Leadership Chaos: When Power is in the Hands of Followers

Gilani, P[1]., Bolat, E[1]. and Wilkin, C[2].

[1]Bournemouth University; [2]Estée Lauder

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued 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, 2011). 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 extant work by focussing on the role of social media, where the term follower has become part of the accepted language of sites such as Twitter and Instagram.

The Instagram influencer market alone has grown exponentially in recent years. It's now a billion dollar industry with a value projected to double by 2019 (Statista, 2019). Social media is increasingly being utilised by users to build their brand, digital celebrity identity and followership (Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Crocker 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).

One-way SMLs differ from traditional leaders is that they are seen as more authentic as they enable insight into their personal and everyday lives (Solis, 2016). As Manning et al (2017, p.130) states, this "publicisation of 'private' everyday activities" implies a level of authenticity which in turn not only develops a level of trust amongst SMLs and SMFs but also enables followers to see SMLs as real, hence, relatable people. These continued interactions and exposure to SMLs lives can generate parasocial relationships, where the SMFs can create a sense of intimacy and perceived friendship (Manning et al., 2017). In the conceptual paper Bladow (2018) stated that due to this intimacy the SMLs' and SMFs' relationship is more authentic and trusting than between traditional leaders and followers.

SMLs are able to drive the attitudes and behaviour of SMFs by pushing content at them. In fact this aspect of social media leadership has received ample attention (i.e. Nair et al., 2010; Khamis et al., 2017; Daniel et al., 2018). Huang et al. (2017, p. 181) claim that SMFs *"are not as important"* because they are simply being influenced by SMLs and have no power within the relationship. Contrary, a netnographic study by Crocker and Cronin (2017) reveals that SMLs are new cults of personality co-created by the SMFs. They argue that SMFs are active endorsers and social deconstructors of SMLs' personal qualities and meta-celebrity identities. In fact 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.

By deepening conversation around conceptualizations of the influence and power in social media influencing context, Crocker and Cronin (2017) come to the conclusion that in the era of consent where SMFs allow SMLs to push their content at them and be heard, the success of SMLs is not only dependant on a charismatic personality of SML but a charisma of the SMFs community. Apart from the study by Crocker and Cronin (2017), the nature of SMLs-SMFs relationships remains largely underexplored. Traditional views on leadership indicate that follower behaviour is a direct result of what leaders do and that leaders are the active ones within the relationships. In the case of social media influencing followers have an interactive means of impacting on SMLs' activities (Belk, 2015). In reality SMFs turn into SMLs as well as SMLs loose any power over their followers within a matter of seconds. This argument provokes a necessary question about 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 Crocker and Cronin's (2017) study does capture SMF's behaviour/perspective; but similar to many other studies on social media influencing it fails to capture the SMLs' perspective.

To help us explore the nature of the SML-SMF relationships by capturing both, SMLs and SMFs perspective, we largely draw upon the constructionist (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) approach in followership theory as well as social power theory (French and Raven, 1959), derived from sociological and marketing studies. However, results of our exploratory study are fundamentally data-driven. In particular, we discovered a different side to the SMLs-SMFs relationship, the one where the traditional perspective on a follower is transformed.

First, the paper discusses theoretical perspectives on followers and followership, drawing upon fragmented and unsettled upon common approaches in leadership literature, and then on social media influencing, bringing in marketing literature perspectives. Second, methodology is described, following which results of the grounded theory and netnographic research are presented. The paper ends with a discussion of empirical results against existing research and a summary of the main implications of this work.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Perspectives on followers and followership

Followers and followership have until recently been afforded little attention in the literature compared to leaders and leadership (Collinson, 2006; Bligh, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Bastardoz and Van Vught (2018) found that only 8% of articles published in *The Leadership Quarterly* up until the end of 2017 used the term 'follower' in their title compared to 83% that used the term 'leader'. There is still no commonly accepted definition of followership (Crossman and Crossman, 2011). 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 (2011) 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 that 'followership' has tended to have.

The work of Meindl (Meindl, 1995) was influential in questioning the dominant heroic status afforded to leaders and the way their role in organisational success (or failure) becomes romanticised. He suggested that success may not always be a result of the leaders' efforts but instead be a reflection of the belief that 'followers' have in these leaders. Meindl's ideas are revisited and developed further by Shamir et al (2007) and Uhl-bien and Pillai (2007). Hollander (1992) further emphasised the need for an understanding of the active role that followers can take. In particular he called for more attention to be paid to follower expectations and perceptions. Since then there have been calls for more thought to be paid to the role of followers in the leader-follower relationship (Bennis, 2008; Bligh, 2011; Carsten et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). This cause has been furthered by developments in leadership theory such as Leader Member Exchange Theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), Shared Leadership (Pearce and Conger, 2002) and Distributed Leadership (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012).

The way that followers are treated in the leadership literature can be categorised in a number of different ways. Uhl-bien et al (2014) set out three different types of approaches to followers, based on the power afforded to leaders / followers in the leader-follower relationship. Leader-centric views of followers include the majority of leadership research (ibid), including approaches such as Trait, Behaviour Contingency and Charismatic and Transformational Leadership. Follower-centric approaches on the other hand highlight the role of followers in constructing leadership and include 'the romance of leadership' (Meindl, 1995), Implicit Leadership theories (Rush et al., 1977) and the Social Identity Theory of leadership (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg, 2001; Hogg et al., 2012) (Hogg et al., 2012; Hogg, 2001; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Finally relational views (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) see leadership as a 'mutual influence process'.

Uhl-bien et al (2014) also argue for the need for a theoretical framework to define what constitutes the evolving area of followership research and set out two different approaches to analyse these: role-based and constructionist. Role-based approaches act to 'reverse the lens' (Shamir, 2007) on the leader-follower dynamic and examine how followers influence leaders. Kelley (2008), for example sets out different types of followers based on two key criteria: are they independent critical thinkers? And are they actively engaged in creating positive energy for the organisation. Five follower types emerge from these: the sheep, the yes-people, the alienated, the pragmatics and the star followers. Kellerman (2012) defines 'follower' by rank and suggests that followers are those individuals who hold less power, authority and influence than their superiors. She divides followers into five different types depending on their degree of engagement. In her view followers can be: isolates, bystanders, participants, activists or diehards. Finally Howell and Mendez (2008) offer three perspectives on follower roles: interactive, independent and shaping. They argue that these three role orientations are shaped by the follower's own self-concept, expectations from the relevant leader and organisational factors.

Followership literature can also be deemed to be constructionist (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Social constructionism adopts the perspective that reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Constructionist research see leadership and followership as being co-produced through 'relational interactions' (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). For example De Rue and Ashford (2010) suggest that leadership (and followership) identity is co-constructed by identity work through a 'claiming' and 'granting' process. Claiming denotes the way in which individuals assert their identity as a 'leader' or a 'follower'. Granting is the process by

which an individual bestows a leader or follower identity on another person. Granting can occur when a person agrees to a claimer's assertion or by bestowing that identity prior to a claim.

Collinson (2006) adopts a post-structuralist approach to explore the construction of three types of follower identity in the workplace: conformist, resistant and dramaturgical selves. The latter highlights the ways in which followers may respond to increased levels of surveillance through impression management and becoming 'skilled choreographers of their own practices' (186). Collinson draws attention to the notion that followers might impact upon leaders' identities. Ford and Harding (2018) further draw upon Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) to explore through a close reading of leadership texts, the identity constructions through which leadership and followership develop. In doing so, they argue that the field of followership has thus far largely lacked a critical perspective.

Uhl-bien and Pillai (2007: ,p194) explore the social construction of followership at both the individual and group levels and in doing so they move away from hierarchical notions of followers and instead define them as being 'someone who socially constructs leadership and identifies him / herself as a follower in that construction'. Adopting this perspective allows us to move away from attributions of inferiority to the follower role. Carsten et al (2010) builds upon this to explore the followership schema and contextual variables that impact on the manner in which followers socially construct their followership role. They found that some followers perceived their role in terms of passivity, obedience and deference, whilst others viewed them as being proactive and participative.

Kellerman (2012) suggests that patterns of dominance and of deference have evolved and that 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 the dispersion of information, enables a means of expression and facilitates connection. Dwelling on her analysis she proposes that social media 'can be thought of as an open resource, available to almost anyone, which empowers almost anyone in ways that historically are unprecedented' (Kellerman, 2013: ,p138). Social media also arguably poses a number of challenges (and opportunities) for followership research because the term 'follower' has become part of the commonly accepted vocabulary for platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In these contexts the meaning attributed to followers are not necessarily imbued with the same notions of inferiority that extant literature has attributed

to the term. We echo the sentiments of Collinson (2006), who argues that virtual spaces and the enactment of 'virtual selves' poses important questions for leadership and followership research.

We highlight the dangers of toxic followership behaviour in the context of social media influencers. Toxic (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Lipman-Blumen, 2006; Padilla et al., 2007; Tavanti, 2011; Mehta and Maheshwari, 2014), dark (Conger, 1990; Takala, 2010; Tourish, 2013; McCleskey, 2013; Mathieu et al., 2014; Haynes et al., 2015; Cruickshank and Collins, 2015), bad (Kellerman, 2004) , shadow (Kets De Vries and Balazs, 2011; Zwingmann et al., 2016) and destructive leadership (Tierney and Tepper, 2007; Einarsen et al., 2007; Shaw et al., 2011; Thoroughgood et al., 2012; Schyns and Schilling, 2013; Krasikova et al., 2013; Fraher, 2014) have become burgeoning fields. Many of these studies pay attention to the role of followers and follower behaviour. For example Padilla et al (2007) discuss the role that 'susceptible followers' pay in the 'toxic triangle', that also consists of destructive leaders and conducive environments. Thoroughgood et al (2012) build on this work by exploring the process that motivate followers to comply with destructive leaders. Chaleff (1995) draws attention to the importance of the 'courageous follower' in questioning leadership behaviour. Offerman (2004) discusses the manner in which followers can influence leader narcissism through flattery and ingratiation and the destructive power this can have on leader outcomes, ethical behaviour and organisational performance. However we seek to illustrate the toxic role that 'followers' of social media influencers can play on influencer behaviour and well-being.

Social media influencing

Social media, originally created for an ease of communication and networking vis-à-vis Internet-enabled conversations and exchange of data, has advanced and is no longer purely based on the communication between users (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Today social media also involves self-presentations of individuals and opportunistic interaction with broad and narrow groups of individuals who ultimately *"derive value from user-generated content and perceptions of interactions with others"* (Carr and Hayes, 2015, p.50). It is for this reason we are witnessing the rise of social media influencing where individual social media users are using their skills, knowledge, and expertise to become social media influencers - leaders (SMLs). Essentially SMLs are creating content and as a result of this have an established base of followers (SMFs) (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The literature around SMLs is growing exponentially and mostly sits within the marketing domain (i.e. Freberg et al., 2011; Lim et al., 2017; Audrezet et al., 2018). 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., 2017; 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, p. 196); and digital entrepreneurs – those who act on business opportunities based on the use of social media (i.e. McAdam et al., 2018). We, however, argue that 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 (Marwick, 2013; Belk, 2015). Just like celebrities, SMLs are able to lead online communities via influencing the attitudes and behaviours of their SMFs (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). In fact followers in the context of social media (SMFs) are defined as 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 finding 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 the traditional businesses, which use self-branding as a tool to stand out amongst competitors. SMLs, as part of a freelance economy and amateur culture, use self-branding as a way to collaborate with SMFs and other SMLs, and build a network to establish a reputation from recommendations, referrals and encourage electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to eventually gain authority.

Whilst this notion of social media influencing is not new - for years brands have made use of celebrity endorsements - social media has provided a landscape for ordinary individuals to build up a substantial social media presence. Moreover SMLs are perceived as more authentic and trusting than traditional celebrities and leaders (Bladow, 2018). This encourages a greater peer impact amongst SMFs themselves, hence, stimulating much greater influence and

impact of an individual SML. Amongst SMFs themselves we see generation of content, participation in discussions, sharing knowledge and influencing one another (Heinonen, 2011). We could conclude that the impact of SMLs in this scenario is amplified in comparison to a traditional leadership context where a leader directly influences the followers. No wonder, more than ever, businesses, organisations and institutions are seeing the authority SMLs have on other users (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014; De Veirman et al., 2017), and are, therefore, seeking to identify SMLs and use them to talk to their target audiences, generate interest and fuel 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 the several high-profiled YouTube SMLs Crocker and Cronin (2017, pp. 456-457) found that SMFs play:

> *"the co-creative, deliberative and sometimes antagonistic role … in determining how the charismatic authority of micro-celebrities is read as well how commercialisation efforts around this kind of authority are met".*

From this it is clear that in line with the constructionist (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) approach to followership theory, SMLs and SMFs are co-constructed through 'relational interactions'. Crocker and Cronin (2017), however, have not really explored 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 in the existing research perhaps due to challenges linked to obtaining empirical data. This paper, however, aims to address this gap by exploring the nature of SMLs-SMFs relationships and capturing the missing SMLs' stories.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a hybrid qualitative methodology; a mix of netnographic observations (Kozinets, 2015) and grounded theory (Glaser and Straus, 2017), to explore SMLs-SMFs relationships. Netnographic observations, used by Crocker and Cronin (2017) 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.

Using unstructured interviews, we first 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 of the twelve interviewees represent 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 1 for a detailed profile of all interviewed SMLs).

[Insert Table 1]

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.

Within the process of interviewing and analysing the interview data, we have adopted the five principles of a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), namely (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.

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 all of the results by identifying four core categories and concepts within the data to build a storyline with the use of metaphor.

The Second step of the data collection and analysis involved an observational netnography of the selected SML accounts. Netnography, the term coined to refer to online ethnography which was redefined by Kozinets (2015), is commonly utilised for the study of virtual communities (Sharma et al., 2018). Similarly to Crocker and Cronin's (2017) study, 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 Figure 1 for the details on the netnographic sample).

[Insert Figure 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.

We used NVivo 10.2 software to document and carry out both netnographic and grounded theory analysis. Handling the data through one software saved time and made it simpler to collate themes and envisage the relationship between concepts making the analysis more manageable. Results of the research are presented in the next section.

FINDINGS

"Mirror, mirror on the wall who is fairest of them all…"
Despite each SML we interviewed having their own thematic focus and different journeys in becoming SMLs, they have shared feelings and opinions in relation to their interactions and relationship formation and management with their SMFs. The overall process of SMLs deconstruction and re-legitimasation of SMLs, described by Crocker and Cronin (2017), was actually evident in SMLs' formation of their personality cult, however, with the strategic curation of SMFs base. This quite represents the referent power of the social power theory (French and Raven, 1959) quite well.

All interviewed SMLs desired to establish a greater followership. It is stated by SML2 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 peoples posts and ask questions. I try to be really interactive and get people to be interactive with me."* [SML1]

However, there appears to be so called 'social media rules', experienced by all of the interviewed SMLs in regards to the curation of followership:

> *"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 priotised." [SML12]

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

"There are some apps you can use as an influencer, so I want more followers so I can be a part of those apps".

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]

In doing so, many SMLs take their relationships with SMFs from an online only context to face-to-face meetings – to build much more personal 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 also evident that there are other mediating factors influencing SMLs' willingness to adhere, one of which is maintaining quality of content and having a unique personality:

"If your content isn't what I want to watch I'm not going to follow you, that's not the right reason." [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]

In particular SMLs are able to establish a sense of intimacy by posting elements of their personal everyday lives:

> *"We live our life we work full time and alongside that there are good and bad days."*[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 links to the information and expert powers within the social power theory (French and Raven, 1959). However, interestingly we discovered that information power is not fully possessed by SMLs but very much influenced by SMFs. 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, even at a micro-influencing level they have a large contribution to social media influencing activities and relationships. Referent power in this context tends to shift from being in hands of SMLs to being possessed by SMFs. Importance of the referent power within the SMLs-SMFs relationships and its shift to SMFs' hands is well portrayed by the Brothers Grimm's famous story of 'Snow White' where the evil queen possesses a magic mirror, which she asks every morning to confirm on her being "the fairest" in the world. The mirror always tells the evil queen what she wants to hear confirming her superiority and beauty. Of course there are positive and negative gains for the SMLs having a 'magic mirror'.

To start with positive gains, each interviewed SML made reference 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 abou.t"* [SML1]

However it goes beyond having an interest. Passion and thus enjoyment is suggested to push an individual to participate in a self-defining activity that includes an investment of time and energy. SMLs' investment in the curation of content and SMFs move the SMLs forward to a

point where the activity becomes part of their identity. SML2 states, *"I think starting for yourself 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 positive gain, interviewed SMLs have reported to grow in confidence – this largely motives 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 we can assume social media influencing acts as a self-managed and self-initiated developmental opportunity. In other cases there is a psychological impact on self-confidence that affects SMLs' personality:

> *"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 also found that whilst SMLs are empowered through their increased confidence they are 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 have shown 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. 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, is arguably unique to social media influencing in comparison to traditional leadership-followership scenarios.

Netnographic results

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the main findings of netnographic analysis.

[Insert Table 2]

[Insert Figure 2]

Netnohraphic findings suggest content type posted by SMLs is driven by network behaviour of the SMFs, meaning sentiment of engagement as well as behavioural social media activities (i.e. likes and comments) is guiding social media influencing. This particular finding was verified and confirmed by the interviews with SMLs. SMLs feed in their content and personality with what SMFs want to see.

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), and generated the highest levels of engagement (95.58%). Furthermore, most engagement was found in the form of likes as opposed to 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 a

positive gain discussed by the interviewed SMLs – confidence that SMLs gained if positive sentiment toward social media influencing activities was expressed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our integrated findings show that SMLs are largely influenced by the network behaviour of SMFs, meaning sentiment of engagement as well as behavioural social media activities (i.e. likes and comments) are guiding what content SMLs post and how they brand themselves. This is in line with Crocker and Cronin (2017) who indicate that bureaucratization and routinization of SMLs' content creation leads to the ultimate demise of SMLs' power and fading of charisma and authenticity. We found that all SMLs desire to establish a greater followership. SMFs are almost perceived as SMLs' currency. Consequently, SMLs appear to go through a cognitive thought process of how to curate followership, in line with Grint (2010)'s notion of leaders existing only if they have followers.

Moreover, our integrated results support existing literature (Solis 2016) in suggesting that SMLs are able to establish a sense of intimacy by posting elements of their personal everyday lives. In the traditional leadership context the place for such intimacy is less evident and hence we could argue the constructionist (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) perspective on followership to be less applicable. Our results show that the bond of intimacy between SMLs and SMFs positions the power within the relational continuum where through 'claiming' and 'granting' process the control and influence are fluid and shift from the SMLs to SMFs, and vice-versa.

In line with the constructionist perspective on followership, it is apparent SMFs drive content and has a large contribution to SMLs' activities. This particular finding demonstrates the active role SMFs play within the context of social media – aspect that is largely overlooked by existing research. The SMLs-SMFs relationship can be said to be co-produced and co-constructed (Shamir, 2007), with SMLs interacting with their SMFs to ask for views and recommendations, as well as crucially thanking them and publishing content they ask to be posted.

Interestingly, our study found that there could be a dark side to followership, which can have negative repercussions for SMLs. SMLs are driven by an increased sense of confidence, generated by the number of likes and follows they gain. However, we found that despite being empowered through increased confidence, SMLs suffer from anxiety, social media fear and insecurity. Crocker and Cronin (2017) did elaborate on reverse effect of greater power shift to SMF's hands. However, their conclusions were made based on the analysis of the

SMFs behaviour without capturing true impact of SMF' power on SMLs. Our interviews highlight the manner in which mental health issues can be triggered by SMFs themselves, who play an important role in shaping the direction SMLs take. This in turn can have an impact on how authentic SMLs see themselves as being - which can create internal conflict. Audrezet et al. (2018) found that authenticity within the 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 selfs. However, our findings contrast with Audrezet et al. (2018) in that authenticity can be compromised within SMLs-SMFs relationships. This perhaps leads to a greater tension and moral obligation dilemma leading to inner conflict in SMLs mindset.

To sum up, Gabriel (2011: ,p394) concluded, *"followers may love the leader, craving protection and support but they also resent and envy the leader"*. In SMLs-SMFs context it is not about resistance but about a continuous power shifts within the relationship. Moreover, when power is shifted to SMFs, followership can take both a light (positive) and dark (negative) turn. After completing empirical data analysis we recognise the value of the Leader-Follower Trade (LFT) approach to partially explaining SMLs-SMFs relationships. According to LFT (Malakyan, 2014, p. 11) *"leading–following functions are exchangeable behaviors in human relationships"*. We have not, however, discovered any trading of functions as such amongst SMLs and SMFs. Perhaps this could be further explored in future studies.

The study has several limitations that could be addressed in future research. The netnographic sample could be deemed small and the selection of posts, triggered by convenience of managing data, might not portray the full colours of SMF-SMLs relationships. When interviewing SMLs we focused on micro-influencers who are part of the Bournemouth Bloggers community. Large-scale SMLs and these who do not belong to communities but are very much independent might express different views.

Despite these limitations, our findings are particularly useful in questioning the traditional notions of leader-follower dynamics. Importantly we discovered that SMLs-SMFs relationships are co-produced. The SMLs' perspectives that we explore to compliment the study by Crocker and Cronin (2017) highlights that the SMLs-SMFs relationships reside in duality and the interplay of light and dark. Each side could be explored further and we would

welcome researchers to deepen our understanding of these complimentary and contradictory sides.

REFERENCES

Ashforth BE and Mael F. (1989) Social identity theory and the organization. *Academy of Management Review* 14: 20-39.

Audrezet A, de Kerviler G, and Moulard JG. (2018) Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*: 1-13.

Bastardoz N and Van Vugt M. (2018) The nature of followership: Evolutionary analysis and review. *The Leadership Quarterly*.

Belk RW. (2013) Extended Self in a Digital World. Journal of Consumer Research 40(3): 477–500.

Belk RW. (2015) YouTube on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Challenges in a Digital Age. *Marketing Theory* 15(1): 21–4.

Bennis W. (2008) Introduction In: Riggio RE, Chaleff I and Lipman-Blumen J (eds) *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Creat Great Leaders and Organizations* San Francisco: CA: Jossey-Bass.

Berger PL and Luckmann T. (1966) The social construction ofreality. *New York.*

Bladow LE. (2018) Worth the click: why greater FTC enforcement is needed to curtail deceptive practices in influencer marketing. *William & Mary Law Review* 59 (3): 1123-1164.

Bligh MC. (2011) Followership and follower-centered approaches. *The Sage handbook of leadership*: 425-436.

Bolat E and O'Sullivan H. (2017) Radicalising the marketing of higher education: learning from student-generated social media data. *Journal of marketing Management,* 33: 742-763.

Burt RS. (1999) The social capital of opinion leaders. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 566(1): 37-54.

Carsten MK, Harms P and Uhl-Bien M. (2014) Exploring Historical Perspectives of Followership: The Need for an Expanded View of Followers and the Follower Role. In: Lapierre LM and Carsten MK (eds) *Followership: What is it and why do people follow?* Bingley: Emerald.

Carsten MK, Uhl-Bien M, West BJ, et al. (2010) Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study. *The Leadership Quarterly* 21: 543-562.

Chaleff I. (1995) The Courageous Follower. San Francisco: Ben-ett. Koehler Publishers. Inc.

Cocker HL and Cronin J. (2017) Charismatic authority and the YouTuber: Unpacking the new cults of personality. *Marketing theory 17*(4): 455-472.

Collinson D. (2006) Rethinking followership: A post-structuralist analysis of follower identities. *The Leadership Quarterly* 17: 179-189.

Conger JA. (1990) The dark side of leadership. *Organizational dynamics* 19: 44-55.

Corbin J and Strauss A. (1990) Grounded theory research: procedures, canons and evaluative criteria. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 19 (6): 418-427.

Crossman B and Crossman J. (2011) Conceptualising followership – a review of the literature. *Leadership* 7: 481-497.

Cruickshank A and Collins D. (2015) Illuminating and Applying "The Dark Side": Insights From Elite Team Leaders. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 27: 249-267.

Daniel ES, Crawford JEC and Westerman DK. (2018) The Influence of Social Media Influencers: Understanding Online Vaping Communities and Parasocial Interaction Through the Lens of Taylor's Six-Segment Strategy Wheel. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*: 1-43.

DeRue DS and Ashford SJ. (2010) Who will lead and who will follow? A social process of leadership identity construction in organizations. *Academy of Management Review* 35: 627-647.

Einarsen S, Aasland MS and Skogstad A. (2007) Destructive leadership behaviour: A definition and conceptual model. *The Leadership Quarterly* 18: 207-216.

Ford J and Harding N. (2018) Followers in leadership theory: Fiction, fantasy and illusion. *Leadership* 14: 3-24.

Fraher AL. (2014) A toxic triangle of destructive leadership at Bristol Royal Infirmary: A study of organizational Munchausen syndrome by proxy. *Leadership* 12: 34-52.

Freberg K, Graham K, McGaughey K, and Freberg LA. (2011) Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review 37*(1): 90-92.

French JR, Raven B, and Cartwright D. (1959) The bases of social power. *Classics of organization theory 7*: 311-320.

Gandini A. (2016) Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy. *Marketing theory* 16 (1): 123-141.

Glaser BG and Strauss AL. (2017) *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge: London.

Graen GB and Uhl-Bien M. (1995) Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly* 6: 219-247.

Grint K. (2010) *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gronn P. (2002) Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly* 13: 423-451.

Haynes KT, Hitt MA and Campbell JT. (2015) The dark side of leadership: Towards a mid‑range theory of hubris and greed in entrepreneurial contexts. *Journal of Management Studies* 52: 479-505.

Heinonen K. (2011) Consumer activity in social media: Managerial approaches to consumers' social media behavior. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 10 (6): 356-264.

Hogg MA. (2001) A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and social psychology review* 5: 184-200.

Hogg MA, van Knippenberg D and Rast III DE. (2012) The social identity theory of leadership: Theoretical origins, research findings, and conceptual developments. *European Review of Social Psychology* 23: 258-304.

Hollander EP. (1992) Leadership, followership, self, and others. *The Leadership Quarterly* 3: 43-54.

Howell JP and Mendez MJ. (2008) Three Perspectives on Followership. In: Riggio RE, Chaleff I and Lipman-Blumen J (eds) *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations.* San Francisco: CA: Jossey-Bass.

Huang CC, Lien LC, Chen PA, Tseng TL, and Lin SH. (2017) Identification of Opinion Leaders and Followers in Social Media. In *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Data Science, Technology and Applications (DATA 2017)*: 180-185.

Jackson B and Parry K. (2011) *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership* London SAGE.

Kellerman B. (2004) *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How it Happens, Why it Matters (Leadership for the Common Good),* Boston: MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Kellerman B. (2012) *The End of Leadership* New York: HarperCollins.

Kellerman B. (2013) Leading questions: The end of leadership – redux. *Leadership* 9: 135-139.

Kelley RE. (2008) Rethinking Followership. In: Riggio RE, Chaleff I and Lipman-Blumen J (eds) *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations.* San Francisco: CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kets De Vries M and Balazs K. (2011) The Shadow Side of Leadership In: Bryman A, Collinson D, Grint K, et al. (eds) *The Sage handbook of leadership.* London SAGE.

Khamis S, Ang L and Welling R. (2017) Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8: 191-208.

Kozinets RV. (2015) *Netnography: Redefined.* 2nd Edition. London: Sage publications.

Krasikova DV, Green SG and LeBreton JM. (2013) Destructive leadership: A theoretical review, integration, and future research agenda. *Journal of Management* 39: 1308-1338.

Lim XJ, Cheah JH, and Wong MW. (2017) The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Purchase Intention and the Mediation Effect of Customer Attitude. *Asian Journal of Business Research 7*(2): 19.

Lipman-Blumen J. (2006) *The allure of toxic leaders: Why we follow destructive bosses and corrupt politicians-and how we can survive them*: Oxford University Press, USA.

Lipman Blumen J. (2005) Toxic leadership: When grand illusions masquerade as noble visions. *Leader to Leader* 2005: 29-36.

Malakyan PG. (2014) Followership in leadership studies: A case of leader–follower trade approach. *Journal of Leadership Studies 7*(4): 6-22.

Marwick AE. (2013) *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Mathieu C, Neumann CS, Hare RD, et al. (2014) A dark side of leadership: Corporate psychopathy and its influence on employee well-being and job satisfaction. *Personality & Individual Differences* 59: 83-88.

McAdam M, Crowley C, and Harrison RT. (2018) The Emancipatory Potential of Female Digital Entrepreneurship: Institutional Voids in Saudi Arabia. In *Academy of Management Proceedings* (Vol. 2018, No. 1, p. 10255). Briarcliff Manor, NY 10510: Academy of Management.

McCleskey J. (2013) The dark side of leadership: Measurement, assessment, and intervention. *Business Renaissance Quarterly* 8: 35.

Mehta S and Maheshwari G. (2014) Toxic leadership: tracing the destructive trail. *International Journal of Management* 5: 18-24.

Meindl JR. (1995) The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: A social constructionist approach. *The Leadership Quarterly* 6: 329-341.

Meindl JR, Ehrlich SB and Dukerich JM. (1985) The romance of leadership. *Administrative science quarterly*: 78-102.

Nair HS, Manchanda P and Bhatia T. (2010) Asymmetric social interactions in physician prescription behavior: The role of opinion leaders. *Journal of Marketing Research* 47: 883-895.

Offerman LR. (2004) When followers become toxic. *Harvard Business Review* 82: 54-60, 113.

Padilla A, Hogan R and Kaiser RB. (2007) The toxic triangle: Destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments. *Leadership Quarterly* 18: 176-194.

Pearce CL and Conger JA. (2002) *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership*: Sage.

Pelletier KL. (2010) Leader toxicity: An empirical investigation of toxic behavior and rhetoric. *Leadership* 6: 373-389.

Rush MC, Thomas JC and Lord RG. (1977) Implicit leadership theory: A potential threat to the internal validity of leader behavior questionnaires. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 20: 93-110.

Schyns B and Schilling J. (2013) How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly* 24: 138-158.

Shamir B. (2007) Introduction: From passive recipients to active co-producers: Followers' roles in the leadership process. In: Shamir B, Pillai R, Bligh MC, et al. (eds) *Follower-centred Perspectives on Leadership: A Tribute to the Memory of James R. Meindl.* Charlotte: NC: Information Age Publishing.

Shamir B, Pillai R, Bligh MC, et al. (2007) *Follower-centered perspectives on leadership: A tribute to the memory of James R. Meindl*: World Scientific.

Sharma R, Vandana A and Shirin A. (2018) The future scope of netnography and social network analysis in the field of marketing. *Journal of internet commerce* 17 (1): 26-45.

Shaw JB, Erickson A and Harvey M. (2011) A method for measuring destructive leadership and identifying types of destructive leaders in organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly* 22: 575-590.

Sihi D. and Lawson K. (2018) Marketing leaders and social media: blending personal and professional identities. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice 26*(1-2): 38-54.

Smith BG, Kendall MC, and Knighton D. (2018) Rise of the Brand Ambassador: Social Stake, Corporate Social Responsibility and Influence among the Social Media Influencers. *Communication Management Review 3*(01): 6-29.

Spillane JP. (2012) *Distributed leadership*: John Wiley & Sons.

Statista (2018) Instagram influencer market size 2017-2019. Available from: https://www.statista.com/statistics/748630/global-instagram-influencer-market-value/

Takala T. (2010) Dark leadership, charisma and trust. *Psychology* 1: 59-63.

Tavanti M. (2011) Managing toxic leaders: Dysfunctional patterns in organizational leadership and how to deal with them. *Human Resource Management* 2011: 127-136.

Thoroughgood C, Padilla A, Hunter S, et al. (2012a) *The susceptible circle: A taxonomy of followers associated with destructive leadership*.

Thoroughgood CN, Padilla A, Hunter ST, et al. (2012b) The susceptible circle: A taxonomy of followers associated with destructive leadership. *Leadership Quarterly* 23: 897-917.

Tierney P and Tepper BJ. (2007) Introduction to The Leadership Quarterly special issue: Destructive leadership.

Tourish D. (2013) *The dark side of transformational leadership: A critical perspective*: Routledge.

Uhl-Bien M and Pillai R. (2007) The Romance of Leadership and the Social Construction of Followership In: Shamir B, Pillai R, Bligh MC, et al. (eds) *Follower Centered Perspectives on Leadership: A Tribute to the Memory of James R. Meindl.* Greenwich: CT: Information Age Publishing

Uhl-Bien M, Riggio RE, Lowe KB. and Carsten ML. (2014) Followership theory: A review and research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly* 25: 83-104.

Uzunoğlu E and Misci Kip S. (2014) Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement. *International Journal of Information Management* 34 (5): 592-602.

Zwingmann I, Wolf S and Richter P. (2016) Every light has its shadow: a longitudinal study of transformational leadership and leaders' emotional exhaustion. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 46: 19-33.

Table 1. 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

Figure 1. Profile of netnography SMLs
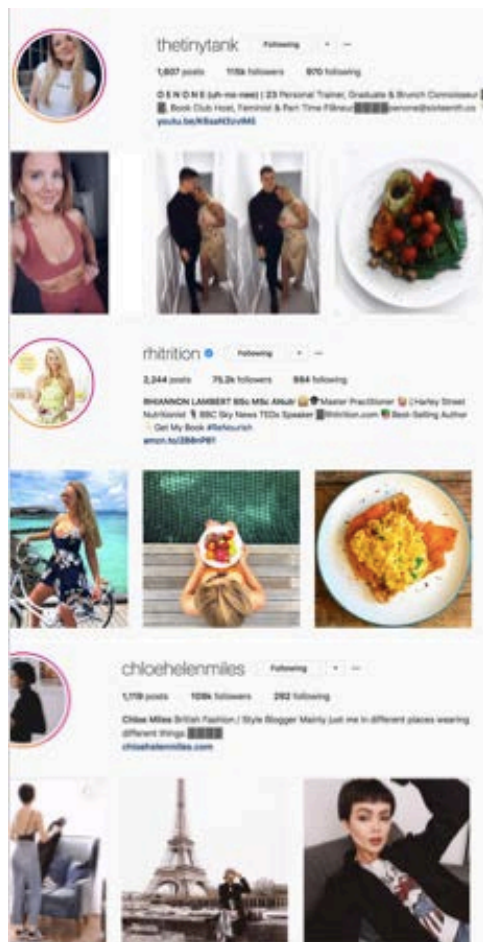
The Tiny Tank – Personal Trainer
- 115k followers
- 1607 posts
- Fitness

Rhitrition – Nutritionist
- 75.2k followers
- 2244 posts
- Nutrition

Chloe Helen Miles – Style blogger
- 109k followers
- 1119 posts
- Fashion

Sources: Images represent front cover pages of Instagram publicly available photos on 16th February 2018

Table 2. 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	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.

	positive reaction.	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 – 4.12%. Most SMFs engaged with SMLs' posts via likes, 97.9% of total engagement arise in the form of likes with comments only contributing 2.1% of engagement.	Social media content should be appealing to encourage engagement through likes and comments, which will drive eWOM and entice more SMFs for an SML.

Figure 2. Netnographic research: word cloud analysis