



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Aesthetics of Food: the Role of Visual Framing Strategies For Influence Building on Instagram**

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Driven by attention economy, images posted on Instagram encourage capital-seeking behavior of influencers, which in turn may bring them financial and social success. We introduce a framework that explains the effectiveness of visual framing strategies. We also provide a perspective on aesthetics of food to historically contextualize contemporary food imagery.

### **[to cite]:**

Shuhan Yang, Jonathan Schroeder, and Duygu Akdevelioglu (2020) ,"Aesthetics of Food: the Role of Visual Framing Strategies For Influence Building on Instagram", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 48, eds. Jennifer Argo, Tina M. Lowrey, and Hope Jensen Schau, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 874-879.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2659789/volumes/v48/NA-48>

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# Monetizing the Megaphone: How Consumers and Firms Use Platforms to Conquer the Attention Economy

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## **Paper #1: Problematizing the Megaphone: The Very Difficult Journey to Becoming an Influencer**

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## **Paper #2: Aesthetics of Food: The Role of Visual Framing Strategies for Influence Building on Instagram**

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## **Paper #3: Orchestrating Pet Influencers: Rhetorical and Visual Strategies in Creating Mediated Platform Content**

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## **Paper #4: Marketing Memeification on TikTok: Initiating and Leveraging Consumer Creativity for Commercial Means**

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### **SESSION OVERVIEW**

Platforms have allowed ordinary consumers to monetize their creative and expressive pursuits. This session brings together four papers that inquire about the tricky, increasingly complex, and multi-actor world of influencer business and provide conceptual and empirical contributions to understand social media consumption.

Monetization of influence provides fruitful areas of inquiry for researchers. Among these, we uncover 1) entrepreneurial pursuits of ordinary consumers to become influencers, 2) the dialectical tensions between promotion and expression in online content, 3) interactions and relations between the audience, influencers, and firms, 4) codification and framing of content to meet audience and firm expectations. Collectively, the papers in this session provide distinctive insights into these issues.

The first paper revisits the megaphone effect and provides a revision to the theory by demonstrating the struggles of ordinary consumers in their quest for becoming influencers. By acknowledging their struggles, this paper provides a needed corrective to the myth of meritocratic and serendipitous journey of becoming and being an influencer. Findings are expanded to explain why consumers leave fields more generally.

The second paper provides a mixed method analysis of food images on Instagram and explores how different visual framing strategies contribute to the engagement strategies of top-ten food influencers. Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, the authors show distinct patterns of representation of food using strategic composition and visual framing. These patterns also reflect long-standing distinctions between the raw and the cooked.

The third paper investigates the phenomenon of pet influencers. Through studying account managers who generate platform content around the performances of their pets, the authors uncover visual and rhetorical strategies of their engagement. The participants implement anthropomorphism through intertextual manipulation of the visual and textual content and orchestration of realistic or fantasy performances.

The final paper explores how platform content is shaped by memes that are also controlled and seeded by firms. The authors show how memes are actively initiated, surveilled, and leveraged by firms. They show how companies use sponsored hashtags to entice consumers to engage with brand content through three types of call to action, where paid influencers take the lead, followed by everyday (unpaid) consumers amplifying the message.

Together, the papers in this session tackle the following questions:

1. How do consumers position themselves as influencers in the attention economy?
2. How do consumers invest in and deploy resources to strengthen their positioning?
3. How do consumers use platforms' expressive capacities to create engagement?
4. How do consumers interact with firms to convert attention to value and revenues?

The session provides a meeting point for scholars using different methods (quantitative and qualitative) and complementary perspectives to understand social media. It investigates the role of different actors that participate in the influencer business: pets, firms, and consumers—as both creators and audiences. All papers are in advanced stages with empirical work completed. Papers also use mixed methods which will attract broader attention. Due to the significance and relevance of the substantive context, we expect a range of ACR members to show interest in the session.

## **Problematizing the Megaphone: The Very Difficult Journey to Becoming an Influencer**

### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

If we were to listen to the depiction of influencers in the mainstream press and some academic articles, we might conclude that persistent efforts from meritocratic consumers will lead to them becoming influencers. Duffy and Wissinger (2017) refer to this mythologized portrait of the path to become an influencer as 'glamorized.' In reality, becoming an influencer is a difficult project that is unlikely to yield results (Duffy 2016). Despite this acknowledgment of the struggles inherent to becoming and being an influencer, we know surprisingly little of what exactly these struggles are and how they affect ordinary consumers' quest for influence. These are the two research questions we answer in this project.

These research questions are important for many reasons. Centrally, there were more than 3.7 million ads by influencers on Instagram in 2018, and 90% of Instagram campaigns in 2018 used micro-influencers— influencers that have somewhere between 1000 and 100 000 followers (HubSpot, July 15th, 2019; Wired, Apr 22nd, 2019). Micro-influencers represent about 25% of the Instagram user base, or about 250 million people (Mention.com 2018). These developments are giving ordinary consumers—consumers who do not possess a privileged position in social fields (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013)—increasing opportunities to capitalize on their (micro) influence. This has translated into an increasing number of ordinary consumers wanting to become influencers: More than 75% of people aged between 5 and 38 state wanting to become one

(DailyMail, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017; People, Nov 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019). The glamorized picture of influencers is thus problematic, as it represents a highly biased understanding of this role and the path to become an influencer. Theoretically, this is a glaring omission in a rapidly rising and important role of the digital economy. Practically, this mythologized understanding of what is required to become an influencer can lead consumers to pursue an identity project that is bound to fail.

We answer our research questions by analyzing repeat interviews with 23 micro-influencers with different followings: (1) less than 10k followers, (2) between 10k and 50k followers, and (3) between 50k and 100k followers. We complement these interviews with all Instagram posts and a month of Instagram Stories from our participants, as well as archival data in the form of articles for and on influencers (166 pages).

We leverage McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) work and concentrate on three main stages that explains the movement of an ordinary consumer to online influencer: acquiring an audience, maintaining and expanding an audience, and deriving benefits from an audience.

When entering the field and starting to acquire an audience, ordinary consumers face struggles associated with the breadth of expertise required to perform their role and the work demanded to better their expertise to do so. For example, consumers realize that, in addition to being proficient in successfully making risky taste displays (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), they also need to know how to use the Instagram algorithm to their advantage, create thematically related images (vs. only one risky display of taste), and do proper make-up and poses.

When maintaining and expanding their audience, consumers need to address changes in their audience expectations, which now demand continuous content creation. We show how consumers take two strategies to address this: they broaden their expertise to multiple fields (e.g., from fashion to food, travel, and design), or deepen their expertise in their focal field of interest (e.g., from fashion stylist to critic, historian, and tailor). This increases demands in terms of consumer expertise, which exponentially heightens the involvement required to continue pursuing their quest for influence. We also find that consumers become objectified by their audience, which brings its own set of struggles associated with addressing negative and unwanted comments and requests.

Lastly, when converting their audience into benefits, consumers need to understand how to position themselves effectively in the market for influencers (i.e., have an effective positioning from the perspective of brands who might hire them), how to develop their unique brand, and how to deal with commercial clients. Here again, we find that consumers are often ill-equipped to address the scope of tasks asked from them, which have become increasingly removed from what led them to start wanting to be an influencer in the first place.

Each of these stages come with its own set of difficulties, which leads influencers to abandon their project. At least in our sample, these difficulties led to more than half our participants (13 out of 23) to discontinue their influencer activities. And the number of followers did not play a role in convincing influencers to continue their quest: We have many instances of Instagram influencers with more than 50 000 followers who abandoned their quest, for example, because converting their audience was deemed too difficult.

Our work contributes to the literature on influencers and consumer involvement in a consumption field. First, the struggles we identify lead us to provide an important revision as to how ordinary consumers become influencers (cf. Erz and Christensen 2018; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). Second, we use this revised jour-

ney to propose an alternative to the dominant theorization of how consumers become influencers. Instead of consumers taking risks when sharing their passion in a consumption, and how they accumulate followers by doing so (see Erz and Christensen 2018; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), we suggest conceptualizing at least a segment of influencers as digital entrepreneurs whose journey to become influencers is active and intentional; For example, they readily create a brand from the get-go, strategically think about their market positioning, and use numerous market resources (e.g., buying followers) to achieve their objective. Lastly, we generalize the struggles we identify to any consumer highly involved in some consumption activity (e.g., see Stebbins 1982 on serious leisure) to provide three main reasons why they leave consumption fields.

## Aesthetics of Food: The Role of Visual Framing Strategies for Influence Building on Instagram

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social media produces a megaphone effect that offers a mass audience to ordinary consumers (McQuarrie and Phillips 2013). Images of food dominate social media, which has revolutionized the world of gastronomy and food (Allué 2013). Food is a central part of defining identity, as well as shaping collective, cultural identities (Lupton 1996). The transformative, aesthetic aspects of food often reflect social status and prestige. Food and eating, beyond survival and sustenance, can be understood as an aestheticized expression of identity, status, and taste. Such taste expressions can be regarded as a taste regime that helps to explain how individuals gain cultural capital in the marketplace – often via social media (Arsel and Bean 2013). By posting food images and seeking feedback from followers through the “likes”, the influencers provide repeated stimuli to control followers’ behavior. Owing to the value creation effect, influencers are becoming a taste maker, and building an informal social norm (Hackman 1992) which will influence how followers perceive food.

Food serves as a powerful system of communication. Food and eating connect consumers to their biological and cultural heritage (Allen 2012). Food is the basis of many consumer habits and rituals (Marshall 2005). The aesthetics of food consumption can be traced back to Epicureanism, an individualistic and communal philosophy that emphasizes the central role of pleasure, laying the foundation for aesthetic appreciation, including appreciation of food and taste. French writer Brillat-Savarin introduced the idea of you are what you eat, and articulated a philosophical approach to cooking (Brillat-Savarin 2009). During the twentieth century, food marketing has shifted from nutrition appeals to more hedonic taste appeals. Intrinsic motivation such as seeking leisure becomes the main purpose of participating in online interaction. Perceived enjoyment derived from the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and the technology acceptance model (TAM) significantly influence online community’s loyalty (Hsu and Lu 2007), this study, was inspired by these theories to explain how influencers apply visual framing strategies as intrinsic motivation on technology use. To better understand influence marketing in the context of how technology interacts with gastronomy, it is essential to analyze online images that connect taste consumption with visual consumption (Schroeder 2002).

Among different social media platforms, Instagram specializes in efficiently distributing visual rhetoric on a personal or global scale to its over 500 million daily active users (Statista 2018). Food influencers create an informal social norm via the repeat use of a circle loop starting from food preparation decision to feedback collection and post recreation. This value creation process prompts the influencer to become a taste maker considering the preferences of

“visual consumers”. In the historical view, this online food images sharing is different from classical business model using their unique virtual “words”. It is a complex practice that has relational, social, and cultural significance. However, the visual aspect of these practices, especially as it related to influencer marketing often remains understudied. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify framing strategies that influence consumer engagement on social media. The behavior of highlighting certain facets and concealing others is a central tenet of framing theory (Entman 1993). Framing affects how audiences interpret and react to scenarios, images, and text. By taking advantages of various rhetoric tools like symbols, metaphors, and depictions, visual imagery operates as a framing device (Rodriguez and Dimitrova 2011).

The research questions this paper aims to answer are:

- RQ1: What do the top ten most-followed food channel Instagram influencers post on their accounts?
- RQ2: What framing strategies do the top ten most-followed food channel Instagram influencers use to visually represent food posts to facilitate consumer engagement?

The Instagram accounts for this study were selected based on a formal ranking by Statista, which is an online statistic, market research, and business intelligence portal that provides access to data from market and opinion research institutions. Statista presented the most-followed food influencers on Instagram in the United States as of January 2018 (Statista 2018). Based on the reliable external assessment data, this study used content analysis to investigate how different categories of visual framing mutually or independently contribute to the popularity of these top ten food influencers.

Using the food-related images posted by these food influencers from January 1 to December 31, 2017, and selected images that received more than 10,000 “likes” on the influencer’s account. The ten influencers included two men and eight women; one of the accounts did not indicate gender. Images were randomly selected in each influencers’ Instagram, one image per month, obtaining a total of  $N = 120$  posts.

Content analysis views data such as images, text, and expressions to be seen and interpreted for their meanings (Krippendorff 2012). We also combined qualitative content analysis with frequency and Chi Square-tests. We developed a codebook of attributes after observing most of the images and divided them into two parts: influencers and food. The coding categories are partially based on the Duncan (1990) study, which offers a visual analysis using contextual readings of visual photographic imagery. Images were analyzed in 13 nominal categories. Acceptable levels of inter-coder reliability via Krippendorff’s alpha were achieved and ranged from 0.86 to 1.0 for each variable tested.

The findings show distinct patterns in how food is represented in Instagram posts. Food influencers prefer to post images about cooked food, without little decoration, using high contrast colors and close-up shots. Most posts do not include “background” elements such as clothing, facial expression, or proximity to influencers. Random placement and casual layout are more of a reflection of the influencer’s own leisure lifestyle; strategies also reflect influencers’ social network identity construction. Raw food images were found to be associated with cluttered composition and far away shoots, whereas cooked food images were associated with high contrast and close-up, especially the top-down camera angle. Cooked food images serve as a justification agent for consumers, “thereby reducing the conflict associated with the subsequent indulgent consumption experience and increasing taste perceptions” (Poor, Duhachek, and Krishnan 2013, 124).

Our analytical categories of raw and cooked food draw inspiration from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s influential work on the raw and the cooked as basic categories for understanding human culture (1983). Perhaps inadvertently, it appears that influencers’ social media posts reflect fundamental, long-standing distinctions of the raw and the cooked. Of course, raw food, when appearing on Instagram, is generally highly aestheticized. However, we find this distinction meaningful, and useful for understanding some basic elements of food posting. Moreover, these factors including social norm, perceived enjoyment, and cultural intermediaries have a significant effect shaping followers’ behavior via the value creation process. Our framework emphasizes the importance of how food can be accommodated within the framework of a meal, and how taste could be used as an approach to describe aesthetic norms. The interaction between real-life meal gatherings and social media creates a combined type of “commensal” experience, one that fosters a sense of community, despite occurring online (Bouvier 2018). Food represents an ideal way to achieve such a sense. This study represents a step toward a more cogent understanding of food influencers on Instagram, informed by historical discussion of aesthetics and taste. In addition to implications such as the visual framing effects of advertising for influencer marketing, future studies may investigate and the role of food influencers as ‘cultural intermediaries’ as described Bourdieu (1984) to help us explain the set of activities and professions in the creation of markets and consumption economies like how music bloggers mediate and orient consumer taste (Arriagada and Cruz 2014).

### **Orchestrating Pet Influencers: Rhetorical and Visual Strategies in Creating Mediated Platform Content**

#### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

As we are writing this, one of the most popular influencers in the world is not a person but a cat with 4.3 million followers on Instagram. Nala is an 8-year-old cat who became Instagram famous after her human companion created the account to share images with her family who resides overseas. Nala’s audience has expanded to other platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, where she has 2.6M followers, 27K subscribers, and 24.9K followers, respectively, creating a multi-platform megaphone.

Despite the prevalence of pet influencers, there is a paucity of studies on the subject matter. While influencers or microcelebrities who manage their own accounts have been explored by scholars (Abidin, 2015, 2016, 2018; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2013, 2015; McQuarrie et al., 2012; Senft, 2008, 2013)—also see papers in this session—, the mediated nature of pet influencers, particularly the ways humans orchestrate their animal companions performatively, manage their online presence, and capitalize on the attention for their pets require further attention. This is important because what sets apart the phenomenon from others is its two boundary conditions: 1) The duality and mutuality of presence of human account managers alongside their pets in social media performances, and 2) The second-degree performance and sociality that is mediated through the pets and with other pet companions. These boundary conditions allow contextualizing a new theorization of the triadic and mediated relationship between humans, their animal companions, and their audience in platforms.

Our method is a combination of interviews and Netnographic observations. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 pet account managers with at least 500 followers. We also analyzed the content of pet influencer posts for visual and textual content. Lastly, through a public pet account, we participated in introspective en-



agement with the practice. We performed iterative and inductive analytical procedures in analyzing our data.

Our findings first demonstrate that Instagram is home to a loosely networked bundle of micro-communities of cat accounts, centered around feline appreciation and fandom. These connected micro-communities are built around hashtags singling out breeds, colors, and micro-interests with frequent overlaps and blurring of community boundaries. Through a shared language (now coined as Meowlogisms by Podhovník, 2018), collective celebration of milestones, and collective action to support each other such as fundraising, pet account managers (PAMs) exemplify the three tenets of community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001): consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility.

Second, we show that within this nexus of micro-communities, PAMs are motivated to create and maintain engagement for two primary reasons: connections or fame. These findings mirror and revise existing typologies on social media communities (Kozinets 1999; Martineau and Arsel 2017).

Third, we show that regardless of their goals, PAMs create anthropomorphic performances for their pets through intertextual storytelling, switching back and forth between engaging with the pets through proxy conversations and engaging with their human companions more directly.

Our data shows that storytelling can be either realistic (staying within the boundaries of the sociomaterial capacities of animals), or fantastical (expressing imaginary or impossible situations). When choosing to make posts on their accounts, PAMs can simply display the raw images they capture by camera, such as their cat sitting on a couch, or they can decide to superimpose the original image onto another one which showcases different settings or characters, such as their cat playing golf. Additionally, the same can occur for the textual content: it could simply reflect the literal or figurative content of the actual image, such as: "my cat sits on the counter," or integrate intertextual narratives which may expand the literal object: "my cat slayed the dragons and conquered the seven kingdoms." These storytelling techniques frame their pet as not only having human emotionality and physicality but also allows the PAMs leverage on shared tropes and narratives such as the case of Game of Thrones to boost engagement and familiarity. Textual cues are frequently supported by visual manipulation, such as editing images to make the cat look like a knight. Lastly, PAMs deliberately choose the account's voice (human versus cat) to supplement this storytelling. Building on the patterning of these strategies, we develop a typology of PAM account management styles.

Our work aims to contribute to a growing body of literature on performances in social media (Abidin, 2017; boyd, 2011; Burgess and Green, 2008; García-Rapp, 2017; Marwick, 2013; Strangelove, 2010; Senft, 2013). We show how social media enables performative mediated interactions and mediated connections between humans through their pet companions, how animals are orchestrated for attention economy, and how this shifts humans' connections with their pets and other humans. Furthermore, we develop a typology of performative orchestration of Instagram pets. Our typology also provides firms tools for identifying and recruiting the most appropriate influencer based on their performance style.

### **Marketing Memeification on TikTok: Initiating and Leveraging Consumer Creativity for Commercial Means**

#### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

In a saturated digital advertising space, brands increasingly desire 'viral' content (Berger and Milkman, 2012). One form of viral

content are internet memes—defined as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/ or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). Internet memes are a form of cultural rhetoric (Grundlingh, 2018; Milner, 2013) and are unique given "the speed of their transmission and the fidelity of their form" (Davidson, 2012, p. 122). Internet memes can build rapport with online consumers and foster consumer engagement (Gelb, 1997). Previous research highlights the convivial nature of internet memes, which act as a type of digital leisure shared by internet insiders (Bauckhage, 2011). However, this form of leisure can also represent a lucrative opportunity for influencers and brands alike through monetizing the attention economy (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler, 2020; Soha and McDowell, 2016). Most research to date explores how consumers create memes, separate from marketing intervention. In contrast, our study explores brand-generated internet memes. We ask, how do brands create and capitalize upon internet memes for commercial means?

To explore our research question, we turn to the context of TikTok, a social media platform (formerly Musical.ly) which allows users to create and share short-form videos, using a library of "sounds" (e.g., music, user-generated sounds, television/movie clips). With over 1.5 billion app downloads and nearly 105 million in January 2020 alone, TikTok is rapidly growing (Sensor Tower, 2019; 2020). For this study, we specifically focus on sponsored hashtags, a paid advertising placement option in which brands pay for custom sponsored hashtags to drive engagement in marketing campaigns. Sponsored hashtags are placed on the app's discovery-oriented 'for you page' to engage consumers immediately upon opening the TikTok app. Data collection began in April 2019 and was conducted by a cross-cultural research team. The researchers identified sponsored hashtags via daily monitoring of the 'for you page' on TikTok and created a database of sponsored hashtags and accompanying visual- and text-based content. Data collection resulted in a sample of 102 sponsored hashtags from 87 companies, such as Nike, Chipotle, Burberry, and other multinational brands. Data were managed and analyzed through qualitative social media methods (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017), using both Nvivo 12 Plus software and manual coding.

Preliminary findings offer a framework of marketing memeification wherein brands initiate the reproduction of content through three types of calls to action: impersonation, transformation, and self-expression. Marketing memeification unfolds on a continuum of individual creativity in which consumers are increasingly encouraged to insert their own creative ideas when developing content in conjunction with a sponsored hashtag. In each case, paid influencers set the exemplary creative standard, while everyday consumers engage with marketing memeification as a form of unpaid consumer leisure. Our study suggests TikTok is unique in using sounds, or sonic anchors, to drive the marketing memeification process.

First, brands initiate marketing memeification through impersonation-based calls to action, which require little to no individual creativity. Impersonation involves movement-oriented actions (e.g., dance, lip-sync) with specific guidelines for the performance. For example, to advertise Season 3 of Netflix's Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, the media company created the #StraightToHell hashtag accompanying a short, easy to replicate dance with the song "Straight to Hell" by Sabrina Spellman as the sonic anchor. Through impersonation, consumers are mobilized to recreate content, exemplified by influencers, directly as it is shown. While some users may perform the dance moves differently, due to ability and style, the brand-related hashtag does not directly invoke creativity.

Second, through transformation-based calls to action, which give more narrative and creative leeway to consumers. Transformation involves transition-oriented stories, wherein consumers are asked to show a change or evolution. For example, in promoting the re-release of Wendy's 'spicy chicken nuggets', the brand encouraged consumers to demonstrate transformational stories using the #SpicySnap hashtag challenge and the song "Snap Yo Fingers" by Lil Jon as the sonic anchor. Through transformation, consumers are mobilized to interpret the brand's call to action and tell their own creative stories loosely related to the branded product. For this challenge, influencers prominently feature Wendy's food products in their content; however, everyday consumers use the suggested sound and hashtag to show their own creative transformations.

Third, through self-expression-based calls to action, which inspire consumers to reflect their personal points of view. Self-expression involves identity-oriented displays of uniqueness in which consumers are asked to interpret the hashtag, with open-ended parameters. For example, beauty retailer Ulta Beauty created the #BeautyIs hashtag campaign, with the song "Here I Am" by Fleur East as the sonic anchor, inviting consumers to broadly define beauty in their own terms. Through self-expression, influencers and everyday consumers promote their own unique viewpoints and perspectives, using the brand as a launching point. User videos range in diversity in messaging, format, and content creators themselves (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age). Thus, on the marketing memeification continuum of creativity, branded hashtags and accompanying sounds increasingly become a pathway for consumers to share their own authentic self-expression, while indirectly promoting the brand itself.

While previous work focuses on the organic evolution of memes as user-generated content (Bigley and Leonhardt, 2017), our findings extend existing research to better understand how marketing intervention spurs memeification for commercial means and to demonstrate how brands leverage the status and visibility of social media influencers to set creative standards. Partitioning devices including sonic anchors and branded hashtags are initiated by the brand; however, marketing memeification decentralizes control of the brand in the process. In line with the theoretical perspective of memes (Shifman, 2014), our study suggests meaning is created on TikTok during the transmission of cultural content. At a meso-level, this transmission process is propelled by sonic anchors (e.g., songs) which work to coalesce consumption communities, reflecting the importance of sounds as objects in consumption research (Patterson and Larsen, 2019). This study represents a first step in understanding how brands operate on TikTok, wherein consumers' creative performances are actively initiated, surveilled, and leveraged for commercial means.

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