

## **1. TUTORIAL INFORMATION**

LBST 391 with Brian Ganter - English Department

## **2. PROPOSED TOPIC OF INVESTIGATION**

The topic of investigation for this tutorial will be the content generated by social media influencers (individuals involved in online marketing who have significant influence or authority over the behaviour and attitudes of others giving them the power to orient the choices of others). This expansive topic will be examined through the unique and overlapping lenses of sociology, economics, political studies, anthropology, and psychology and these disciplines will all shape a series of interview of questions related to the topic of investigation to be used in the production of a series of brief podcasts. Because the tutorial will involve the production of a series of three short podcasts, podcasts as a genre and their basic structure and qualities will also be a sub-topic of investigation.

## **3. RESOURCES AND METHODOLOGY**

*Materials needed :*

Microphone (for interview recordings), audio editing software, interview subjects (minimum of 3 and maximum of 9), sources and articles related to social impacts of content created by social media influencers and the development of podcasts (a minimum of six articles will be required reading chosen by the supervising instructor and the rest will be both chosen by the instructor and gathered independently by the student)

*Methods :*

This tutorial will involve the execution of a series of three small scale, self-directed interdisciplinary research projects which will culminate in the preparation of three sets of interview questions pertaining to three different issues of interest related to the primary topic of investigation. The three themes to be explored will be decided upon between the student and supervising instructor prior to the beginning of this tutorial. The student and instructor will discuss the student's preliminary research findings and refine the interview questions collaboratively during the bi-weekly one on one tutorial meetings and formal assessment by the supervising instructor will be on a combination of the student's preparation for and participation in the tutorial meetings and on the podcasts as final products.

*Examples of potential themes include : effects of social media influencer content on social attitudes towards global tourism, gender and sexuality, privacy, surveillance, and policy, or journalism; the effects of social media influencer content on beauty ideals and body image, mental health, and relationships; or the effects of social media influencer content on positive social change (for example: anti-oppressive cross-cultural solidarity, education and prevention campaigns, large scale social networking, etc.).*

The recorded interviews (which will necessarily represent diverse and marginalized or underrepresented perspectives and be conducted by the student) will be analyzed, compared, and interpreted by the student with the guidance of the tutorial supervisor and then organized to create 3 original, relevant, and thought-provoking podcasts which, in combination, will synthesize concepts, principles, and theories gathered by the student during the preliminary research process, interview process, and podcast production process. The three short, original, and meaningful works will demonstrate the student's deepened knowledge of the topic of investigation and will allow the student to communicate their provisional conclusions and personal insights related to this topic in a way which is empowering for the student and relevant and informative to listeners.

#### **4. PROPOSED LEARNING OUTCOMES :**

##### **PLO 1 – Self-directed learning**

The student will conduct three small scale, self-directed interdisciplinary research projects exploring three unique themes related to social media influencers, the existence of this occupation, and the social impacts of the content they produce and share.

##### **PLO 2 – Knowledge**

The student will employ knowledge from multiple disciplines to generate meaningful discussion and debate related to the topic of investigation. The student will be very careful to be aware of and to highlight the limits of disciplinary knowledge.

##### **PLO 4 – Synthesis**

With the guidance of the supervising instructor, the student will synthesize academic theories and principles to create podcasts that are critical and interdisciplinary in their nature.

##### **PLO 5 – Research methods**

The student will apply qualitative research methods to conducting interviews. The student will be required to apply ethical reasoning to the development of interview questions and to work appropriately with human subjects during the interview process.

##### **PLO 6 – Communication**

Produce well-organized and coherent university-level materials, individually or in a group, which meet stated objectives and audience needs in written, oral, digital and/or visual forms.

The student will be individually responsible for producing original, meaningful, and coherent university-level audio materials (podcasts) which will be informative for audiences and will give the student numerous skills in the process of creating the audio materials.

#### **5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The focus of the following brief literature review is on the role of 'Social Media Influencers' (SMIs) in society and the multifarious potential influences upon and impacts of the content they produce and distribute. This broad topic of investigation is ideal in the context of the liberal studies degree program because it is a subject which can be examined from the perspective of various disciplines including, but not limited to; sociology, political studies, economics, anthropology, and psychology, and can serve as a challenging and useful site of connection for these diverse perspectives. It is also a highly relevant topic as digital technologies continue to rapidly develop and shift the conditions of human social life and social media platforms, in particular, become increasingly influential sites of social and economic exchanges. The articles presented in this literature review were selected to give an introduction to current scholarship on this subject and to provide direction and tools for the design of a tutorial dealing directly with this topic of investigation.

*Who are social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality* (2011) conducted by Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg investigated audience perceptions of SMIs in an attempt to identify core perceived attributes of sample SMIs using the California Q-sort technique. This research was intended to provide public relations recommendations to organizations seeking to increase their social capital (a form of capital defined by the strength of the organization's social media presence) by revealing personality traits associated with effective SMIs. The California Q-sort technique has been previously used in public relations research to evaluate core perceived attributes of organizational spokespeople and it was applied in this study to SMIs. Past research on this topic has focussed on understanding SMI efficacy and appeal based on quantitative measures (examples include: number of likes and shares on a post, number of followers on

social media platforms, etc.), but this study took an innovative approach by employing qualitative measures to better understand what makes an effective SMI. Results indicated that “SMIs take pleasure in offering advice” (Freburg et. al 3) and that giving advice and being turned to for advice were both “quite characteristic and salient for SMIs” (Freburg et. al 3). This contrasted with CEO scores indicating a potentially significant and unique aspect of this role. Unfortunately, this research “cannot be considered fully representative of the public at large” (Freburg et. al 3) due to its “arbitrary choice of SMIs” (Freburg et. al 3) and use of convenience sampling.

The personalities of SMIs are essentially curated online identities established through posted participatory content. Khamis, Ang and Welling discuss the concept of self-branding as it pertains to SMIs in their article *Self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the rise of Social Media Influencers* (2016). The article introduces self-branding as a concept, outlines the concept’s brief history, highlights some of the criticisms and endorsements of it, and considers the reasons for its recent surge in prevalence. The researchers argue that the rise of digital technologies and social media, in particular, have paralleled the increased prevalence of self-branding and that despite “inherent tensions and problematic ironies [embedded in the concept], self- branding persists through the rise of Social Media Influencers” (Khamis et. al 1) . This article explores three examples of SMIs “whose fame and following was achieved via the practices and phenomena under consideration” (Khamis et. al 1) and how their perceived reliability and trustworthiness was established through radically different processes than traditional forms of authority are and have been. This study also highlights the “near-total extension of marketing logic and language into more areas of contemporary social life” (Khamis et. al 15), the “dismantling of what were once

‘knowledge monopolies’” (Khamis et. al 15) by replacing trained specialists with quasi-experts, and the profundity of the transformations prompted by “social, interactive and conversational media in the Information Age” (Khamis et. al 15).

Strubel, Petrie, and Pookulangara respond to the emergence of social media sites as “important socialization outlets” (329) in their psychological study entitled *“Like” Me: Shopping, Self-Display, Body Image, and Social Networking Sites* (2018). This research studied “women’s internalization of appearance ideals, psychological well-being, and their intentions to make online purchases” (Strubel et. al 328) in relation to their involvement with Facebook. Participants in this study were all female undergraduate or graduate students who completed online surveys measuring “internalization, sources of beauty information, social comparisons, body satisfaction, self-esteem, purchase referrals, and purchase intentions” (Strubel et. al 328). The researchers employed the objectification theory framework to this study and used structural equation modelling to find relationships between the variables being analyzed. The most relevant finding to the topic of investigation of this literature review was that passive use of social media was more highly correlated with “internalization of societal beauty ideals” (Strubel et. al 328) which was found to have inverse effects on the women’s body satisfaction and self-esteem. This article suggests that passive consumers of SMI produced content could be more susceptible to internalizing beauty ideals (which could also increase their likelihood of having lower self-esteem) and that SMIs (who could be considered active users of social media platforms) are individuals who may benefit more from the psychosocial comparative elements of social media. The research also confirms the strength of social media to influence women’s self-perception and their purchasing intentions and decisions. The article acknowledges that the “processes

predate and are not exclusive to social media” (Strubel et. al 15), but contends that social media has been a facilitator for participation in and practices related to self-branding, thus intensifying key observed trends.

Abidin adds to the academic discourse surrounding gendered self-display and self-branding with an article focussed specifically on selfie-production by SMIs entitled “*Aren’t These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?*” : *Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity* (2016). In this article, Abidin explores influencers’ use of and engagement with selfies through extensive ethnographic fieldwork, digital participant observation, archival research, and web archaeology and a grounded theory analysis approach was used to thematically code content. The subjects of the research were 190 Singaporean SMIs and other individuals related to SMIs’ social media content production. In this article, Abidin argues that selfies have become powerful commercial and subversive tools through their being under-estimated and discursively framed as frivolous and inconsequential. According to Abidin, this under-estimation has led to a surge in the generative power of selfies for SMIs. One of the questions this article raises is whether SMIs (who are predominantly female) are actually being empowered to distribute their own original, subversive content and to self-define, as this article suggests, or whether SMIs are being exploited and having their content appropriated and dictated by retailers, marketing firms, social media platforms administrators, consumers or other involved parties.

This brief review of the literature related to the topic of SMIs in society explored various elements related to the production and consumption of the online content they produce and revealed that there has been extensive research done for the last two decades on social media content, but as the birth of the occupation of SMI and its proliferation

occurred quite recently there is relatively little known about these individuals, their practices, and the implications of this occupation and the content they produce on society. The research gathered for this literature review suggested that global policy makers could gain insight from further research into this topic as a lack of current capacity to keep up with rapid shifts in digital technology and culture was lamented in more than one study. Some compelling themes emerged from this literature review and numerous topics to further explore were considered. Building a tutorial based around interviews on topics related to this subject could prove very informative and the following are possible topics, drawn from articles in this literature reviews, to further explore in a potential future tutorial : the notion of self-branding and its relationship to authenticity, the implications of famous quasi-expert SMIs on public health, people's relationship to self-display online (how people view their own self-displays and others displaying themselves), peer-comparison and self-esteem online, public perceptions of social media influencers versus reality, and the how the perception of SMI content as authentic and trustworthy is established and maintained in spite of the widespread and growing public acknowledgement that SMI personalities are contrived and manufactured like other traditional forms of advertising. Any future tutorial would also benefit from another more comprehensive and systematic review of the literature related to this topic.

## 6. NEXT STEPS

LBST 392 - Graham Cook (Sociology)

I have taken two upper level sociology courses with Graham Cook and received positive feedback from him on my work and in-class contributions. When I approached him to do a tutorial at his earliest convenience, he agreed to do so either over the summer semester or in the fall of 2019. The reason I think Graham Cook would be a good faculty member to work with is that the discussions I've participated in during his classes surrounding issues related to the human dimensions of social media and the socioeconomic impacts of there

being an occupation like an “influencer” and the mass-distribution of the types of content they tend to predominantly produce have been robust and thought-provoking. I would appreciate his guidance because I think he would bring a strong critical lens to my investigation of this topic. After taking a course with a focus on social inequality with Graham, which discussed the role of violence against women (in a Canadian context) as a driver of social inequality, I would also be interested to further explore that alternative topic if we decide to redirect our focus.

LBST 490 - Cheryl Schreader (Geography)

I’ve had Cheryl Schreader as an instructor twice. The first time she taught me alongside Brook Houglum in Liberal Studies 100 and the second time I took an upper level Geography course with her which focussed on global climate change. There are three major reasons why I would like to work with Cheryl on my graduation project; the first is that she is female. The second is that Cheryl has demonstrated a deep respect and interest in Pacific Northwest First Nations’ and global Indigenous people’s traditional ways of knowing and that is something I appreciate about her and think she could impart knowledge to me about. She has recommended and lent me books relating to decolonization and education in the past which reflects her generous character and dedication to sharing knowledge. The third reason is that she is a geographer. I have little knowledge of geography as discipline, but taking her course on climate change opened my mind to the breadth of this discipline. I would like to learn more about the scientific underpinnings of climate change and increase my ability to understand, describe, and evaluate mitigation strategies. I think her expertise on this topic and our positive relationship will lend themselves well to a successful graduation project. I have not approached Cheryl about working on my graduation project yet.



## 7. WORKS CITED

- Abidin, Crystal. "Aren't These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?" : Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-17.
- Freberg, Karen, et al. "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality." *Public Relations Review* 37.1 (2011): 90-92.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers." *Celebrity Studies*, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>. Accessed 07 Dec 2018.
- Strubel, Jessica. "'Like' me : Shopping, self-display, body image, and social networking sites." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2018, pp. 328-344.