reaction.	SMFs use comments to express gratitude and positive opinions about content posted by SMLs. Overall the sentiment is positive. There is a pattern in the way SMFs react and interact with posts across three SML profiles. Comments are mostly linked to the content but also are linked to SMLs' personalities.
3. Network analysis	Greater engagement was found with SML images - 95.58% - as opposed to videos –	Social media content should be appealing to encourage engagement through likes and

	4.12%. Most SMFs engaged with SMLs' posts via likes, 97.9% of total engagement arises in the form of likes with comments only contributing 2.1% of engagement.	comments, which will drive eWOM and entice more SMFs for an SML.

Figure 1. Netnographic research: word cloud analysis