



## SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THE ONLINE IDENTITY OF EGYPTIAN YOUTH

Hanan Ezzat Moussa

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# Social media influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth

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Hanan Ezzat



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Social media influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth

Doctoral Thesis

Supervised by Dr. Iolanda Tortajada

Department of Communication Studies



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I STATE that the present study, entitled “Social media influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth”, presented by Hanan Ezzat for the award of the degree of Doctor, has been carried out under my supervision at the Department of Communication Studies of this university.

Tarragona, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020

Doctoral Thesis Supervisor

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Iolanda Tortajada', written in a cursive style.

Iolanda Tortajada

I dedicate this thesis to my late mother,  
Dr. Ehsan AboulEIFetouh (1942-2010), who always  
encouraged me to be the best I can be.  
She watched over me with great care till  
the day she died, and I am sure she is continuing  
to watch over me now

*Cover photograph taken by Hanan Ezzat and edited by Asser Hazem.*

## **Abstract**

This thesis seeks to investigate the relationship between social media influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth. The context of this study is Egypt, a country of traditional, patriarchal and keenly religious nature. Its youth, while being viewed as promising with all eyes set on them to bring about change in the society, face many challenges on a day-to-day level. They struggle with their identity just like other youth around the world. This study is critical to understand the role of social media influencers given that youth spend a great deal of time following them and consuming their content.

My original contribution to knowledge is exploring the way in which social media influencers' and their fans' processes of identity construction are connected through their online performances and interactions in a non-Western developing culture. My study also provides a look into the societal role of social media in Egypt, moving away from the mobilization role that has dominated social media studies about Egypt. The study delves into how social media influencers and their fans from youth present themselves online and construct their identity. It looks into what constitutes a social media influencer and a fan and their relationship. Special focus is on how fans appropriate the content presented by social media influencers and how becoming a fan plays out in their online identity.

The relationship between social media influencers and the online identity of youth is explored through the framework of reception



studies and its central notion of appropriation. The literature which this study draws upon includes studies about identity in the digital age, identity development, online identity construction and self-presentation and relevant studies. Particular attention is paid to Goffman's dramaturgical approach and Leary's self-presentational tactics. Additional important relevant theoretical concepts are included to help explain the relationship between social media influencers and the online identity of youth, namely: displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships. The study employs a qualitative methodology through in-depth interviews with nine influencers and eighteen of their fans. The interviews generate a wealth of information, insights and perspectives from both parties.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that social media influencers reached out to their audiences, with an aim to build a large fan base. To achieve that objective it was essential for them to create a distinct persona. A persona which was authentic, approachable and intimate with their fans. In that they performed to their fans and aimed deliberately to create a specific impression. They had to balance their performance with displaying authenticity, which was a characteristic they knew was key for their fans. They employed a number of practices to perform authentically such as developing original content and their conscious choice of topics while observing Egyptian traditions and societal boundaries, posting selfies, going live regularly and maintaining a distance between themselves and their fans to create an aura of mystique around themselves.

Social media influencers valued their fans greatly and that was evident in that they knew a great deal about them especially their socio-demographic make up. In many cases they were told by their fans that they were role models for them. Social media influencers saw themselves fundamentally as content creators or YouTubers, then came the afterthought of being an influencer. For them this word meant the ability to bring about positive change that could transform the daily lives of individuals. In that they capitalised on the nature of the Egyptian society, which for a long time was governed by strong traditional structures, and now has started to depend on other structures such as social media to act as a reference for the society.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that fans, on the other hand, actively sought to be present online as a way to announce their existence. They also sought to create an impression on others and to achieve that they performed for others. They safeguarded this existence very much and that was reflected in the huge weight they gave to others who may see them or interact with them online. Their list of others was quite large and was constituted primarily of parents, family and friends as well as future and potential employers. Influencers were notably missing from the list of others. Fans selection and use of photographs was key to their online identity and self-presentation and it was influenced heavily by the nature of the Egyptian society. While males used their photographs to represent themselves on their profile, some females opted for more abstract photographs of objects, books, animals, events or they did not use a photograph at all. Those females stated safety concerns, societal

constraints and religious reasons for their choices of their profile photograph. In addition, some females made use of privacy settings to limit who could access their information. Fans did not entertain the use of the social media influencers' photograph regardless of how much they liked the influencer. Social media influencers raised an unexpected observation that females mask their identities behind males; they act as females but under the male name of a husband/fiancé/father or brother. This is a reflection of the conservative nature of the Egyptian society and could be a sign of experimentation with online identity. Some fans highlighted a disconnect between them and their parents with respect to what they do online.

Fans took in content from social media influencers but on their own terms, appropriating and repurposing it. For fans to allow social media influencers to play a role in their lives, they needed to identify with them first. They needed to feel that they were similar to them to start to pay attention to what they say. Consequently, when that happened many fans created imaginary relationships with social media influencers and considered them credible sources of information. Fans interacted with social media influencers in many ways both online and offline. Some fans shared the influencers content on their page, creating a social association with them.

The analysis revealed that social media influencers and their fans' processes of identity construction are connected through their online performances and interactions. Social media influencers play an

indirect role in the online identity of their youth fans. They inspire their fans to change their attitudes and behaviours. These changes in attitudes and behaviours are reflected in the fans' online identity through the ideas they propagate, what they post and link to and what they share. Social media influencers can be considered as catalysts that bring about change in their youth fans.

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*In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful*

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## **Introduction**

This thesis examines the relationship between social media influencers (hereafter influencers) and the online identity of Egyptian youth. This study is conducted in Egypt, a developing country and part of the Arab world (also known as the Middle East and North Africa region), where numbers of social media users continue to grow rapidly every day with the largest group of users being youth (Salem, 2017). My original contribution to knowledge is exploring the way in which influencers' and their fans' processes of identity construction are connected through their online performances and interactions in a non-Western culture.

Youth are characterized by being at a stage where their identity is developing, and they are typically grappling with it, similar to youth around the world (Erikson, 1968). This struggle is transferred to their online presence, where they get a chance to experiment with their identity and present themselves to others. They aim to bring about a certain impression on others. Being online presents an opportunity to consciously reflect on their identity and continue to develop it. Within their online presence they are exposed to a myriad of content and personalities such as celebrities and influencers. Overtime they become fans of these personalities, which begs the question in the case of this study: What is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth?

I have used qualitative methods to better assess the influencers' (and their fans') experiences in order for me to know how influencers

present their online identity while having their fans in mind and what kind of identifications are present in the way fans construct and present their online identity. This study is relevant to salient topics in communications and cultural research today such as influencers and online identity of youth. It represents particular importance in Egypt and the Arab world where there has been a strong focus on social media as a tool for mobilization (Attia et al., 2011; Herrera, 2012; Khamis et al., 2012; Morozov, 2011; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013), brushing aside the other societal roles social media can play. It is also important because the Egyptian society boasts a large youth cohort. Focusing on youth means focusing on an important part of society and often youth in societies are looked upon as catalysts of change on many societal fronts. The study fits in with literature about influencers and their audiences. This study will exclude the following: traditional/mass media; children, adults, senior and elderly individuals in the society; and, other forms of identity such as social and cultural identities.

On a personal note, I have a vested interest in this topic, which stems from my interest in youth and their role in society. I chose it as an extension of my master's degree topic which was titled: *The effect of American soap operas on the perception of social relationships by Egyptian high school students*. This was back in the days before social media started in Egypt. I linked a popular media genre to youth. The study showed that indeed soap operas can and do play a role with youth's perception of social relationships. Therefore, now with social media I am interested to find out if and how becoming a fan of an

influencer plays a role in the online identity of youth fans. Lastly, as a mother of three, I can see how social media have become an integral part of their lives given the time they spend on it. I also see other youth within my circles and how they interact with social media. All these reasons have motivated me to study influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth.

This thesis has seven chapters. The chapters build on each other to some extent, so they should preferably be read in their order. The introductory Chapter 1 sets the scene for the study by providing an overview of the context of the study, putting both influencers and youth into perspective. I start by focusing on the elements that can help the reader understand better Egyptian youth. Through these elements the reader will also get a better understanding of the Egyptian society, the backdrop of this study. I follow this by examining social media and influencers. I share relevant definitions of social media and I highlight its participatory culture. I give particular attention to the platforms influencers use to disseminate their content and propagate their messages; these are the same platforms ranked as the highest used by youth. I conclude the Chapter with an overview of definitions of influencers and the different perspectives and patterns in their studies.

Chapter 2 on the theoretical framework and literature review outlines the framework of reception studies, which this study comes under and reviews the relevant literature. I focus on building a narrative that highlights the suitability of the framework for the study through introducing reception studies, their origins and their link to social

media. I then look at appropriation as a central notion within reception. The literature review covers the key concepts pertaining to the study such as identity, online identity construction and self-presentation, the processes to construct it and the role of others in its co-construction. I present the most relevant studies to each concept. I build connections with several concepts that can be used to provide explanations for the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth namely displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships. I conclude the Chapter with the research question and its sub questions.

Chapter 3 on methodology outlines the study design. The study employs a qualitative approach depending on interviews to collect data, insights, and the perspectives of influencers and their fans. I highlight my role as a researcher and the ethical considerations for the study. I dedicate a number of sections to the study phases in detail: planning, developing the research tools, data generation and approaches to data analysis. I explain the rationale for each and every choice. Within that I look at the challenges I faced. I conclude the chapter with the validity and reliability of the study.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I contrast the voices of influencers and their youth fans in a number of themes, which emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The themes are online identity construction and self-presentation, perceptions and fandom experience.



Chapter 4 is the first Chapter to contrast the voices of influencers against their youth fans about the theme of online identity and self-presentation. I start off by sharing the main themes which emerged from the analysis of the influencer and fan interviews. After that I focus on influencers and how they appropriate social media. I move onto fans appropriation of social media and map this—where data is available—against the West (Europe and the United States) and the Arab world. In the latter part of the Chapter, I look at how influencers present themselves. Within that I look at their displays of authenticity. I explore the practices they employ to achieve their objective of cultivating their audiences and building their fan base. I follow this by fans views about their processes for online identity and self-presentation and how they go about it.

Chapter 5 is the second Chapter to contrast the voices of influencers against their youth fans about the second theme of perceptions. I alternate their views about what it means to be an influencer and what it means to be a fan. Each party reflects on what it is like to be themselves and what they think about the other party.

Chapter 6 is the third and last Chapter to contrast the voices of influencers against their youth fans about the third theme fandom experience. It looks at two main behaviours: participation and appropriation. Participation is a reflection of the participatory culture of social media, while appropriation shows how becoming a fan reflects on the fans' online identity and self-presentation and its manifestations.

Chapter 7 is the last and concluding Chapter in the thesis. I bring together the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth and describe the results of the analysis. I answer the research questions. I clarify my contribution to the literature and its practical implications. I examine the relationship between this study and previous research. I highlight the limitations of the study and my recommendations for future studies. The annexes of the thesis cover the interview guides and protocols for influencers and fans as well as details about the influencers and fans interviewed.

## **CHAPTER 1: Contextualizing influencers and their fans in Egypt**

Meaning is context bound but context is boundless.

~Jonathan Culler

## **Introduction**

This Chapter sets the scene for the study by looking at influencers and their fans from youth through an Egyptian lens. The Chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on understanding Egyptian youth and the second section looks at social media and influencers. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the context of the study.

In the first section, I focus on youth who are at the centre of this study. Through the various sub sections, I pull out the characteristics and aspects that are relevant to the study and have a bearing on it such as: the youth bulge, outlook of today's youth, socio-economic challenges they face, the culture they live in daily and their social values and lastly, their use of technology. Through this section the reader will understand more about the context of the study: the Egyptian society, culture and its intricacies. Where feasible I compare Egypt to the West

(Europe and the United States) to help readers who are unfamiliar with this part of the world to become more acquainted with it.

In the second section, I look at social media and influencers. I start by the relevant definitions of social media and their participatory culture. I present a brief overview of social media in Egypt in light of its existence side by side next to traditional media. I then give an overview of the highest used platforms by youth in Egypt, which include Facebook, YouTube and to a lesser extent Instagram (Alexa, n.d.). At the same time, these are the platforms which influencers use to disseminate their content mainly in the form of videos. I follow this with the different definitions of influencers and then I look at the relevant literature perspectives and patterns in their studies. I end the Chapter with my concluding thoughts about the contextualization of influencers and their fans from Egyptian youth.

## **1 Understanding Egyptian youth**

I will start by defining youth in general, then move onto looking closer at Egyptian youth. Youth is a stage of transition between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood (Kehily, 2007; Roche et al., 2004). The definition of youth I adopt for this study is the United Nations' definition of youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNESCO, 2020). The word 'adolescence' is often used interchangeably with 'youth', although it refers to a lower age bracket. An alternative description of 'youth' is 'emerging adults'. In

this study the age bracket will be 15-24 years of age for Egyptian youth.

Individuals undergo significant physical and psychological developments during adolescence and youth, all of which impact on identity. On the physical side, the body starts to develop into its adult form. On the psychological side, the changes in the body create different feelings for individuals and many expectations from the people around them who start to treat them differently. These expectations according to Arnett (2007) include: being more adult like in their behaviour, taking ownership of their decisions and building new independent relationships. Youth represents a period where adult tasks become imminent, such as getting a job, starting a family and becoming a citizen. This also involves changing individuals' outlook and worldview, in a sense they need to project themselves into the future and this is achieved through their career path (Kroger & Marcia, 2011).

### **1.1. The youth bulge**

Egypt's demographic profile shows a pronounced youth bulge<sup>1</sup> (State Information Service, 2018; UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020). In a panel survey of young people in Egypt in 2009 about "62% of the Egyptian population was below the age of 29 at the time of data collection and almost 40% were between the ages of 10 and 29"

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<sup>1</sup> Youth bulge is described: "As the relative number of children decreases, populations experience a growth in youth as a share of the total population, resulting in what is known as a youth bulge" (United Nations, 2018, p. 14).

(Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015, p. 6). These numbers stand very close to the numbers today: overall, youth in Egypt constitute about 60% of the population (UNFPA Egypt, 2020). Youth aged 10–24 make up almost one-third of Egypt’s population of 97 million people (UNFPA Egypt, 2020). Youth aged 18 to 29 are estimated at 20.2 million, representing 21% of the country’s population according to Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) 2018 figures (CAPMAS, n.d.). This is very much unlike Western societies in which youth make up a small percentage of the society, and societies are characterised by being aging societies. For example, in Europe youth make up 17.4% of societies (European Union, 2015).

Youth typically can be viewed as an asset to any society but at the same time they represent a challenge to governments. They need to create jobs and a labour market which can take in the large numbers of youth (United Nations, 2018). This is very true for Egypt; Egyptian youth can be seen as agents of change. The *Arab Human Development report 2016* shows at a great level of detail that events in the region since 2011—especially the Egyptian revolution which was a defining moment—have demonstrated that youth are agents of change and that the society has high expectations of them (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). At the same time youth are viewed by the United Nations as architects of the 2030 agenda; they are central to achieving sustainable development (United Nations, 2018).

In a broad sense, Egyptian youth are distinctly Arab in that they reflect the traditions and challenges of the region. According to Ayish (2018)

research has demonstrated that Arab youth draw on both local and global values to develop their identity. This identity which takes on a hybrid form attempts to celebrate global values such as diversity, innovation, tolerance, women-empowerment and freedom. It also celebrates national pride which is something all Arabs are incredibly proud of. Egyptian youth struggle with their identity and in that are in no way different to youth around the world. They undergo a ‘crisis’, as typically described by Erikson (1968) in which they address key questions about their values and ideals, their future occupation or career, and their sexual identity.

## **1.2. Outlook of today’s youth**

Egyptian youth today are quite different than their parents. For example, they prefer urban cities, while most of their parents would have been from rural roots (Cole, 2014). These cities offer modern facilities and services to enable youth to fulfil their needs. The urban population make up 43.3% of the total population (*The World Factbook, Africa, Egypt*, n.d.). Egypt is divided into 27 Governorates (provinces). The four urban Governorates (Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Suez) have no rural populations, while the remaining 23 Governorates are subdivided into urban and rural areas. This urbanism has resulted in youth becoming more cosmopolitan (Cole, 2014). The traditional Arabic values that youth carry are being complemented with a shift towards individualism and an affinity towards global values (Ayish, 2018).



Linked to urbanism and becoming more cosmopolitan is youth's increasing lack of respect for—the official language—Arabic (Amin, 2000). This lack of respect manifests itself in two ways: the first way is using a new type of lingo and the second is deliberately mixing Arabic with English language. The new lingo is called 'Franco Arabic' or 'Latinized Arabic'; it is a hybrid of Arabic written in Latin letters and numbers, each one representing a letter in the Arabic alphabet. Franco Arabic has become extremely popular amongst youth in their online communication and is considered acceptable in informal communications (Al-Fawaz, 2015). The second manifestation is combining Arabic with English language. This is a common trend in Egypt by youth who consider this a sign of being cosmopolitan. Zizek comments: "If you consider the English language as the world language of the west, adolescents seem to associate the expression of a modern, cosmopolitan attitude through the integration of English terms" (2017, p. 210). Indeed, youth want to come across as more modern and more cosmopolitan, so they mix deliberately Arabic and English.

Another development which has fuelled Franco Arabic, has been the launch of Microsoft Word Maren in 2009. This is the Windows extension that automatically converts Romanized Arabic (Franco Arabic) to Arabic script (Arab Crunch, 2009). Franco Arabic is unique to Egypt and to this part of the world; Europe and the West use Germanic languages solely.

### **1.3. Socio-economic challenges facing Egyptian youth**

Youth are dealing with unassailable socio-economic challenges. On the top of these challenges are limited access to quality education opportunities (El Baradei & El Baradei, 2004). This is coupled with poverty, high rates of unemployment reaching 11.9% for youth in 2017 (State Information Service, 2017) and aspirations to emigrate from Egypt (Amin, 2000). These challenges have resulted in a rise in the age of marriage for both sexes especially those living in urban places (Dhillion & Yousef, 2009; Rashad et al., 2005). They have limited resources and the costs of marriage are rising (Amin, 2000, 2013). Non-married partners are frowned upon in the society and have to exercise their relationship in the dark. In contrast, in the West partners can live together in consensual union without marriage (European Union, 2015).

I would like to single out two specific challenges of particular significance to identity development and realization: the rise in the age of marriage and unemployment. Mulderig (2013) positions this predicament as follows: marriage is considered the end of one being an adolescent, therefore, when there is a delay in marriage there is a delay in transitioning to become an adult. Consequently, many Egyptian youth experience the notion of “waithood”, where they are waiting to transition into adulthood. The flip side to this is that parents are considered as a safety net which protects them. Parents continue to carry the responsibility of their children who are 18 or above. So instead of youth being independent individuals, they are totally

dependent on their parents and continue to live with them (Institute of National Planning, 2010). Accordingly, identity development in that case will extend beyond adolescence well into emerging adulthood. To compare this with the case of the West, youth as they turn 18 are expected to move out of their parents house and become independent. Moreover, marriage in the West is usually delayed in favour of pursuing an education or building a career and not because of financial barriers (Davis & Weinstein, 2017).

The second important challenge which has a bearing on identity development and realization is unemployment and this is especially critical for Egyptian youth. Willis argues: “Unemployment, or the prospect of it, produces oppression by excluding young people from forms of identity-making and satisfaction provided by these new leisure and consumption fields” (2003, p. 406). This means that unemployment may result in a delay in identity development and extend its development into emerging adulthood beyond the adolescence years.

Combined with these challenges, is the prolonged time which youth spend on social media which reaches an average of 22 hours weekly (Press room, 2015). In a study on the use and impact of online social networks in Egypt, it was found that university students spend an average of 2 to 5 hours daily, while 11% spend a time range of 5 to 8 hours, and 16% spend more than 8 hours per day on social media (El-Khouly, 2015). To compare this with the West, in the United States, teenagers (13- to 18-years) spend an average of 9 hours on media

daily, excluding time spent at school or for homework (Rideout, 2015). Consequently, a large number of Egyptian youth have discovered contentment in social media. They see social media as an enabler for them to act as a constructive force in socio-economic development in their communities (Ayish, 2018).

#### **1.4. Culture and social values**

There are both changes and challenges in the culture youth live in and the social values prevalent in the society (Amin, 2000, 2013). Egypt, is a civilization more than 3000 years old. It is an “old patriarchy vigorously alive under new conditions” (Therborn, 2004, p. 113). Typically, men held the power in the society, but this is changing slowly with movements and calls for more women empowerment, which culminated in the establishment of the National Women Council in the year 2000.

Egypt is a religiously keen culture; in “a region long dominated by rigid, oral, and tradition-based formats” (Ayish & Alnajjar, 2019, p. 38). According to *Understanding the Arab Digital Generation Report*, in the past, youth drew on traditional structures such as family and societal norms for guidance. This is now shifting with the advent of social media as alternative sources of information now exist (Sabbagh et al., 2012). Connected to this is the absence of young role models which youth can relate and look up to (Jung et al., 2014). Traditional authority figures such as religious and state figures are much senior than youth and their speech is rhetorical and, in many cases, irrelevant

to them. For example, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, the highest Islamic figure in Egypt is 74 years old, whilst Pope Tawadros, the highest Christian figure in Egypt is 67 years old. This makes it challenging for youth to relate to them. It is even much more difficult to relate to other younger figures such as celebrities and sports figures due to their fame and fortune; their success is based on talent or achieving out of the normal parameters. Even Mo Salah who is a role model for many youth has built his fame through playing football in a club outside of Egypt.

The last aspect, which I will look at in terms of culture and social values is gender equality. In the Egyptian society although males account for 50.5% of the population, and females account for 49.5% (Ahramonline, 2019), attitudes towards gender roles and gender equality are conservative (Gadallah et al., 2017; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). There are segregated gender roles for men and women (Mensch et al., 2003). These attitudes impact on female labour force participation, the household division of labour, age at marriage, and gender-based violence (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Moreover, there is a rise in sexual harassment not only on streets but also in work places and places of gatherings such as malls and cinemas (Amin, 2013). In the West, gender equality and women-empowerment is much more developed and socially accepted (European Union, 2015).

In conclusion, Egyptian youth live in a traditional, patriarchal, conservative and religiously keen society, where gender equality is at an early stage (Ayish & Alnajjar, 2019; Gadallah et al., 2017; Mensch

et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015; Sabbagh et al., 2012; Therborn, 2004).

## **1.5. Youth and technology**

Today's youth were born into the world of the internet. They don't know what the world looked like without it. As Palfrey and Gasser state: "They all have access to networked digital technologies. And they all have the skills to use those technologies" (2008, p. 1). A number of words have been used to describe today's youth that fit well with Egyptian youth: the iGeneration (Rosen, 2010), the Net Generation (Tapscott, 2009), and the E-Generation (Underwood & Farrington-Flint, 2015). Tapscott (2009) offers eight norms to describe the Net Generation, these norms are distinctive attitudinal and behavioural characteristics that differentiate them from other generations. The norms include freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed and innovation. These norms fit well with Egyptian youth who in the aspect of technology have a more global than local outlook.

The Egyptian government has been behind the technological advancement and developments which youth enjoy today. Egypt was one of the very first countries in the Arab world where the internet was introduced in 1993. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology was established in 1999 and the Internet was introduced commercially in 2000 (Kamel & Hussien, 2001). Internet user penetration reached 48% with an estimated number of 45 million

users; mobile subscribers reached 110.6 million in September 2017; in addition, 26.3 million Egyptians are using smartphones (O’Dea, 2020). The launch of Fourth generation (4G) broadband cellular network technology in 2017 and the spread of use of mobile devices especially smartphones and tablets has enabled youth to access technology (Kamel, 2014). According to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), more than 73% of the internet users are tertiary students, which include university students and post graduate students (MCIT, 2015).

## **2 Social media and influencers**

### **2.1. Definitions**

Being online is an integral part of the daily life of millions around the globe. The estimated data created on the internet in one minute in 2019 was: 1 million logged onto Facebook, 4.5 million videos were watched, 46,200 new posts on Instagram and 3.8 million requests on Google (Lewis & Officially Chad, 2019). This data count demonstrates how social media have gained an important place in societies.

Many definitions of social media—also known as Social Networking Sites (SNS)—exist which support this study. I will share in the following the most relevant definitions. Social media are a group of internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 and facilitate user generated content that can be shared (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media are inherently designed to allow individuals to construct

a member profile to present themselves, generate a list of affiliated users, customize their privacy and facilitate connections with others both known and potential (Boyd, 2011; Carr & Hayes, 2015; Friedrichsen & Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013; Papacharissi, 2011; Sanderson, 2010).

I adopt in this study, Boyd and Ellison's, definition of social networking sites (SNS) as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (2007, p. 211).

Boyd outlines four properties and three dynamics of SNS, which make them a mediated environment for self-presentation and various social interactions. The properties are persistency, searchability, replicability and scalability. The three dynamics include: invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private (Boyd, 2008). These properties mean that content can be stored for a long time (forever), searched at any time, copied in an unlimited manner, which also means potential visibility is quite high and content can be disseminated widely. In terms of the dynamics, audience is not necessarily co-present but ambiguous and there is a lack of immediate feedback for self-presentation and a lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries which makes it difficult to maintain distinct social



contexts. Individuals disseminate their content such as status updates and posts to a large audience which comes from all walks of life if their settings are public (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). In addition, nothing is totally private on SNS (Boyd, 2008).

Overall, social media create spaces for people to engage, collaborate, interact, participate and communicate. This is appealing to all especially youth (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Boyd, 2008; Bruns, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Young people adopt social media because they are comfortable using technology and can access it conveniently (Vorderer et al., 2016).

## **2.2. The participatory culture of social media**

One of the most relevant notions of social media to this study is the participation it brings about, the sense of togetherness. Henry Jenkins (2016) describes this as “the participatory culture”. According to Delwiche and Henderson (2012) our media landscape has undergone a seismic shift, giving a rise to the participatory culture. In this culture knowledge is being created, distributed and dealt with in entirely new ways. This culture brings together diversity and democracy and enables individuals to express themselves through many forms and practices (Jenkins, 2016).

There are five distinct characteristics of participatory culture: relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing one’s projects; informal mentorship; a belief

that contributions matter; and, a sense of social connection (Chau, 2010). Social media indeed create and achieve these characteristics. To join social media there are low barriers, mainly an email is needed to create an account on Facebook and Instagram. YouTube does not require an account to use its service and view videos. Therefore, youth can easily experiment with their identity as they use social media and join its various networks. They can express themselves artistically and in many ways. The participatory culture of social media enables users to create and share content easily. Youth can take a photograph or record a video on their mobile phones and upload it immediately to be viewed by others. The 'live' features of social media enable creation of content which can be shared in real-time through stories. Informal mentorship can be achieved easily within this culture as users provide content that can benefit others and people can exchange experiences.

The participatory culture of social media fosters the belief that contributions matter. Contributions can include developing and posting content, viewing, liking, tagging others, linking to content, sharing and commenting. Each of these contributions gets accounted for on social media and contributes to the count of views, likes, shares and other forms of participation (Chau, 2010). Moreover, there is a sense of social connection, people tend to connect with people they may know and in many cases people they may not know and through social media the relationship starts to develop and grow. Sanderson explains: "Social media are inherently designed to facilitate human connections" (2010, p. 494), so social media are built on humans communicating

and connecting. There is a centrality of social connections in this culture (Ellcessor, 2012).

Resonating with this are the notable changes brought about by social media in the conditions of production, distribution and consumption of culture as noted by Bruns (2015). He argues that social media have converted private interactions to be available more publicly, so others can join in as well. This participatory culture has transformed the frequency and manner of our communication with one another as well as the way reality is co-constructed.

In fact, in many circumstances today, social media obligates us to participate. Through this participation, we become co-constructors of the content and are likely to develop a sense of ownership that may be accompanied by a sense of belonging and obligation (Kessler, 2013, p. 307).

In their book *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, Editors Jenkins, Ito and Boyd (2016) argue that participatory culture as a concept points to both descriptive and aspirational dimensions. The descriptive dimension pertains to how participatory practices and forms of cultural production are carried out. While the aspirational dimension pertains to how such participatory practices can inspire empowerment among different groups. Therefore, I see that the concept of participatory culture is interlinked closely to this study as fans are part of a fandom which is a form of 'participatory culture' and they may be empowered by influencers. Fan studies provide great input into identity studies. Booth (2009), argues that fandom can be an individual or collective experience within a community. Accordingly,

in this study I will be examining fans as an individual experience and not within a community.

### **2.3. Social media in Egypt**

In Egypt, social media exist alongside traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Egypt has a long-standing traditional media scene with newspapers issued since 1828. Radio was introduced in 1934 and television followed in 1960. Today, Egypt has 20 newspapers, 59 radio channels and 98 television channels (Allam, n.d.; BBC, 2018). Television remains an important source of entertainment in Egypt but is losing ground to the internet.

Historically, for quite a long time, Egypt enjoyed a leading position amongst Arab countries in terms of films and media content, it was even named “Hollywood of the Middle East”. The works of authors and singers from Egypt were read and heard across the Arab world. Recently, this has weakened mainly due to the rise of other Arab countries trying to claim their spot and has resulted in the decline of the popularity of the Egyptian Arabic dialect. This has also been influenced by the proliferation of Franco Arabic.

Booz & Company (now Strategy&) in collaboration with Google, surveyed 3,000 youth in the Arab world and concluded that the internet has clearly overtaken television as the must-have technology for youth. When given a choice between living without television or without the internet, “nearly 80% said they would give up television” (Sabbagh et

al., 2012, p.16), this demonstrates the decrease in television usage by youth.

The January 2011 revolution reintroduced social media to Egyptians and fuelled the soaring numbers of users as people used it for mobilization (Attia et al., 2011; Herrera, 2012; Khamis et al., 2012). Social media and the internet have redefined the Egyptian society, and placed individuals at the centres of their own narratives (Elsewi, 2011). Enthusiasm for using social media in Egypt continued after the revolution. This was demonstrated in a regional online survey administered in eight countries in the Arab world—one of which was Egypt—where participants felt that through the use of social media they were empowered to influence changes in their societies (Salem & Mourtada, 2012). This gives social media a more societal role and shifts its role away from mobilization.

Egypt is quite open to social media, all of which are Western, with no specific Egyptian developed social media. Supporting Arabic interface has helped immensely the proliferation of these media into the society as there is no language barrier to use them. The utilization patterns of Egyptian youth for social media are very much in line with global, regional and Western patterns of usage as I will demonstrate in the sections below. The following platforms: Facebook, YouTube and Instagram will be examined respectively as the highest used platforms by youth in Egypt (Alexa, n.d.). They are also the platforms used by influencers to disseminate their content. For each SNS I will cover its start, mission, its popularity, success factors and use in Egypt.

### **2.3.1. Facebook**

Facebook was launched in 2004, by Mark Zuckerberg and his colleagues, it went public in 2006. Facebook is the world's leading SNS. Facebook's mission is to: "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Facebook, 2019).

Facebook's popularity is due to many of its features and what it enables its users to do such as networking, keeping in touch with friends and family and selling and buying. Facebook users can post pictures, videos, links as well as text. They are able to react to posts via pressing on certain icons and they can share content.

As a result of its popularity Facebook became more than merely a medium of communication; it achieved a level of recognition and influence as a new sort of social institution for sharing information and for finding and connecting with others" (Jordán-Conde et al., 2014, p. 356).

In the case of influencers in this study they can be considered part of this social institution.

Facebook enables the creation of a profile grounded in individuals' offline connections (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). Accordingly, research on Facebook suggests that connecting with close friends who are known to the individual in real life is more common than using the site to meet new people. Also, users use the site to find out more information about people they have met casually (Ellison et al., 2011). Amongst many factors, the success of Facebook can be attributed to its

integration with other websites and applications, amounting to seven million in 2012 (Wilson et al., 2012). Facebook allows other sites to use its like and share buttons, which results in populating its content widely across the internet (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Facebook is at the heart of the participatory culture as its users collaborate, share and contribute content together through its many features. Contributions can be counted easily through the count of followers, likes, comments and shares.

In Egypt, Facebook is one of the heaviest used social media, it is referred to locally as 'El-Face' instead of the full word Facebook. Facebook ranks at the 5<sup>th</sup> position in terms of the most visited sites in Egypt (Alexa, n.d.). Egypt remains the biggest national market for Facebook in the region with 39 million Facebook users as of 2018 (ASDA 'A BCW, 2019). Around 23% of all Arab Facebook users are in Egypt alone, with more than 65.8% between 15-29 years of age and 65.8% males (Salem, 2017). These figures are comparable with regional and global figures. Across the wider Middle East and Africa region, 265.4 million people now use Facebook (Radcliffe & Bruni, 2019). In the United States, the Pew Research Centre findings indicate that Facebook dominates the landscape for use of younger Americans, alongside with YouTube (especially those aged 18 to 24) of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Facebook ran a number of events in Egypt, the most recent was for Egypt's Creator community in 2018.

### **2.3.2. YouTube**

Founded in 2004 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, YouTube began as a way to post and share video materials. Within a year YouTube viewership grew and Google purchased it (Arthurs et al., 2018; Soukup, 2014). YouTube's mission states: "Our mission is to give everyone a voice and show them the world. We believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build community through our stories" (YouTube, n.d.).

YouTube content is mainly user generated videos. Content covers almost every topic under the sun and ranges from people sharing their experiences, tutorials, telling stories to daily videos which are known as YouTube vlogs. Heffernan (2007) uses the term: "Many Tribes of YouTube" to describe the diversity of YouTube in both its content and creators. Typically, YouTube has turned consumers into producers. YouTube's role in the participatory culture is a place for posting videos, many of which document everyday life (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Burgess & Green, 2009). Similar to Facebook, contributions can be counted in YouTube in the form of counts of subscribers, likes, shares and comments (Chau, 2010).

There is a growing fixation with online video and social media, this has enabled YouTube to fit the description that it is more of a SNS than a video sharing site given that it incorporates both streaming and social aspects of media consumption (Lange, 2008; Tur-Viñes &



Castelló-Martínez, 2019; Wattenhofer et al., 2012; Xiao et al., 2018). Recently, the ability to share photographs on YouTube has become possible through YouTube Community. “It has thereby established a unique role as a repository of popular culture, creating a diachronic archive over time as well as synchronically expanding in its scope” (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 3). Indeed, YouTube has established an important presence amongst social media.

YouTube's success is due to a number of factors: the attractiveness of video combined with the ability to understand content in spite of illiteracy; engagement is easy through comments; and, of course access and viewing is at the viewer's convenience. These factors are critical in a country like Egypt where there are high rates of illiteracy, 25.8% of the population aged 10 and above is illiterate in 2017 (State Information Service, 2018). YouTube's popularity is increasing as outlined by *The Defy Media Report* which found that American youth aged 13-24 view fewer hours of traditional TV than content from digital sources. 96% of youth at an average of 11 hours weekly watch online video on social media or on sites like YouTube. In contrast, traditional TV is viewed by only 81% at an average of 8 hours weekly. The report follows on to explain that online videos allow youth to watch what they want when they want, which is more than what TV offers. Youth on their part believe that videos are easy to relate to and can make them feel good about themselves and they are able to avoid advertisements (Defy Media, 2015).

Overall, the Middle East and North Africa region is ranked second in the world with a number of daily YouTube video views at more than 310 million views (Cabral, 2015). YouTube ran a number of events in Egypt and assigns managers to content creators and influencers to help them develop, grow and provide them with the needed support. The most recent event was in December of 2019 titled: *YouTube Space, Pop-up Cairo*. According to *Arabian Business*, content creators with more than 10K YouTube subscribers enjoy free access to equipment and training opportunities (Halligan, 2018). Recently, an online show, *Sadeem* was launched to find talented content creators across the Arab world. The show, which is competition-based, has run three seasons to date and partners with Tik Tok, Fujifilm, Sennheiser and Boulevard (Sadeem, 2020).

YouTube ranks at the 2<sup>nd</sup> position in terms of the most visited sites in Egypt (Alexa, n.d.). Egypt has the highest viewership share of YouTube in the Middle East (*State of Social Media Report 2018*, 2018). Hala Ajil, YouTube Partner Manager for the Middle East and North Africa region describes the huge potential YouTube has in Egypt. She believes that many YouTube creators who produce engaging and original content are Egyptians (Think Marketing, 2015).

In terms of the user profile in Egypt: 41% of YouTube users are women; average age of YouTube users is 35 years old; 67% of YouTube users have a university degree; 28% of YouTube users access the internet via a smartphone; and, 19% of these users access YouTube via their smartphones (Salem & Mourtada, 2011).

### 2.3.3. Instagram

Instagram owned by Facebook Inc. was launched in 2010. Instagram is an online, mobile phone photograph and video sharing SNS. It enables its users to take photographs and videos, and then share them on its platform and other platforms (Frommer, 2010). Instagram's mission is: "to capture and share the world's moments" (Instagram, n.d.).

Accessing Instagram as a mobile application can seem as a limitation for the service, however, Lunden (2014) explains that according to statistics, mobile handsets are now the most popular form of access to SNS. This is true for Egypt as well (Kamel, 2014).

In Egypt, Instagram is referred to locally as 'Insta' instead of the full word Instagram. The numbers of users of Instagram in Egypt are relatively low compared with Facebook and YouTube. Instagram ranks at the 37<sup>th</sup> position in terms of the most visited sites in Egypt (Alexa, n.d.). Egypt has 11 million active users on Instagram (*State of Social Media Report 2018*, 2018). It's worth noting that the majority of Instagram users are men at 58.4%, and users aged 18 to 24 years were the largest user group in January 2019 (Napoleancat, 2019). According to Statista (2020) users in the age bracket 18 to 24 make up 40.4% of Instagram users in Egypt.

Instagram is included in this study because it is a main channel for influencers to disseminate their content. Through observing influencers, I have found that they insist on sharing their Instagram accounts. Many ask fans in their videos to follow them on Instagram

where they upload photographs and stories on a daily or regular basis, so they are driving their fans to follow them on Instagram. They position it as a way to get ‘intimate’ with them or enable them to follow their daily activities.

## **2.4. Influencers**

The other important focus of this study are the influencers. I will provide an overview of the definitions of influencers and the key trends in literature about them.

### **2.4.1. Definitions**

Influencers started off as informed bloggers and social networkers. They positioned themselves as figures of authority in specific areas and started to create their own communities and fan bases. Consequently, they reached a large number of audiences and got their messages across. They did this initially because of their knowledge and passion which they wanted to share with the world then came the monetary and financial benefits (Friedrichsen & Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013).

Facebook and YouTube refer to influencers as ‘creators’ basically meaning those who produce content for them. On Instagram, influencers are referred to as ‘Instafamous’ or ‘Instagrammers’, these are regular people who became famous on Instagram by using self-presentation strategies and photographs to build their audiences (Marwick, 2015; Reinikainen et al., 2020). A regularly used word to

substitute influencers particularly those on YouTube is the word ‘microcelebrity’, coined by Senft (2008) meaning those committed to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good. Influencers deliberately craft a certain image for themselves and cultivate their audiences.

Influencers can be defined from a number of perspectives. The first perspective is that of ordinary users who became influencers:

Influencers are every day, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts (Abidin, 2015, para. 1).

This definition highlights ordinary users who build their fan bases depending on sharing and narrating their lives with others through sponsored content. The second perspective sees them as online opinion leaders within the two-step communication flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006). The third perspective is the ability of influencers to bring about change; they are able to mediate messages and impact communities in the digital environment hence creating a viral effect and influencing societies (Ayish & Alnajjar, 2019; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). A fourth and popular perspective is that which defines influencers from a marketing perspective positioning them as a new type of independent third-party endorsers who use social media (Freberg et al., 2011). A fifth perspective looks at influencers through

their number of followers/subscribers. They can be split into mega-, macro- and micro-influencers based on the numbers of followers/subscribers they have on one or more platform (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Mega-influencers are those with a base of one million or more followers/subscribers. Macro-influencers are those with a minimum of 100K up to a million followers/subscribers. Micro-influencers are those with a follower/subscriber base of 5-10K; they are characterized by having more engagement levels with their audiences and are perceived to be authentic (Gottbrecht, 2016; Langan, 2019; Marwick, 2013a). Using these definitions, I will allocate to mega-influencers the title of ‘tier 1 influencers’ and allocate to macro-influencers the title of ‘tier 2 influencers’.

It’s worth noting that usually outside of social media, most influencers have limited existence in the public sphere. Their work on social media has attracted some newspapers and television channels to feature them when talking about people who made it in the virtual world (Hoby & Lamont, 2010). A distinct feature of influencers is making use of the full suite of SNS such as having accounts and presence on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat... etc. This strengthens their presence and helps them create a distinct online identity for themselves.

To support their expansion, influencers create fan or ultras pages and groups that have thousands of members. These members are fanatical supporters of the influencer, very much like sports ultras. They sometimes refer to them as “Republic of X” or “Army of X” or the

influencers' name followed by the suffix "zians". A strong example is the A.R.M.Y of K-pop group BTS.

In Egypt influencers are a relatively new phenomenon for the Egyptian society and within a couple of years their numbers grew. Their mere existence created a shift from traditional authority/popular/leading figures usually being religious, sports and movie stars to a more diverse group of people who come from all walks of life and are not originally labelled as celebrities. They project a well-crafted image (not necessarily real) to their audiences.

In terms of influencers in the Arab world and Egypt and according to the *Arab Media Outlook (2016-2018): Youth.Content.Digital media report*, influencers in the Arab world have the potential to be a source of local culture and develop their influence to leverage far greater social benefit beyond their current marcomms revenue streams. The report highlights five main reasons for their growth in the Arab world: youth demographics of the region, technology adoption, social media, emergence of short content formats and convenience of consumption. The report explains that possibly the single biggest driver of influencers is the strong youth skews the region has with a large percentage of youth in all countries as opposed to the percentage of youth in Western developed countries (Dubai Media City and Dubai Press Club, 2016). This reflects typically the situation in Egypt and its youth bulge (See Section 1.1. for details).

### **2.4.2. Perspectives and patterns in influencers studies**

Influencers have been the subject of diverse and extensive studies over the past years from a number of different perspectives. These perspectives together create certain patterns in influencers studies. I will focus on four perspectives of relevance to this study: marketing and brand endorsement; specific named influencers and their communities; the relationship between influencers and their audiences; and, specific genres of content produced by influencers. In the following, I will examine these different perspectives in more detail.

The first perspective in studies—which represent a majority—focuses on the role influencers typically play in marketing, brand endorsement of a certain brand, product or service which ultimately influences the purchasing decision. This is a role most influencers are associated with and reflects the definition of them as independent third-party endorsers. It is based on the premise that people adopt behaviours and opinions from another person or group that conforms with their self-definition and aspirational images (Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip 2014, De Veirman et al., 2017). In the following I will cover a number of studies within this perspective. Colliander and Dahlén (2011) compared the effects of brand publicity in social and traditional digital media. They used a questionnaire and found that a blog post about a fashion brand resulted in higher brand attitude and increased purchase intent compared to an online magazine article on the same topic. This was because readers felt closer to the blogger. Lee and Watkins (2016) examined how vlogs influence perceptions of luxury brands. They



used mixed methods including surveys and experiments. The study showed that vloggers positively affected consumer purchase intentions for (luxury) brands promoted in their vlogs. Likewise, Chapple and Cownie (2017) examined consumers who started to regularly follow lifestyle vloggers' product recommendations. Through a qualitative design using in-depth interviews, they found that participants considered vloggers as credible sources of information. This was mainly driven by perceptions of trust and similarity.

The second perspective in studies focuses on specific named influencers and their communities documenting their phenomenal success in creating their online personas. In the following I will cover a number of studies within this perspective. Jerslev (2016) focused on Zoella the British beauty blogger and how her microcelebrity strategies are especially connected with the display of accessibility, presence, and intimacy online. She found that celebrification on social media platforms works along a temporality of permanent updating of immediacy and authenticity. Berryman and Kavka (2017) also taking Zoella case in point looked at her online persona as a 'big sister' and how she employs intimacy with her audience through affiliating herself with a range of products she uses in her everyday life. They found that she succeeded to create this intimacy by using a raft of social media especially Twitter which provides constant 'backstage' access to her private life. García-Rapp (2016) investigated the British-Chinese beauty guru Bubzbeauty, framing issues of online popularity development. She took an ethnographic approach over 22 months and analysed 80 of her videos to explore content characteristics and

affordances for the creation and maintenance of viewers' attention. She found that the strengthening of Bubzbeauty position as a beauty guru is the result of two techniques to create influence. The first is her use of YouTube as a business platform to present her straight-forward tutorials and the second is through creating a strong bond with her audience through intimate vlogs. Font (2018) examined whether followers of Spanish fashion YouTubers Dulceida and Paula Gonu could identify post-feminist elements in the content of these celebrities. She conducted eight interviews with young people who manage fan clubs in Instagram dedicated to each of these two influencers. She found that they unconsciously detect elements linked to post-feminist patterns, such as authenticity, empowerment and sexual agency in representations of these celebrities on YouTube and Instagram. Cocker and Cronin (2017) focused on seven of the United Kingdom's most popular YouTuber channels: fashion and beauty vloggers Zoella, Tanya Burr, Louise Pentland (SprinkleofGlitter), Esté e Lalonde and Fleur Bell (FleurDeForce), satirists/lifestyle commentators Alfie Deyes (PointlessBlog) and Marcus Butler. They explored through observing their content and engaging in a sustained non-participant netnography of responses to these videos how followers interact to articulate the appeal of these British YouTube personalities. They found an interdependence between the YouTubers and their followers through a 'cult' like culture. Martínez and Olsson (2018) studied the role of YouTubers in the life of children using YouTuber Misslisibell as a case in point. They wanted to specifically find out how Swedish children construct and negotiate the YouTuber Misslisibell as a girl celebrity. They found that indeed YouTubers play

a part in the construction of the identity of children. However, they also found that some children, irrespective of gender and age, demonstrate critical reflexivity in relation to marketing strategies by YouTubers, while some children do not. Hurley (2019) focused on five popular influencers from the Arab world (Huda Beauty, Noha Style Icon, Model Roz , Lojain Omran and Taimal Falasi). She found a great similarity between Arab influencers and those in other contexts. She also found that their authenticity was crafted. Marôpo et al. (2020) examined two popular teen YouTubers from Portugal and Brazil, SofiaBBeauty and Manoela Antelo and how they manage intimacy in projecting their lives and how that is perceived by their followers. They found that their followers trusted them and were inspired by them. Jorge et al. (2018) also used SofiaBBeauty as case in point to explore how she associates with brands in her self-presentation and builds her own persona. They found that she created through her videos a view about consumption mixed with empowerment.

The third perspective in studies examines the relationship between influencers and their audiences. In the following I will cover a number of studies within this perspective. Westenberg (2016) conducted a study about Enzo Knol, a popular YouTuber from Netherlands and his influence on teenagers. The study depended on in-depth interviews with YouTubers and their fans. She found that YouTubers do have an influence on the behaviour of teenagers, however, their parents are unaware of this influence. The study highlights that this may be problematic and recommends that parents should know who their teenage children follow. Aran-Ramspott et al. (2018) looked at the

relationship between Spanish preadolescents in Catalan Secondary Schools and YouTube influencers. The study combined quantitative and qualitative techniques through a survey administered and three focus groups. They found that indeed YouTubers are incorporated into preadolescents leisure time practices. They are seen more as actors of a teen digital culture, rather than as identification or role models due to the critical attitude preadolescents have of them. On the other hand, Pérez-Torres et al. (2018) explored YouTubers and their impact on Spanish adolescents construction of identity. They analysed the content of the YouTubers and found that the adolescents included messages and comments to express their identification with the YouTubers. Adolescents took the YouTubers as role models, so they acted as a social reference for them. Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez (2019) examined the activity of commenting on videos of Spain's 10 most subscribed YouTubers. They found that there was a low level of interaction generated by the content of YouTubers in the sample studied as well as no replies by the YouTubers themselves.

Lastly, the fourth perspective of studies revolves around specific genres of content produced by influencers. In the following I will cover a number of studies within this perspective. Abidin and Ots (2015) explored beauty and lifestyle vlogging in Singapore. They found that influencers accommodate commercial brands and manage the different external tensions and demands on them. Raun (2018) examined transgender vlogging by focusing on the Canadian micro-influencer Julie Van Vu. He describes how she uses intimacy as a key dynamic to form the relationship with her audience. More recently,

Ayish and AlNajjar (2019) examined how three Arab influencers negotiate their identities in cyberspace. They analysed content created by influencers Abdallah Al Maghlouth, Abdulrahman Mohammed and Laila Hzaineh across three key themes: human engagement; women's empowerment and cultural revivalism. They found that the process of hybridization undertaken by the influencers suggests how Arab youth are articulating their cultural identity online by seeing both the past and the present as two integral components of their evolving identity.

It can be inferred from this literature review that influencers have been studied and examined from a number of diverse perspectives. The studies use diverse methodologies: some quantitative and some qualitative, while others employ mixed methods. The studies show that influencers do play varying roles and demonstrate different levels of relationships with their audiences, followers and fans. My study falls under the third category of studies which examines the relationship between influencers and their audiences.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This Chapter aimed at contextualizing influencers and their fans from Egyptian youth. I started off with Egyptian youth and the key aspects pertaining to them. The first distinct aspect is the youth bulge and how youth make up a large percentage of the Egyptian society (State Information Service, 2018; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). I moved onto the outlook of today's youth and how they are becoming more urban and cosmopolitan (Cole, 2014). They face unsurmountable

socio-economic challenges (Amin, 2000, 2013; Dhillion & Yousef, 2009; Rashad et al., 2005). I then looked at the culture they live and operate in daily and the social values which are traditional, patriarchal, conservative and keenly religious (Gadallah et al., 2017; Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015; Sabbagh et al., 2012; Therborn, 2004). I ended this first section with a look at their use of technology (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). Throughout, where possible, I contrasted the data from Egypt with that of the Arab world and the West (Europe and the United States). This section demonstrated that in spite of a busy traditional mass media scene, social media are taking over the hearts and minds of youth (Sabbagh et al., 2012).

In the second section, I looked at social media and influencers. I started off with the relevant definitions of social media to this study. I focused on an important and central notion to this study: the participatory culture of social media and how it is redefining production, distribution and consumption of culture (Bruns, 2015; Chau, 2010; Delwiche & Henderson, 2012; Jenkins, 2016). I moved onto social media covering Facebook and YouTube as the highest used platforms in Egypt by both influencers and their fans. I covered the start of each platform, its mission, advantages, success factors and how young people use it (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Burgess & Green, 2009; Ellison et al., 2011; Heffernan, 2007; Lange, 2008; Wilson et al., 2012; Xiao et al., 2018). I followed this by a closer look at their usage in Egypt. I then looked at Instagram as a key platform used by influencers although its popularity here is much less than Facebook and YouTube (Frommer, 2010; Lunden, 2014). I concluded the section by an

overview of the different definitions of influencers. Influencers have been defined from a number of perspectives (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Ayish & Alnajjar, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011; Gottbrecht, 2016; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006; Langan, 2019; Marwick, 2015; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019; Senft, 2008; Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). I looked at influencers in Egypt and the reasons of their success in the Arab world and Egypt, which can be attributed mainly to the youth bulge (Dubai Media City and Dubai Press Club, 2016). I followed this by an overview of perspectives and patterns in studies about influencers which are quite diverse (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Cocker & Cronin, 2017; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017; Font, 2018; Jerslev, 2016; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Pérez-Torres et al., 2018; Raun, 2018; Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014; Westenberg, 2016).

The Chapter demonstrated that social media have permeated the Egyptian society with their heaviest users being youth (Salem, 2017). Accordingly, this study will explore the relationship between influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth, with a focus on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram as the main platforms influencers use to disseminate their content and youth use to consume this content.





## **CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

We put on a face to meet the faces we meet.

~ T.S. Eliot

## **Introduction**

In the first Chapter, I provided an overview of influencers and their fans from Egyptian youth, which are the focus of this study. The Chapter demonstrated that Egyptian youth while grappling and experimenting with their identity face unsurmountable challenges (Amin, 2000, 2013; Dhillion & Yousef, 2009; Willis, 2003). Youth spend a high percentage of their time on social media; in turn they are exposed to influencers alongside other content. Many of them, by time, become fans of influencers. This begs the question, what is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth?

This Chapter aims at outlining the theoretical framework which underpins the study and providing a literature review. The Chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section focuses on the theoretical framework of reception studies. The second section looks at the relevant literature in relation to this study to place it within the context of the wider body of studies. The third section builds

connections with additional theoretical concepts that can help explain the relationship between influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth. The fourth section covers the research question. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the theoretical framework and literature review.

In the first section, I give an overview of reception studies: their origins, relationship with social media and, appropriation as a central notion within reception. Through this section I demonstrate the suitability of reception to this study as a theoretical framework.

In the second section, I explore the key theoretical concepts that are consistently defined in the literature as important concepts pertaining to the study. I start with identity and its definitions with a particular focus on youth and the struggle they face during identity formation. I follow this with a look at studies about identity. I then move onto online construction and self-presentation processes. I start by defining them. I then focus on two particular scholars and their work, namely: Goffman and his dramaturgical approach and Leary's self-presentational tactics. I look at the processes to construct online identity and the role of others in co-constructing it. I provide an overview of the relevant studies.

In the third section, I look at the concepts of displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships. These additional concepts will help link influencers and the online identity of youth, in addition to the previous concepts and processes

mentioned within the construction of online identity and self-presentation.

In the fourth and last section, I share the key research question and its sub questions. Their totality achieves the study goal.

## **1 Theoretical Framework: Reception Studies**

I will rely on the theoretical framework of reception studies to explore the research question of the relationship between influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth. I chose this framework because it provides an active role for audiences; they are not mere receivers or consumers (Livingstone & Das, 2013a). According to Livingstone and Das (2013b) audiences, reproduce meanings by negotiating the text and at the same time, they reproduce social relations that structure their everyday actions. Morley (1980) defines reception as the semiotic process through which audiences interpret messages and act on those interpretations. This takes place against the backdrop of their experiences and background. Staiger (2005) argues that this process is not a truth-finding process but more about the meaning of the text, and in what circumstances. This framework, which I adopt in this study, will give fans an active role in creating a meaning of what they consume from influencers and moreover appropriate it.

## 1.1. Origins of reception studies

The driving force for reception studies came from cultural studies, especially from feminist traditions and ethnographic methods during the 1980s and 1990s (Livingstone & Das, 2013a). The start of reception studies can be traced back to Hall, who wrote in 1974, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Alasuutari, 1999). His main premise was 'text' in any form such as books or movies is not accepted simply by the audience but that there is 'negotiation' and 'opposition' by them; they interpret the meaning based on individual cultural background and life experiences. This set the foundation for reception studies and his work influenced subsequent research.

One of the important ideas Hall (2001) propagated is that prior to a message having any effect it has to be appropriated i.e. decoded meaningfully. When that happens then the message can have an impact whether in a persuasive, entertainment, emotional or behavioural capacity and it can impact on thinking and behaviours. So in the early eighties, the focus was very much on qualitative methods such as individual interviews or focus groups (Schröder, 2019). The phase of audience ethnography started when researchers looked at reception from an audience perspective (Alasuutari, 1999). A new phase of reception studies emerged when researchers started to question audience ethnography. Their objective was to get a handle on contemporary media culture as a topic and as an activity which is structured by the framework of discourses around it. Reception studies

are concerned with cultural issues related to media use (Alasuutari, 1999). My study will fit under this last category as it addresses influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth.

In a detailed and extensive review of reception studies Livingstone and Das (2013a) provide an overview of how reception studies have developed and evolved. They start with a selection of key scholars such as Eco (1979), Morley (1980), Fiske (1992), Gray (1992), Johnson (1986) and Silverstone (2003) who were behind the core texts of reception studies and their central ideas. They then cover the classic studies of audience reception and a significant body of research which differentiates audience reception from the Uses and Gratifications tradition. They highlight that for the most part, the “media” of audience reception studies has been focused on television. To demonstrate that, they give an overview of studies by Radway (1984), Ang (1985), Hodge and Tripp (1986), Liebes and Katz (1990), Biltereyst (1991) and Stacey (1994).

Livingstone and Das (2013a) move onto journals which cover reception studies and from their analysis they list a number of journals which cover reception studies, some with more focus on it than others such as *Participations*. They then examine in detail the approaches to reception studies including encoding/decoding, reception and resistance, interpretative communities and the social infrastructure of reception, linking identity and genre, and, cultural diversity. They look into the questions of methodology and lastly, reception in the digital age, which is very relevant to this study. The main take away from their review was that approaches to reception are quite diverse and that

reception has a versatile and developmental nature (Livingstone & Das, 2013a); therefore I see that it suits this study as a theoretical framework.

## **1.2. Reception studies and social media**

With the advent of social media it was natural that scholars and researchers extended reception to social media especially that it has a participatory culture. Livingstone (2004) explored how reception can be extended further to social media and an ever-changing media landscape. She discussed how this has influenced research as social media present new challenges for researchers to discover how audiences are interacting with social media and what they are thinking or feeling during that engagement.

A key question which presents itself, is ‘how do we define audiences in light of social media especially that people nowadays immerse themselves in social media?’

Bird (2011) sees audiences as active cultural producers and interactive fans. Livingstone (2013) asserts that people have become audiences, consumers, workers and citizens. Mathieu (2015) argues that social media and more specifically Facebook put aside the concept of passive media reception and that audiences play a much more active role. Similarly, Schröder (2019) looked at the ways in which reception research is reinventing itself in a post-broadcasting age. He describes an empirical shift from the concept of decoding to the concept of audience participation in social media.

Studies which are relevant to this study in that they demonstrate how reception and social media can be brought together include the following studies. Cayari (2011) explored how YouTube affects culture and society through a case study about a teenage musician, Wade Johnston. He outlined how Johnston started his music on YouTube and grew his fan bases and popularity there. Carpentier (2011) investigated audience theory with a focus on two of its key dimensions: the active/passive and the interaction/participation dimensions. Jensen and Sørensen (2014) analyzed social networks from the point of view of the user. They combined quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze users' experiences and perceptions. Through their study they were able to develop a framework for accessing users use of social media, especially Facebook. Heikkilä and Ahva (2015) conducted an extensive audience study in Finland to provide a better understanding of the role of journalism and news in everyday life especially in light of social media. They found that journalism is still relevant today as articulated by users and that news is not entirely lost in the current media landscape. Mathieu and Pavličková (2017) explored the reading of Facebook's newsfeed and how it can be seen as a sense-making activity that contributes to the construction of the user's mediated life. Through their study they demonstrated the suitability of a reception approach for this type of studies.

It can be inferred from this literature review of relevant reception studies, that reception is suitable for studies on social media and



audiences (Livingstone & Das, 2013a; Schröder, 2019). Accordingly, this will be the theoretical framework I will employ in this study.

### **1.3. Appropriation within reception**

A core notion within reception studies is appropriation. This notion may help explain the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth as whenever individuals are exposed to content, they negotiate its meaning and appropriate it. In the case of this study youth fans are exposed to content by influencers. According to Jenkins et al. the new skills within the participatory culture include appropriation, which they define as “the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content” (2006, p. 4). They elaborate on this further and explain that appropriation can be viewed as a process which involves taking culture apart and assembling it together again.

In the introduction of the book *the Appropriation of Media in Everyday Life*, Ayaß (2012) asserts that media do not simply take effect: but they are rather appropriated. She emphasizes that the interpretation of media by the recipient and co-recipient plays a major role.

Accordingly, media content does not just meet “users” but enables them to make sense of what they are receiving. “Recipients are neither black boxes nor tabulae rasae” (Ayaß, 2012, p. 2).

There are two words which describe audience reception quite accurately in which it is an active and selective process. Viewers negotiate the meanings of texts in specific contexts (Michelle, 2007).

This is especially facilitated by social media as the shift to them has facilitated combining and repurposing media content (Jenkins et al., 2006). Accordingly, content is not consumed but repurposed and appropriated by the recipients. According to Yang and Stohl (2020) digital appropriation activities are key to information shared online. However, it is a choice; borrowing the concept of technology appropriation, “either the technology is adapted and integrated into the users’ everyday lives (appropriation) or users decide not to use it (disappropriation)” (Carroll et al., 2001, p. 3). Accordingly, this study will explore the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth, within that I will explore whether or not fans appropriate the content from influencers and how that may play a role in their online identity construction.

## **2 Identity in the digital age**

This literature review aims to cover the key concepts that are consistently defined in the literature as important concepts pertaining to the study. It is organized around identity and online identity construction and self-presentation. Understanding these concepts and the studies around them, will help highlight and pinpoint the gap in studies that this study will fill.

Prior to delving into identity in the digital age, it is imperative to start with the definitions of identity and how it develops and youth’s struggle with it to highlight what youth in this study experience and go through. I then move onto online identity construction and self-

presentation processes. Within these concepts, I note important studies around the topic from the West, Arab world and Egypt. The following questions will guide this review to narrow it down to the relevant studies: what is identity and how is it formed? what do youth experience re identity? and, what is online identity and self-presentation? what are the processes behind them and, who plays a role in the construction of online identity besides the individual? These questions will help in my quest to explore influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth.

## **2.1. Identity**

### **2.1.1. Definitions**

In the following, I provide a selection of definitions of identity and its characteristics relevant to this study. Identity is something we uniquely possess; it is what distinguishes us from other people; and, at the same time, it implies a relationship with a social group (Buckingham, 2008). Identity refers to an existential position, to a combination of needs and self-perceptions (Marcia, 1980).

One of the authoritative scholars, who contributed greatly to the literature on identity was Erikson (1902-1994). He developed an eight-stage model for the development of an individual since infancy till emerging adulthood. His seminal ideas lay the ground for the many scholars who contributed to our understanding of identity today and whom I will cover briefly in this section. Blasi and Glodis, present a

summary of their interpretation of Erikson's insights on identity as follows:

(a) Identity is an explicit or implicit answer to the question, Who am I?; (b) that consists of achieving a new unity among the elements of one's past and one's expectations for the future, (c) such that it gives origin to a fundamental sense of sameness and continuity, (d) The answer to the identity question is arrived at by realistically appraising oneself and one's past; (e) by considering one's culture, particularly its ideology, and the expectations that society has for oneself, (f) while, at the same time, questioning the validity of both culture and society and the appropriateness of the perceptions that others have of oneself. (g) This process of integration and questioning should occur around certain fundamental areas, such as one's future occupation, sexuality, and religious and political ideas. (h) It should lead to a flexible but durable commitment in these areas, (i) that guarantees, from an objective perspective, one's productive integration into society, and (j) subjectively, a basic sense of loyalty and fidelity, (k) as well as deep, subconscious feelings of rootedness and well-being, self-esteem, confidence, and sense of purpose. (l) The sensitive period for the development of identity are the adolescent years, even though its outline may become more precise and acquire age specific expressions throughout one's life (1995, pp. 405–406).

Their interpretation encompasses many characteristics, aspects and dimensions of identity as a multi-faceted construct.

An important characteristic of identity is its reflexive nature. Giddens (1991) emphasizes the concept of self-narrative; a coherent life story, to be convinced of a stable identity through time. He argues that identity can no longer be seen as something given but it has to be understood and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. Linked to this, Hametner & Joerchel (2009) argue that the question ‘Who am I?’ can be answered reflexively. They add that reflexivity is an act in which a person tries to formulate who they are or who they would like to be. Within this they emphasize that reflexive composition of narratives is key. This means that identity is temporary.

In conclusion, the diversity of definitions demonstrates that identity is a multi-faceted construct. It is dynamic, fluid and temporary, elements are continuously being added and others discarded; and, it is not a static personality although stability and routine are important aspects of it (Blasi & Glodis, 1995; Buckingham, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Hametner & Joerchel, 2009; Marcia, 1980). Throughout this study I will solely use the word ‘identity’ and will not resort to any synonyms.

### **2.1.2. Youth’s struggles during identity formation**

There is typically a struggle for youth to become independent individuals. Erikson (1968) describes the life-cycle as an indispensable coordinate of identity. During adolescence individuals undergo a crisis in which they address key questions about their values and ideals, their future occupation or career, and their sexual identity. In a sense they experiment with their identity and negotiate it. A conflict arises in that

period between identity and the role the individual should play in life. Taking a slightly different take on Erikson's work, Turkle (1995) explains that what Erikson referred to as identity, is a period of intense interaction with both people and ideas; a time of experimentation. This phase helps with the development of a core self that gives meaning to life.

Peer relationships are an important aspect of identity development as Erikson (1968) believes that although identity is developed by the individual, it has to be recognized and confirmed by others. Youth present themselves to one another and experiment with aspects of their identities. Within that context they confirm or reject self-concepts through social feedback, and move towards consolidating their identity (Nurmi, 2013). It is worth noting that the heightened period for hinging identity exploration on the individual's relations with family, peers and the immediate community is during the adolescence years (Davis, 2010). The individual, during adolescence, is "eager to be affirmed by peers, to be confirmed by teachers, and to be inspired by worth-while ways of life" (Erikson, 1968, p. 130). As adolescents move into emerging adulthood, identity exploration is hinged on reflecting on their relations with the wider community (Damon et al., 2003). Consequently, given that Egyptian youth experience *waithood*—whereby they are waiting to get married or employed hence start adulthood—theoretically they should be viewed as emerging adults, however, practically they are on the adolescence side. This influences their identity formation and exploration as mentioned above. Their identity exploration will depend on their relations with family, peers

and the immediate community rather than the wider community. On social media, identity is formed and viewed through the choice of ‘connections’ displayed as ‘friends’ (Boyd, 2008).

The following excerpt from Arnett’s book *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the Twenties*, illustrates the most central feature of emerging adulthood (youth):

Perhaps the most central feature of emerging adulthood is that it is a time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. In the course of exploring possibilities on love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are and what they want out of life. Emerging adulthood offers the best opportunity for such self-exploration. (2006, p. 8).

This description applies to Egyptian youth as they are in no way different to youth around the world. The struggles youth experience during identity formation is critical for this study which focuses on Egyptian youth who are considered agents of change and the society has high expectations from them (See Chapter 1 for details). These struggles may influence the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth.

### **2.1.3. Studies about identity**

Identity is a timeless topic that has been researched extensively. Côté states that “Identity Studies is reputedly one of the fastest-growing areas in the social sciences” (2006, p. 3). Identity has been researched

over the years by many scholars and researchers. As Johnston (2012) pointed out, major contributions to this topic of study have been made by psychologists (Ball, Lilienfeld et al.), sociologists (Goffman, Lortie, Walker), philosophers (Gergen, Taylor) and anthropologists (Kondo, Mayer). Furthermore, Way and Malvini Redden (2017) conducted a comprehensive review covering the period 2000 till 2016. In their review they looked at hundreds of articles about online youth. They noted that identity was one of the key ten topics covered by scholars and researchers; a third of the material they reviewed incorporated some aspect of identity. This shows the richness of the topic of identity. In the introduction of the *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, Vignoles et al. (2011) dedicate the first chapter of the book to present an integrative view of identity. This is of particular importance as they discuss some key debates about identity such as it being individual, relational, or collective; stable or fluid; discovered, personally constructed, or socially constructed; and, reliance on quantitative or qualitative methods. The key takeaway from their analysis is that literature on identity is very diverse because it is rooted in different theoretical traditions. For my study I will be drawing mainly on Erikson's work on identity, while touching upon other works on identity by other key scholars of relevance to this study as will be outlined in the subsequent sections.

The research scene has witnessed the launch of specific publications dedicated to studies around identity such as: *Self and Identity* [<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/psai20/current>], the flagship journal of the International Society for Self and *Identity and Identities*



[<https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20>]. This gives an indication of the wealth and richness of the literature about identity.

I conducted a review of the literature carried out by Arab and Egyptian researchers around identity per se. In terms of the volume of studies, it is much less than studies and research that has been conducted in the West. The studies I will be sharing here are written up mostly in Arabic and have been published in Arabic journals most of which have been peer reviewed.

Recently, the American University in Cairo's *Arab Media and Society Journal* dedicated its Winter/Spring 2019 issue to Media and identity. The issue covered a number of studies which focused on expressions of identity in different contexts. These studies found that indeed there is a distinct national Egyptian and Arab regional identity, with some variations as will be demonstrated in the following. Crone (2019) analysed how a pan Arab television station celebrated the former Algerian female fighter Jamila Bouhired. She examined the changing identity of Jamila as an icon in being used by the station. She found that the television station downplayed the Arab Spring uprisings and promoted specific political systems as being the heirs of Jamila. Radwan (2019) looked at participation and national identity building through Arab State electronic portals through analysing 22 portals. He found that they Arab countries express their national identity differently. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Morocco utilize effectively their history and culture to portray their national identity. Gad (2019) explored the organizational identity in the Egyptian

telecommunications sector. She surveyed 200 employees and found that there is an identity screening process within the hiring process. She also found that culture is a huge factor in hiring. Through those employees the organizational culture is created and maintained. Khalil (2019) examined the cultural identity expressed through electronic platforms of higher education institutions in UAE. She found institutions had different ways electronically to express their identities, some depend on projecting a cultural identity based on Islamic traditions while others depended on projecting a more liberal identity. More recently, Ayish and Alnajjar (2019) examined how three Arab influencers negotiate their identities in cyberspace (See Chapter 1, Section 2.4.2. for details about this study).

Moving on from the *Arab Media & Society* issue about Media and identity, I will give an overview about other studies conducted in the Arab world and Egypt. These studies about identity tackled a specific dimension or perspective of identity such as cultural, linguistic identity, national identity as Egyptian or regional identity as Arabs. The studies depended on exploring a relationship between two variables or the influence of one variable on the other as will be demonstrated in the following.

The first set of studies focused on the relationship between the use of technology and social media and identity. Al Tayar (2014) examined the impact of technology on identity. He found that individuals feel that SNS have enabled them to fulfil their identity and to express it fully more than in the real world, they are able to interact with others

regardless of social, physical, health and psychological circumstances. Shoukr (2014) examined the relationship between digital citizenship and the ego-identity of female adolescents. She did not find a relationship between them. Louli (2017) looked at the use of youth of digital media. She found that these youth start to form a distinct culture and identity characterized by weakened social relations and a tendency to consumerism.

The second set of studies focused on the relationship between exposure to specific content and national and regional identities. ElKhahky (2004) explored foreign satellite channels and their reflections on identity and the crisis in the values of a sample of Arab adolescents from eight countries. She found that almost half of the adolescents were confused about their identity especially those who were exposed heavily to foreign satellite channels and especially well-educated males. Similarly, Mosharafa (2009) studied the influence of Arab satellite channels on Arabs' sense of identity and belonging. She found a correlation between exposure and feeling a sense of Arab identity as the channels address the viewers as Arabs. This sense increased amongst males, lower socio-economic levels and those of younger ages. However, there was no difference in the sense of identity based on education. Al Amri (2013) examined how Saudi students studying abroad undergo a struggle of identity whereby they consciously deny their Arab and Islamic roots in their online interactions. Alshoaibi (2019) studied the impact of social media on the identity of youth in the Arab world, depending on the social cognitive theory and the social comparison theory. She found that social media shapes the identity of

youth and accordingly governments are paying attention to the power of social media. AbuYusef (2013) examined the controversy around the Egyptian identity after the revolution through analysing and comparing the journalistic speech of party newspapers towards national identity. She found that depending on the direction of the party, specific elements were focused on in the speeches.

A third set of studies focused on specific identities such as cultural or linguistic identities. Atef (2004) looked at the relationship between adolescents aged 14-17 years of age and their usage of the internet and cultural identity. He found that using the internet influenced the cultural identity. This influence increased in the case of using chat and pornography sites. Zoghaib (2014) looked at the relationship between the exposure to talk shows in television and the cultural identity of Egyptian youth. She found that exposure to talk shows did not necessarily influence the cultural identity of youth. However, there were some mediating factors that influenced cultural identity such as education and self-appreciation. AlBeltagy (2010) focused on youth and their linguistic identity in light of globalization. The study found that social media increase alienation of youth and lead them to create their own Latinized Arabic language to talk in their closed communities and circles.

More importantly, this literature review revealed that there aren't any studies similar or near to this study conducted in the Arab world or Egypt. Alshoaibi echoes this and states: "The influence of social media on youth identity in the Middle-East is a fairly unexplored topic"

(2019, p.1), indicating that in a broad sense the topic of identity has not been explored deeply in the Arab world, let alone the topic of online identity which is the focus of my study. I want to emphasise that my study on influencers and the online identity of youth will contribute to filling this gap in research.

## **2.2. Online identity construction and self-presentation processes**

### **2.2.1. Definitions**

To navigate in social media, individuals need to establish their online identity. At the heart of online identity construction lies self-presentation—also known as impression management—the process through which individuals communicate an image of themselves to others (Baumeister, 1982). Self-presentation is regarded as a minimum requirement for participation on SNS by users and one of the most important pieces of SNS (Tufekci, 2008). It is the varied ways in which users present themselves to others (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Livingstone states: “the very language of social relationships is being reframed; today, people construct their ‘profile’, make it ‘public’ or ‘private’, they ‘comment’ or ‘message’ their ‘top friends’ on their ‘wall’, they ‘block’ or ‘add’ people to their network, and so forth” (2008, p. 4). It is evident that social media have brought about these changes and the way these changes are expressed.

Self-presentation is critical to this study as youth set out to define themselves in front of others in this new environment (Yang &

Bradford Brown, 2016). Schlenker, states that self-presentation “reflects the transaction between self and audience in a particular social context” (2003, p. 498). In this study the social context is an online one.

### **2.2.2. Goffman’s dramaturgical approach**

The beginnings of self-presentation can be traced back to Goffman (1959), who lays down in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* the foundations of self-presentation. He built his premise on a dramaturgical approach, using metaphors borrowed from dramaturgy to describe how individuals present themselves to guide and control the impression of others about them and how this happens in relation to others.

In the following, I will provide a more detailed overview of his most relevant ideas to this study. His first idea is that when an individual appears before others, when in front stage, the individual will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of him/her and of the situation. The individual undertakes a performance in which they observe social rules and conventions (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1959; Jenkins, 2008). His second idea is that when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to gather information about him/her or bring existing knowledge they have about him/her already into play. They do this to be able to respond better. They seek to gather this information from many sources or cues. If others have no previous knowledge of the individual

they rely primarily on what the person says, or they depend on clues from conduct and appearance. Sometimes the individual will perform in a specific way, to create a specific impression. Others, even if they come across as passive, will form an impression from whatever information is available to them. “The individual’s initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretences of being other things. As the interaction progresses additions and modifications in this informational state will occur” (Goffman, 1959, p. 5). Goffman’s third idea is that individuals give certain impressions intentionally and at the same time other impressions are given off unintentionally. The unintentional impressions are received by the audience alongside the intentional ones (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Goffman’s fourth idea is that the ‘front’ (platform) is the expressive equipment of a standard kind which is intentionally employed by the individual during his performance. This is the setting which includes a physical layout and the ‘personal front’ which includes facial expression, clothing, racial traits, age, size, looks and speech patterns. Consequently, behaviour will be different in a ‘back stage’, as no performance is needed (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). The fifth idea according to Goffman, is the audience; also known as others. Goffman dedicates a large part of his approach to them. They are a key party that has to be available as there is a need to make an impression on others or control that impression (Goffman, 1959). As Hogan (2010) argues that within the dramaturgical approach the audience refers to those who observe a specific actor and monitor their performance. At the same time these are whom the individual puts on a front for. Within this front,

individuals pick and choose which details to focus on to create a certain impression, in addition to the details that are given away unintentionally as part of the performance. Pearson (2010) describes that part of what Goffman refers to as an everyday performance is the construction and reconstruction of an identity narrative. Merchant (2005) asserts that social media allow many opportunities for identity work because performance requires an audience.

Goffman's thoughts were developed pre the digital era and have many parallels in the online world as proven by numerous studies (Birnbaum, 2008; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Nesvadba, 2017; Serpa & Ferreira, 2018). Individuals put out information online deliberately to project a specific image and create a specific impression; individuals seek to gather information about each other through their profiles, their connections and the type of content they share; individuals seek to give certain impressions but the audience also forms an impression which can differ to what was originally intended; the front is the platform used and the personal front is replaced by the elements such as language used, emojis and photographs posted and shared; and, all platforms present an audience, sometimes in the form of friends who are supposedly people the individual knows or fans who are people that the individual does not know but represent an audience to their online activity. Marshall (2010) asserts that what is constructed on Facebook or Twitter is for a performance of the self. This online character is well aware of potential audiences. Schlenker states: "Goffman's dramaturgical approach provided an intricately detailed exposition of the



Shakespearean theme that “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players”” (2003, p. 494). This demonstrates the performative nature of individuals especially in the presence of others.

Tufekci (2008) believes that the influence of Goffman is profound on studies around self-presentation on social media. Goffman and his work has been the subject of a number of books (Burns, 1992; Smith, 2006). Accordingly, this study will draw on Goffman's approach as it may offer insights on the way influencers and their fans present themselves online and help to explain the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth. The study presents an opportunity to explore the applicability of Goffman’s approach in a non-Western culture.

### **2.2.3. Leary’s self-presentational tactics**

Leary (1996) is another important scholar, whose work on self-presentation influences this study. He presented a long list of tactics for self-presentation: self-descriptions, attitude statements, public attributions, remembering and forgetting, nonverbal behavior, social associations, conformity and compliance, the physical environment and other tactics. I will focus on the key tactics which are of relevance to this study and can be observed in the presentation of online identity.

Starting off by self-description, it is how people use words to self-present themselves. The words they choose give an indication and tell more about what they like or don’t like; their values; affiliations; and,

how they see themselves. He goes on further to describe the process they use as selectively presenting true information about themselves. Applying this online, self-description is the words users use to describe themselves in the about or introduction sections of their profiles. A second tactic he describes is what individuals express through attitude statements to influence the impressions other people have of them. Applying this online, attitude statements can be what individuals post on their home page or the specific topics they tend to focus on or share on their profiles. A third tactic is conformity and compliance, in which individual's behave in ways that are consistent with social norms and others' preferences. Applying this online, it can be developing, presenting or sharing content that is in line with social norms. A fourth tactic is social associations, whereby individuals publicise their connections with famous or successful social units, such as sports teams, celebrities or other popular artists. Applying this online individuals publicize the link they have with famous people. They do this by following them, becoming fans, liking and commenting on their content and sharing any content they post on their own profiles. I will draw on Leary's tactics as they may offer insights on the way influencers and their fans present themselves online and help to explain the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth.

#### **2.2.4. Processes to construct online identity and self-presentation**

Social media provide individuals with the processes to present themselves online and perform. These processes empower youth to relate to others and to the world in powerful ways (Buckingham, 2008). I will focus on Facebook mainly because it provides a range of processes to establish an online identity. To use YouTube users simply need a Google account. Instagram users can log in with their Facebook accounts or create a new account which includes, similar to Facebook, a profile photograph, account name and a small description called bio.

Specific processes to construct online identity in Facebook include constructing the user profile or account, selecting and using photographs, sharing and other processes. Identity per se is not observable but behaviour online can be observed. The way in which individuals use these processes constitutes their online identity. In the following, I will look with more detail into each of these processes.

The first process is constructing a profile. It is a key process for self-presentation and representation of identity. Its management may be considered as a performance within Goffman's dramaturgical approach (Cover, 2012; Goffman, 1959; Jaschinski & Kommers, 2012). In the profile, users display information about themselves, share content and display their connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Uski, 2015). Visitors to a profile can make use of profile information to form an impression (Gosling et al., 2011). Users are free to customise their privacy settings so that they select what their audience gets to see (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). Manago et al. (2008) point out that profiles can represent a

number of things: either the authentic self or selected aspects of the self or an idealized self or people can experiment with a number of possible selves. This all represents a possibility of selective self-presentation i.e. individuals can choose which identity cues they claim in online environments to create a certain impression (Ellison, 2013; Walther, 2011). Livingstone (2008) found that the way in which teenagers construct their online identities evolves over time, with younger teens emphasizing more aesthetic elements of their profiles and older teens aiming for more austere profiles that emphasize their connections with others.

The second process, which is the starting point for a profile, is the selection of the profile photograph of the user. The photograph acts as a core identity marker (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Mallan & Giardina, 2009). According to Wynn and Katz “Who-I-am tends to be expressed in a photograph” (1997, p. 320) i.e. identity is presented in a photograph. Lobinger and Brantner echo this and state: “Selfies and self-photographs are important elements with regard to identity work and the construction of authenticity in online environments” (2015, p. 1848). Photographs indeed can be a true representation of the person. The profile photograph appears in the top left corner of the profile. This photograph is what appears every time the user interacts on their own page or with others on their pages. There is also a cover photograph, which is the larger photograph at the top of the profile, above the profile photograph. There are timeline photographs, in addition to the ability to create and assemble albums to encompass groups of photographs.

Photographs are part of the user's personal visual narrative and are key to self-presentation (Friedrichsen & Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013). Zhao et al. (2008) describe how Facebook users predominantly show rather than tell their identities; implicitly than explicitly. Ellison et al. (2006) describe photographs used on the profile as providing support to claims made in what is written; people use photographs to express what is important to them. Selecting photographs is a key process within online identity construction. In addition, people tag others in photographs. Pempek et al. (2009) found that self-presentation was one of the most interesting things their participants found about Facebook and 62.64% of Facebook users considered posting photographs to express who they are. Krämer and Winter (2008) set out to explore the relationship between self-reported offline personality traits and online self-presentation in profiles. They found that self-efficacy with regard to impression management is strongly related to the number of virtual friends, the level of profile detail and style of personal photograph. Strano (2008) looked at the choices people make when choosing public profile photographs on Facebook, and found that older users change their profile photographs less frequently than younger users and are more likely to display photographs of themselves alone.

The third process is sharing; what individuals share on their profiles. Sharing content is a means to show social associations with others as mentioned previously in Leary's (1996) fourth tactic for self-presentation. What individuals share reflects their ideas, thoughts and who they follow.

There are a myriad of other processes to construct an online identity on Facebook such as putting together a short biographical description of the user (Intro), posting to the users wall, deciding which connections can post to directly, and providing user updates with their latest news and activities. Users have the ability to comment on others' posts, updating statuses, liking of pages and the act of 'friending' other people (Manago et al., 2008; Walther, 2011). Recently, the ability to post stories was added as a new process on Facebook. Stories on Facebook allow individuals to share photographs and videos with their friends and followers that will only be available to their selected audience for 24 hours (Facebook, 2019).

Processes on YouTube include users liking a video and/or comment under it, whilst on Instagram, users can love or comment on posts by people they are following and also share their own updates or highlights using stories and hashtags and repost the content of others.

### **2.2.5. The role of others in co-construction of online identity**

Online, the audience can co-construct a profile with an individual and contribute to a large extent to the content of that profile. For example, when friends interact with a post of a friend or an influencer through liking or commenting or through tagging the account owner, they help shape the profile and its contents, hence contributing to the online identity for that individual. According to Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) co-construction of identity happens through social interactions both online and offline allowing youth to explore their

identity and experiment with it. Walther et al. (2008) observe that postings by other people on one's own profile reflect the character of whoever made the posting. However, there is a possibility that the reaction of observers may affect perceptions of the profile owner although the profile owner did not post the content themselves. Therefore, others can and do play a role in co-constructing the online identity.

For youth especially, there is a desire to construct a representation that is valued and affirmed by peers and friends (Livingstone & Brake, 2010) confirming Erikson's (1968) views on the importance of peers. In her review of identity construction, Cerulo (1997) highlights how new technologies have developed the interactions from the requirements of co-presence and they have generalized the array of others contributing to the construction of self.

#### **2.2.6. Studies about online identity and self-presentation**

Online identity and self-presentation have been researched extensively. Schlenker states that "Research on self-presentation has exploded in the last 25 years" (2003, p. 492). In using the word exploded he emphasizes the vast amount of research conducted in the last two decades or so. Studies about online identity and self-presentation reflect the developments in the digital sphere, with each development there are a set of studies.

The initial studies focused on self-presentation in anonymous environments such as Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), Chat Rooms, and Bulletin Boards. Turkle (1995) addressed identity in the internet age. She focused on how technology made individuals reevaluate their identity online and engage in relationships, sex and politics in new and novel ways. She believed that there were numerous opportunities to experiment with identity, especially in anonymous environments. Surratt (1998) discussed if communication mediated through technology can be a real interaction and if real communities can be established solely through technology. She examined a number of MUDs. These studies paved the way for the next wave of studies which looked at self-presentation in anonymous online environments such as Internet dating sites and social media sites, which were novel at the time.

Marwick (2005) investigated Friendster.com as well as Orkut, and MySpace in terms of user presentation strategies. She found that the social power in the networks is made invisible and substituted by structural assumptions on how identity should be presented. Similarly, Boyd and Heer (2006) focused on Friendster.com. They analysed the communicative aspects of profiles within the site. They found that Friendster provides a communicative environment, but the cultural structures developed both online and offline build the framework necessary for ongoing communication. Gibbs et al. (2006) found that perceived online dating success was predicted by four dimensions of self-disclosure (honesty, amount, intent, and valence), although honesty had a negative effect. Manago et al. (2008) investigated



MySpace and how emerging adults use it for identity exploration. They found that it provided valuable opportunities for emerging adults to realize possible selves, however, female sexual objectification and social comparisons may hinder effective development of identity.

A set of studies focused on researching online identity and self-presentation from different angles and in different contexts. Mazur and Kozarian (2010) analysed blog entries and posts on public websites by adolescents and emerging adults and found that they wrote emotionally toned entries and were careful in their self-presentation. Zhao and Jiang (2011) looked at how forms of self-presentation differ between American and Chinese users. They found that self-presentation is sensitive to culture. Bazarova et al. (2012) found that there were differences in self-presentation based on the publicness of the profile in language styles used.

It is evident from the literature review that studies are varied in their topics, methodologies and represent the breadth and richness of the topic of online identity. It is also clear that the majority of studies about identity, online identity and self-presentation since Erikson to date are about European and American participants, with a few studies focusing on non-Western participants, as outlined in the previous sections. This presents an opportunity to conduct a study about online identity in a non-Western context and more importantly in a developing country.

### **3 Building Connections**

In addition to Erikson's identity formation, Goffman's dramaturgical approach and Leary's self-presentational tactics, the study will draw on a number of other theoretical concepts which may provide explanations about the relationship between influencers and their fans' online identity. These theoretical concepts include displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships. I would like to highlight that all of these theoretical concepts are closely interlinked. The majority of literature around them focuses on the fan-celebrity relationship. However, these concepts on numerous occasions have been extended to the realm of influencers. For each theoretical concept, I will start off with its definition, then how it is enacted and studies about the concept.

#### **3.1. Displays of authenticity**

The first concept that may additionally provide an explanation for the relationship between influencers and their fans' online identity is a key process used by influencers to present themselves, which is authenticity and displays of authenticity. Typically, influencers aim to display "authenticity (what is genuine, real, and/or true)" (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, p. 838), and fans search for this authenticity in influencers and appreciate it. Authenticity is the presentation of a truthful and honest self (McCormack, 2011). Banet-Weiser emphasizes that: "It is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and

ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives” (2012, p. 5). In this sense, authenticity helps individuals understand themselves more; it is a moral compass. Authenticity is used as a means to differentiate people from one another and from the different forms of media (Marwick, 2013b). This connects with the view that authenticity is a communicative and negotiation process that takes place between the main players in communication especially in terms of trustworthiness, originality and spontaneity (Enli, 2015). Duffy (2013) asserts that new technologies have given rise to an instant form of authenticity, whereby real people are considered agents in the mediated public sphere.

There are a number of representational practices which are used by influencers to display authenticity. I will focus on the most relevant to this study. The first practice is posting original content (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Marwick, 2013b; Savignac et al., 2012). Audrezet et al. (2018), found that influencers are passionately authentic when they get to publish digital content that is enjoyable for them and this in turn gratifies them. The second practice is frequent and genuine interactions with followers especially in absence of gatekeepers (Elccessor, 2012; Marwick, 2013b). The third practice is circulating authentic images and selfies (Audrezet et al., 2018; Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Pöyry et al., 2019; Schroeder, 2013).

Studies about displays of authenticity have typically focused on celebrities. Elccessor (2012) used writer and actor Felicia Day as a case

study through which she explored how stardom is changed by social media. She found that stars ‘authenticate authenticity’ i.e. they perform the traits that make up their star image and ensure that it comes across as authentic. Meyers (2009) examined the celebrity image of pop singer Britney Spears and explored authenticity through her. She found that throughout her career Spears has actively pursued authenticity through an appeal to show and tell the “truth” and the “real”.

More recently, research has examined authenticity and YouTubers and influencers. Tolson (2010) investigated user-generated content on YouTube, specifically make-up tutorials and the communicative practices within that to achieve authenticity. He found some distinct practices on YouTube such as presentation, interactivity and expertise. Savignac et al. (2012) explored through a qualitative study authenticity management tactics of lead bloggers in the skate-board and street wear community. They found five main tactics employed by bloggers: using an informal tone of writing, publishing original content; contextualizing the subjects of the blogs, reflecting their offline identity and, displaying their expertise in the field. Marwick (2013b) conducted 30 interviews to explore how fashion bloggers use authenticity to differentiate the quality of blogs. One of her key findings was although that authenticity was highly appreciated by all bloggers, they were unable to agree on its meaning. She found that there are distinctive communicative practices on YouTube but preferred to label them as communicative entitlements. One of the findings in García-Rapp’s study (2016) on Bubzbeauty, was that she purposefully aimed to convey an authentic message in all of her

product reviews. She achieved this through talking about her own experience in using the product. Audrezet et al. (2018) observed influencers and brand partnerships and how these partnerships may result in tensions for influencers authenticity management. Their study revealed two authenticity strategies employed by influencers; passionate and transparent. By passionate they mean influencers are driven by their inner passions more than commercial goals. By transparent they mean fact-based information about the product or service. In their study, Aran-Ramspott et al. (2018) found that YouTubers were perceived as an ‘authentic performance’ for their preadolescent audiences.

### **3.2. Identification**

The origins of identification can be traced back to Burke (1950) who emphasized that the effectiveness of communication goes back to identification with the character. So ‘connections’ are established between the character and the audience member. Kelman (1961) asserted that identification occurs when an individual adopts behaviour from another person or a group because this behaviour is associated with a self-defining satisfying relationship with this person or group. He mentions that audience members would feel similar to the speaker and start to create a positive relation with them; they would start to want to be like them.

Bandura (1986) took identification further and developed the Social Cognitive Theory. The theory advocates that individuals enact a

behaviour if they perceive themselves similar to the person modelling the behaviour. People are easily influenced by social figures that are perceived to be similar to them (Bandura, 1989).

Identification has been extensively researched and the fan-celebrity relationship has been the focus of these studies. Adams-Price and Greene (1990) found that adolescents identified with celebrities and developed what the researchers called ‘secondary-attachments’ with them. Basil (1996) focused on the basketball player Magic Johnson and his announcement that he was HIV positive. He looked into the effects of celebrity identification through the young adults’ identification with Magic Johnson, their AIDS-related concerns, perceived risks, and behaviours. Overall, the study showed a complex relationship between youth based on their socio-demographic differences and identification with a celebrity on beliefs, attitudes and behavioural responses to AIDS. Boon and Lomore (2001) explored young adults judgement regarding the degree to which relationships with celebrity idols influenced their sense of identity and feelings of self-worth. They found that a spokesperson with whom the audience identifies with ensures the greatest likelihood of achieving lasting attitude or behaviour change. Briñol and Petty (2009) investigated source factors in persuasion and found that processing a message from sources who seem similar to oneself decreases psychological reactance and systematic examination of the message.

Much of the identification process with celebrities can be extended to influencers. Jin et al. (2019) compared the effect of traditional

celebrities to Instagram celebrities or the Instafamous in terms of source trustworthiness, brand attitude, envy and social presence. They found that Instagram celebrities can be more effective in resonating with audiences as they are perceived more similar to regular audiences, have a higher likelihood of interacting with fans and are easier to associate with than traditional celebrities. A recent study by Schouten et al. (2019) found that participants identify more with influencers than celebrities, they feel more similar to them and trust them more than celebrities, this further confirms that influencers are gaining more trust with their fans and a higher level of identification with them.

### **3.3. Source Credibility Theory**

Linked to identification is the Source Credibility Theory. The origins of this theory can be traced back to Hovland et al. (1953) who analysed the factors which underline susceptibility to persuasion and attributed a number of these factors to the perceived credibility of the source.

Source credibility refers to the positive characteristics and traits of communicators that influence the receivers acceptance of the message (Ohanian, 1990). The theory advocates for three aspects:

trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019; Ohanian, 1990; Teng et al., 2014).

Pornpitakpan (2004) reviewed five decades of research about source credibility. She found a number of variables which interact with source credibility, namely: the source, message, channel, receiver, and destination variables. Johnson and Kaye point out that “Perceptions of

credibility are critical for obtaining and retaining an audience” (2015, p. 545). This is crucial for influencers who set out to build their fan bases. Metzger et al. (2003) argue that source credibility fits with the current web environment given its technological and structural features.

Similar to identification, much of the research around source credibility focuses on the fan-celebrity relationship. Munnukka et al. (2016) explored the formation of peer-endorser credibility and its influence on attitude formation. They found that although celebrities are used for brand endorsement, they are not always convincing as endorsers. They found that peer endorsers had a higher level of credibility. Johnson and Kaye (2009) investigated the credibility of online media including source credibility of blogs, bulletin boards, chat, candidate websites and issue-oriented websites two weeks before and after the US 2004 presidential election. They found that the trustworthiness and similarity dimensions are the key sources of peer-endorser credibility that have the strongest influence on advertising effectiveness.

With the advent of social media, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) appeared. A number of studies found source credibility to be positively correlated with perceived eWOM information credibility. Bhatt et al. (2013) explored source credibility and found that endorser trustworthiness is the most important factor for consumers. Teng et al. (2014) explored from a marketing perspective the antecedents of persuasive eWOM and found that amongst the key antecedents was



source credibility. Jin and Phua (2014) investigated through two experiments the impact of celebrities tweets about brands and the source credibility perception of consumers as well as social identification with the celebrities. They found the more followers the celebrity had the more credible they came across and therefore more trustworthy and increased the likelihood of wanting to build an online friendship with the celebrity. Thomas and Johnson (2017) studied the effect of celebrity expertise on advertising effectiveness. They found that celebrities with expertise are viewed as credible sources and that celebrity expertise has got a very significant influence on purchase intention.

### **3.4. Parasocial relationships**

The last concept that may help explain the relationship between influencers and the online identity of fans is parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships can be traced back to Horton and Wohl (1956) who described the relationship between a spectator and a performer. Their main premise was that the reactions of television viewers to broadcasts represented that of people engaged in face-to-face interactions. Horton and Strauss (1957) further developed the concept within television viewing.

The key characteristic of parasocial relationships is that they are imagined relationships that tend to be experienced as real (Rubin & McHugh, 1987); there is an illusion of intimacy as real interpersonal relationships (Bond, 2018; de Bérail et al., 2019; Dibble et al., 2016).

These relationships compensate dissatisfying real-life experiences (Caughey, 1984); this relationship is one-sided unilateral and not reciprocated by both parties (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Over time media users can give media personalities a role to play in their life and they start to perceive them as friends (Rubin et al., 1985) or as role models (Fisher-Keller, 1997).

Studies prove that the relationship between the two parties is illusionary when it comes to influencers and their fans, as influencers especially mega ones don't have the time to respond to comments and interact with each and every fan (Labrecque, 2014; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

In his book *Imaginary social worlds: a cultural approach*, Caughey (1984) describes how fans behave. He explains that they refer to their hero as a friend or an older sister or mentor or father figure or guide. These words reflect that parasocial relationships are a normal part of social development during adolescence as confirmed by studies, which is of special importance to this study due to its focus on youth (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Steele & Brown, 1995). Parasocial relationships are represented in the following behaviours: fans feel as if they know celebrities through their exposure in the media; repeated exposure to a vlogger can elicit similar feelings of relationship enhancement as traditional media. As this relationship continues to develop, the viewer will start to see the vlogger as a trusted source of information. They seek out their advice and guidance (Rubin et al., 1985); they see the media personality as their friend

(Perse & Rubin, 1989); and, they want to meet the media personality (Rubin et al., 1985).

It's worth noting that similar to the case of the previous concepts, the majority of past research and studies about parasocial relationships focuses on the fan-celebrity relationship. For example, Alperstein (1991) found that respondents in his study created a range of imaginary relationships with celebrities in television advertisements and those relationships became part of the individual's social construction of reality. Parasocial relationships are an appropriate theoretical framework for studying the one-sided relationship between celebrities and fans (Stever & Lawson, 2013); therefore, it can be extended to YouTube personalities or vloggers and their fans.

With the advent of social media there are a number of growing studies about parasocial media within that realm. I will share a selection of those studies to demonstrate how versatile the concept of parasocial relationships is and that it can be examined across a range of media and communication spaces and platforms. Kassing and Sanderson (2009) investigated parasocial relationships through a thematic analysis of 1,086 fan postings on cyclist Floyd Landis's Web site (floydlandis.com). They found that fans interaction with Landis was a typical parasocial interaction from the side of these fans towards the athlete. Colliander and Dahlén (2011) found that blogs generated more purchase intention because of increased parasocial relationships. Tsiotsou (2015) looked at how social and parasocial relationships develop in SNS. She found that consumer relationships and behaviours

are quite complex in SNS and that consumers are no longer passive. Rihl & Wegener (2019) explored how parasocial relationships are formed with YouTubers. They used an exploratory online survey and found that the strength of these parasocial relationships is not influenced to any great extent by use of the feedback functions on platforms.

Displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships are interlinked as demonstrated by studies. Basil (1996) found that identification may underlie attitude or behavioural change. Studies have linked the perceived authenticity of the persona to be a significant predictor of parasocial relationships (Alperstein, 1991; Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Similarly, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) found that the credibility of influencers and parasocial interaction have a significant and positive relationship with purchase intentions of followers.

## **4 The research question**

My main goal is to explore the way in which influencers' and their fans' processes of identity construction are connected through their online performances and interactions. Drawing on the literature review above, I will discuss my goal through exploring the following research question and its sub questions:

What is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of their fans from Egyptian youth?

To unpack this question, specific questions pertain to **influencers**:

- How do influencers present themselves online?
- How do they see their fans?
- How do they see themselves and their role in relation to their fans?

Questions which pertain to **fans of influencers from Egyptian youth** include:

- How do fans construct and present their online identity?
- How do fans see influencers?
- How do they see themselves in relation to influencers?

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this Chapter was to shed light on the theoretical framework that will underpin the study and highlight the key pieces of literature relevant to this study. In the first section, I covered reception studies with appropriation as a central concept. I presented studies which brought together social media and reception to demonstrate the suitability of reception as a theoretical framework for this study.

In the second section, I moved onto identity in the digital age and shared the relevant definitions of identity to this study. Identity is not an individual achievement but grows by being acknowledged and recognized by others (Buckingham, 2008; Erikson, 1968). Identity is based on psychosocial reciprocity and can be influenced by many factors (Blasi & Glodis, 1995). It is important to note the reflexive nature of identity (Giddens, 1991). I highlighted youths struggles with identity as outlined by Erikson (1968). I followed this by outlining key

studies about identity especially those conducted in Egypt and the Arab world. I then looked at processes for online identity and self-presentation, starting with its definitions. I outlined the work of two key scholars who influenced the direction of literature and research about online identity and self-presentation, namely Goffman (1959) and Leary (1996). Their work and the work of subsequent researchers showed the performative nature of identity. I looked at the processes individuals use to construct their identity focusing on the construction of a profile, selecting and using photographs and sharing content. When constructing an online identity, individuals have the liberty of choosing which aspect(s) to focus on and reveal to others and which to hide or downplay (Goffman, 1959; Manago et al., 2008; Schlenker, 1980; Tufekci, 2008; Turkle, 1995). I highlighted the role of others in co-construction of online identity. I concluded this section with a literature review of studies about online identity and self-presentation.

In the third section, I went on to build connections with four additional theoretical concepts which may help explain further the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth: displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Duffy, 2013; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Hovland et al., 1953; Kelman, 1961; Ohanian, 1990; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). In the fourth section I stated the goal of this study, its main research question and sub questions.

The literature review highlighted the lack of similar studies in the Arab world and Egypt. I was not able to find any study remotely close or similar to the research topic at hand. Therefore, there is an opportunity for this study to cover a well-researched topic in the West from an Egyptian perspective. I hope my study will contribute to advancing the youth agenda in Egypt as they are considered to be one of the top priorities. Egypt has a Ministry of Youth and Sports dedicated to focussing on youth. Its mission is to improve the life of youth through programmes which develop their skills and build their national pride (*Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2020*). Moreover, 2016 was declared *Year of The Youth* (Darwish, 2016). A number of initiatives were launched within that year focusing on knowledge, education, sports as well as financial initiatives. National youth conferences are held regularly to create a nation-wide dialogue about youth and move forward on any related issues. Lastly, Egypt launched the First World Youth Forum (WYF) in 2017 bringing together the brightest minds of youth from around the world to discuss current challenges worldwide (*World Youth Forum, 2019*). So, I hope that the findings of my study will feed into these efforts to connect more with youth and use social media more effectively towards that end.





## **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

Methodology is intuition reconstructed in tranquillity.

~ Paul Lazarsfeld

## **Introduction**

In the previous Chapter, I covered the theoretical framework for the study, which is reception studies. I followed this by a comprehensive literature review covering the various concepts pertaining to the study such as identity, the struggles during identity formation, construction of online identity and self-presentation. I moved onto other relevant theoretical concepts which can help explain the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth such as displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships. I concluded the Chapter by the study goal, research question and its subset of questions.

This Chapter aims to share the methodology of the study, the research techniques and tools I selected and why I selected them to conduct the study. The Chapter is divided into five main sections. The first section covers the study design. The second section focuses on my role as a researcher. The third section highlights the ethical considerations I

took into consideration in the study design. The fourth section covers the study phases. The fifth and last section highlights the validity and reliability of this study. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the methodology of the study.

In the first section, I start with the study design which is a qualitative methodology. I explain the rationale for my choice and the strengths of such an approach for my study.

In the second section, I move onto my role as a researcher. I share the multiple roles I took on to enable me to carry out sound research.

In the third section, I highlight the ethical considerations in this study. These considerations stem from the context of the study which is Egypt, its society and culture.

In the fourth section, I detail the stages of the study. I start off with planning which included identifying the data needed to address the research questions and how best to gather it. Planning included sampling and specifying the target participants for this study. It also included planning for the data analysis and building in reflective and reflexive activities. I then move onto developing the instruments and research tools which included interview invitation(s), interview protocol(s) and guide(s) and my research journal. In the next phase, I cover data generation. I start with the influencers and how I prepared for their interviews, reached out to them, conducted the interviews and the post interview phase. I then move onto fans and how I prepared for

their interviews, reached out to them, conducted the interviews and the post interview phase. I conclude this section with approaches to data analysis which covers transcription, reviewing transcriptions and coding and analysis.

In the fifth and last section, I cover the validity and reliability of the study. I outline how I achieved them in my study.

## **1 The Study Design**

I decided to employ a qualitative approach and methodology, building on the theoretical framework of reception studies, to achieve the study's goal. This was deemed the most appropriate methodology as Mason describes qualitative research as “characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive” (2002, p. 24). Qualitative research provides contextual sensitivity, so by employing this methodology, I will be able to explore the topic at hand while taking into consideration the Egyptian context. The qualitative methodology will also enable me to better assess the influencers' (and their fans') experiences in order for me to know how influencers present their online identity while having their fans in mind and what kind of identifications are present in the way fans construct and present their online identity.

As outlined in Chapter 1, Egypt has its culture and intricacies which are unique to it, so approaching this study I have to be flexible and operate within this distinct culture. In addition, the topic at hand which

is online identity has special considerations. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue that online identity has a complex nature which renders special attention. This nature dictates investigation of rich data such as opinions and observations of users and what they think. They are key to this exploration because I am looking at online identity and its construction. As I explore the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth, I will seek the point of views of both the influencers and their youth fans.

A number of characteristics of qualitative research as outlined by scholars render it the most appropriate methodology for this study. Creswell (2009) emphasizes the social aspects of qualitative research as he notes that qualitative research is a way to explore and understand the meaning people assign to problems. Merriam (2009) believes that qualitative researchers have a strong interest to find out how people understand their experiences and build their worlds. By adopting a qualitative approach, I will observe and apply Mason's (2002) description of qualitative research. He believes that through qualitative research we can explore many dimensions of the social world especially intricacies of daily life and delve deeper into research participants. He outlines that it should be conducted in a systematic, rigorous, strategical, flexible, reflexive, moral and generalizable manner.

My research strategy was an organic one, by which my research design, detailed data generation and sampling decisions were not totally defined in advance. Initially, I had put effort into the planning

phase to define data generation and sampling to some extent but bearing in mind that I needed to be flexible and that the research will evolve as I go along. So, I balanced having a plan but also being flexible in execution and implementation. At each phase, I reflected upon my progress, any issues that came up and adapted my plan accordingly. I aimed to conduct the study strategically while being reflexive in all the steps, hoping for the findings of the study to resonate on a wide level.

## **2 My role as a researcher**

In this study, I took on multiple roles as a researcher: developing the study design; becoming a follower/fan; becoming an interviewer, data generator and analyzer; and, a reflexive researcher. In the following I will examine these multiple roles.

My primary role was to put the various elements of this study together and bring it to life. My secondary role included becoming a follower and potentially a fan to influencers to achieve the objectives of this study. To immerse myself in the fan experience, I subscribed to their channels and liked their accounts/pages. Where they had official fan groups, I joined these groups to observe comments, interactions, engagement and conversations. I started to follow their activities online especially their stories on Instagram where most of them post stories on a daily basis. I looked at the content they presented and how their audiences reacted to it through numbers of shares and likes and content of comments. Other roles I played included being an

interviewer, data generator and analyzer. I connected with influencers and fans and built rapport with them to ensure successful interviews. I worked with the transcripts of the interview and my observations to analyze the data generated in the interviews. I also played the role of a reflexive researcher ensuring that I critically evaluated all my steps and being mindful of my biases and working on eliminating them throughout the study.

Over the course of my study, I enjoyed watching how the influencers developed. As the field work progressed, they all grew in the number of their audiences and fans, some moving from tier 2 to tier 1 categories (See Chapter 1, Section 2.4.1. for definitions of tier 1 and 2 categories of influencers). Some of them started to develop further and outside of the social media to carry out actual activities on the ground such as signing book contracts or starting to coach.

In this study, I already had a strong understanding of youth through my own children aged 21, 17 and 12 and the struggles they face. I was aware through them and their friends, who they are fans of and how that influences their perceptions of their own selves and how they want to be perceived on social media. Therefore, I was able to relate to most of the participants from fans who participated in the field work and shared their views on the topic of the study. However, that being said, I still maintained an open mind and a curious attitude when working with the data generated.

### **3 Ethical considerations and the study design**

From the onset of thinking of the study design, I started to think about ethical considerations that need to be built in every phase. My starting point was the Egyptian society, which is the context of my study. I needed to consider what is accepted and what is not in research in Egypt. I had to deal with a rather ‘skeptical’ society, where giving out information is not common. Normally, people are willing to chat in casual and informal settings; however, as soon as they are informed that it is for research purposes they decline. People are concerned about falling prey to deceitful people or fraudsters who collect information and use it to gain some sort of financial benefit or create a problematic situation for them. This is even more critical for youth who are instructed by their parents not to talk to people they don’t know or give out data.

To manage dealing with a skeptical society, I needed to collect data in the way that suits the society. In spite of the lack of similar previous studies to guide me as highlighted in the literature review, I employed my cultural and local knowledge to be able to navigate in the society and collect the data needed successfully. In using interviews as my main tool for data generation, I was clear with both influencers and fans that the data I was collecting was for research purposes only. I took time to introduce myself and create rapport with them as: “good rapport between interviewer and interviewees can facilitate data collection” (Vasquez-Tokos, 2017, p. 13). My profile as an academic



researcher and also a mother, not so young in age, helped in creating trust with them.

I ensured that I dealt with utmost clarity in my communications with them prior, during and after the interviews so that they were aware of their participation in the study and their contribution to it. Influencers made it clear that they were happy to be attributed and mentioned with their names and channels/pages in the study as their presence is already publicly available. Therefore, throughout the study the identity of influencers will be shared. In terms of the fans, they will remain anonymous and their anonymity will be safeguarded throughout the different phases of the study and in the discussion of the results through use of alias names.

## **4 Study phases**

The study consisted of four phases:

### **Phase 1: Planning**

The planning phase focused on the following:

- Identifying data needed to address the research question(s) and how best to gather it including rationale of choice.
- Sampling and identifying the target participants for the study.
- Planning for analysis.
- Planning for reflective and reflexive activities.

### **Phase 2: Developing the research tools**

I developed a number of research tools to facilitate the study:

- Interview invitation(s).

- Interview protocol(s) and guide(s).
- Research journal.

### **Phase 3: Data generation**

The data generation phase included for both the influencer and fan interviews:

- Preparation phase.
- Reaching out to influencers and fans
- Conducting the interviews.
- Post interview phase.

### **Phase 4: Data analysis**

The data analysis phase included:

- Transcription.
- Reviewing transcriptions.
- Coding and analysis.

In the following, I will examine each phase in more detail.

## **Study Phase 1: Planning**

### **1.1. Identifying data needed to address the research questions and how best to gather it including rationale of choice**

To answer the research question: What is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of their fans from Egyptian youth?

I determined what data would be needed.

For influencers, it was important to find out how they:

present themselves online;

see their fans;

and, see themselves and their role in relation to their fans.

For fans, it was important to find out how they:

construct and present their online identity;

see influencers;

see themselves in relation to influencers?

In terms of how best to gather the data needed, I decided to depend on in-depth interviews. Qualitative researchers have a raft of tools to choose from, they can use one or more of the following tools as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln:

qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (2005, p. 3).

From within that raft of tools, I chose interviews which I deemed appropriate to collect insights and in-depth descriptions of influencers and their fans.

The beauty of interviews is that they are an everyday activity that is becoming a very valuable tool especially for research. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) describe the interview society as relying heavily on

face-to-face interviews to unveil the private aspects of participants. Although they are referring to the West, this stands quite true in the Arab world and Egypt which has started to rely on interviews especially in the media in the form of news interviews, talk shows, and in documentaries. Myers and Newman see the interview as a social interaction: “The interview is a drama with a stage, props, actors, an audience, a script, and a performance” (2007, p. 11). In that they are applying Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to qualitative interviews. Demarrais (2004) defines an interview as a process whereby a researcher and a participant come together and have a conversation about questions of a study. Brinkman argues that “Certainly, conversations in the form of interviewing have been refined to a set of techniques—to be explicated throughout this book—but they are also a mode of knowing and a fundamental ontology of persons” (2013, p. 3).

The value of interviews cannot be understated as they have many advantages such as being flexible and modifiable; I will be able to adapt the questions based on the responses and delve deeper where I need to. I will also be able to respond to what is being said as the interview progresses. There is the advantage of non-verbal cues especially in face-to-face interviews in which I will observe the participants while they talk, especially their facial expressions, eye movement and use of hands, which will give me a better idea of what the participants are thinking. I will be able to get behind their thinking by following through with more probing questions. As Rapley (2004) argues that interviewing enables researchers to gather both contrasting and complementary views on the same topic. Therefore, by choosing

interviews as the data generation tool I will depend on an activity people are familiar with or have experienced in one way or another and at the same time use an effective technique for data generation of data, viewpoints, perspectives, perceptions and insights about the topic of study.

## **1.2. Sampling and identifying the target participants for the study**

The population for any study is the set of entities from which the research sample is to be drawn (Eisenhardt, 1989). For this study the population was Egyptian youth who are fans of influencers. This was a rather broad and large population given that youth constitute about 60% of the society (UNFPA Egypt, 2020). Therefore, I needed to use sampling. Gentles et al. (2015) assert that sampling within qualitative research is the choice of the data sources from which data needs to be collected so that the research meets its objectives. My sampling strategy was one which would guarantee that I reached a sample that would help me answer the research question(s).

I used two purposive non-probability sampling approaches to select participants for this study from both influencers and fans. The first approach was purposive non-probability sampling which was deemed the most suitable approach to collect the data needed. In purposive sampling participants are selected because they meet the criteria that have been preset by the researcher as key to address the research

question. Non-probability sampling is using the researchers' judgment to select a sample (Given, 2008).

The sampling approach I chose was deemed the most appropriate for two reasons. The first, is that I had set inclusion criteria for both influencers and fans (see Sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2. for details). The second reason was because it was utilized in similar studies. Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) used non-probability purposive sampling to select female Instagram users to interview in order to determine the extent to which Instagram influences their buying behaviour. Westenberg (2016) used convenience sampling (non-probability sampling) to select the YouTubers and their fans for interviews. The second sampling approach I utilized as a second stage was snowball sampling. This entailed asking participants to recommend other participants who meet the study criteria and would be willing to participate (Robinson, 2014). I detail this further in the next sections.

### **1.2.1. Influencers**

In terms of identifying influencer **target participants**, I developed inclusion criteria to ensure a diverse group of influencers will be represented in the study:

- all Egyptian;
- gender: males and females;
- genre of content: varied and mixed;
- and, having a significant fan base on social media. I split up influencers into tier 1 and tier 2 categories, which represent mega- and macro-influencers respectively (See Chapter 1, Section 2.4.1.

for definitions of mega and macro-influencers). This was according to figures in January 2019, which was the start date of my contact with them.

My exclusion criteria included:

- influencers who were using mass media alongside social media to disseminate their content.
- non-Egyptian influencers.

To help identify the target influencers I used existing tools on social media such as looking at which videos are considered by YouTube as ‘Trending’ and checking the content creator of the video and their fan base. Trending is defined by YouTube as: “Trending helps viewers see what’s happening on YouTube and in the world. Some trends are predictable, like a new song from a popular artist or a new movie trailer. Others are surprising, like a viral video” (YouTube, 2020a). This was relatively easy to identify as YouTube includes a ‘trending’ icon on its left-hand side. In addition, I depended on websites which rank YouTube channels and information in the form of articles or news stories about them. After accessing their YouTube channels, I extended to like their Facebook pages and followed them on Instagram, to be able to gauge their fan base(s) and also to find multiple methods to contact them. As a starting point I drew up an initial list of 15 target influencers, using purposive sampling. While conducting the interviews and to expand the sample, I used snowball sampling whereby I asked influencers to recommend other influencers I could speak to and consolidated that list and at the same time continued to use social media to help me identify target influencers.

### 1.2.2. Fans

For the fans I developed inclusion criteria to ensure a variety of fans will be represented in the study:

- all Egyptian;
- youth 18-24 years of age;
- gender: males and females;
- and, diverse education and socio-economic levels represented. This will be determined through which type of education they were getting whether private or public and where they were living; whether urban or rural areas. Although this was not a key variable in the study, but the socio-economic diversity will be beneficial to widen the scope of the results, provided that there are notable differences based on it.

My exclusion criteria for fans included:

- non-Egyptian;
- those under 18 or above 24 years of age.

To select fans, I started going through influencers' Facebook pages to select either top fans or people who have written a recommendation for the influencer. Facebook Help Centre defines Top fans as:

People can become eligible for a top fan badge on your Page by being one of the most active people on your Page, which can include watching your Page's videos, liking or reacting to content, and commenting on or sharing posts" (Facebook Help Centre, 2020).

I then looked up each profile to try to see if the fan fitted the study's criteria, i.e. the definition of youth, I depended mainly on the



photographs and the Intro section (bio) of the profile to determine if they would fit. This was very tricky as I discovered later on that some people posted incorrect information and of course others did not use personal photographs, so it was impossible to determine any information let alone their age from their profile photograph. On YouTube, top fans are less visible as there is no top fan badge on YouTube, but I was able to see fans who commented repeatedly on influencers videos. I then looked them up on Facebook to check if they fitted the inclusion criteria. While conducting the interviews and to expand the sample, I used snowball sampling whereby I asked fans to recommend other fans I could speak to.

### **1.3. Planning for the analysis**

To interpret the data that will be generated, I planned on using open coding. Given (2008) asserts that coding is the starting point in the analytic process to be able to make sense and conjure a meaning from the information collected during the field work. Coding will help me make sense of the data generated in the interviews. While Coffey and Atkinson (1996) explain that coding is to go beyond the data, think out of the box about the data and generate new ideas and theories. I decided that open coding would fit the purposes of my study and enable me to answer the research question(s) effectively.

#### **1.4. Planning for reflective and reflexive activities**

An important characteristic of qualitative research is that “the researcher is the primary instrument for data generation and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). In the case of my study, I am the primary data collector and analyzer. This has its advantages such as being responsive and adaptive, however, it has its disadvantages such as biases. My goal was to build on the advantages and minimize the disadvantages as much as possible. Additionally, Berger (2013) proposes that researchers need to put emphasis on their sensitivity and understand their own role in creating knowledge. They have to be mindful of their own biases, perceptions and ideas and monitor how they may affect the research process. He stresses that researchers need to strike a balance between what is personal and what is universal.

Accordingly, as a researcher it was important to be active, reflective and reflexive in my study from its onset and not consider it an afterthought. Mason (2002) believes that reflexivity is a continuous process about examining, questioning and reflecting on what you are doing and within that challenging yourself, i.e. being critical. He asserts that it is key for researchers to understand how their thoughts, actions and decisions influence the research process. This process for me started at the very beginning with thinking through carefully the decisions I had to take in terms of choosing: the topic of study, the research question(s), methodology and how best to conduct the research and write-up its results. Mason (2002) further explains that researchers should constantly stand back and evaluate their role in the

process and be as critical as they can be. In my planning, I set out to start and maintain a research journal to capture my reflections and observations throughout each step of the research, especially the data generation phase. I was aware of my biases and worked to eliminate them throughout the phases of the study.

## **Study Phase 2: Developing the research tools**

I developed a number of research tools to facilitate the study, this phase started 9 January 2019. The tools included the interview invitation(s) interview protocol and guide(s) and research journal.

### **2.1. Interview invitation(s)**

For both influencers and fans, I drafted a message in English and then went on to develop the Arabic version, inviting them to participate in a PhD study about influencers. It was important to demonstrate transparency in this message stating who I am, what I am doing, what I want from them and to seek their consent to allow further communication between us to agree how we can connect to conduct the interview in case of their agreement. I used primarily the message in Arabic, except for two target influencers whom I sent to the message in both languages because they speak some English words in their videos.

## **2.2. Interview protocol(s) and guide(s)**

I developed an interview protocol and guide(s) in English, then went on to develop the Arabic version. In both the interview protocol and guide for influencers and fans, it was important to seek consent from participants to both participate in the interview and to record it. This entailed explaining the purpose of the study and the process of the interview. To aid me in the development of the interview guides, I used McNamara's (2009) recommendations for creating effective research questions, these recommendations included: using open-ended questions and neutral and clear wording. This was to ensure that the influencers and fans will speak freely and elaborate as much as they can.

For the influencers interview protocol and guide, I developed a broad set of questions consisting of two main parts. The first part was about the influencer and the content they presented, the second part was about the influencer's relationship with the fans (See Annex 1). The questions were then drafted in Arabic. For the fans interview protocol and guide, I developed a broad set of questions consisting of three main parts. The first part was about their use of social media, these questions aimed to act as icebreakers and to help create rapport with the fans and understand more how they use social media. The second part was about being a fan of an Egyptian influencer and the third part was about how youth construct their identity and present themselves online in social media and the role influencers played in this (See

Annex 2). The interview protocol(s) and guide(s) were then drafted in Arabic.

I planned to look together with the fan at their Facebook profile or Instagram account during the interview whether on the phone or if we are sitting together face-to-face— if they agreed—as one of the main ways to see the manifestations of being a fan, if any, online. It's worth noting that the fan protocol and guide was revised after the influencer interviews and some changes were made to it to mirror the influencer interviews from a fan point of view, with a slightly different flow than the influencer interviews.

### **2.3. Research journal**

I developed a research journal to record my thoughts, reflections and observations with each activity I conducted as planned. The format was simple, recording the date, activity and notes. I tried to keep to it religiously but some days I did not have any specific reflections.

## **Study Phase 3: Data Generation**

### **3.1. Data generation – influencers**

#### **3.1.1. Preparation phase**

In my role as a researcher and in my preparation for my contact with the influencers for the interviews as mentioned earlier, I subscribed to their channels and pages. I took time to watch some of the content presented by the influencers to get familiar with it.

### **3.1.2. Reaching out to influencers**

I started to contact influencers on my target list by all means possible. If a business email was available that was used, in addition to using Facebook Messenger and Direct Messages on Instagram. Eventually, the total number of influencers I targeted were 40 influencers: 17 of which were tier 1 influencers and the remainder tier 2 influencers; 22 males and 18 female influencers. The response rate was 27% as initially 11 influencers agreed. However, out of the 11 who agreed, 2 disappeared. The first one via WhatsApp mentioned that her channel had been hacked and that she will contact me when she resolves the problem, and she never did. The second one, an Egyptian influencer who lives in Saudi Arabia, said that her preferred method would be to respond in writing, and asked for the interview guide to be sent to her. I sent her the questions and one reminder, but she never came back to me. 29 influencers did not respond in any way and 2 declined. The highest responses to participate in the interviews were via their official email followed by Instagram messages. WhatsApp was used to share details before or after interviews.

When I initiated contact with the influencers, all of them preferred the pre interview contact to be via email or WhatsApp only. In retrospect, when I reflected on the process of recruiting influencers, I discovered that I should have initially started with my own circle of friends and acquaintances. It turned out later that some of them knew some influencers in person and could have connected them with me easily.

However, I found this out after I had completed the process of recruitment of influencers.

When reaching out to the influencers, I kept in mind Creswell's guidance: "A topic can be researched if researchers have participants willing to serve in the study" (2009, p. 24). By this he stresses the importance of acquiring participants who will be willing to openly and honestly share information: It is easier to conduct interviews with participants in a comfortable environment where they do not feel restricted or uncomfortable to share information. Accordingly, those who expressed their interest to be interviewed, wanted to be interviewed by phone. Influencers did not entertain the idea of meeting face-to-face to conduct the interview, and requests to meet were politely declined. They all opted for phone interviews at the time of their choice, with the exception of one influencer who requested that the interview to be carried out through WhatsApp voice notes as he was waiting for his plane to take him from Spain, where he resides, to Cairo.

### **3.1.3. Conducting the interviews**

The interviews were conducted in the period 1 to 28 February 2019. At the beginning of each interview I went over the purpose of the study and sought their verbal consent again to participate in the study and to record the interview using my mobile phone. Verbal consent was deemed more appropriate due to the skeptic nature of Egyptians towards research. I took a conscious decision to conduct all of the

interviews in Arabic so that the influencers would feel more comfortable and be able to express themselves better.

I used my prior knowledge about the influencer I accumulated during the preparation phase to drop in pieces of my knowledge about them. This in turn helped immensely in creating rapport and building trust between us. If they mentioned an example from their content, I was able to comment about it. In addition to the questions in the interview guide, additional probing questions came up. Influencers were invited to add any comments or additions they wanted to at the end. This invitation was taken up by four of the influencers. I made sure that the interview was more of a conversation. All of the influencers said at the end that they had thoroughly enjoyed it. At the end of each interview, I asked influencers to recommend other influencers I could speak to (snowball sampling). I consolidated that list and at the same time continued to use social media to help me identify target influencers.

#### **3.1.4. Post interview phase**

After the interviews, there was a follow-up to thank the influencers. Two influencers took the time to send me screen shots of additional information about their audience composition and fan pages. It's worth highlighting that the number of participants was not predetermined or specified in advance. I determined the number of participants by the data collected. I judged that the data had reached an acceptable saturation point when the research questions could be answered satisfactorily. By saturation point, I mean reaching a point of



informational redundancy where additional data collection will not add anything new to the study (Gentles et al., 2015; McCracken, 1998).

For influencers, in total the number of successful interviews were 9 (2 tier 1 and 7 tier 2 influencers) (See Annexes 3 and 4 for details and an overview of influencers interviewed). I found that by the fifth interview that not much new data was being generated; however, I conducted additional interviews to ensure that the saturation point had been reached. When I found that from the sixth till the ninth interview the data generated was echoing the first five interviews, I decided to conclude the interviewing process for the influencers at the ninth interview.

## **3.2. Data generation - fans**

### **3.2.1. Preparation phase**

In preparation for the fan interviews, I joined a couple of fan pages and groups on Facebook to get familiar with them. I looked at the types of comments they put under videos on YouTube and the types of content they liked.

### **3.2.2. Reaching out to fans**

Recruiting participants from Egyptian youth proved a more challenging task than recruiting the influencers. Influencers were expecting businesses and companies to reach out to them, so they posted clearly their contact details, and most had multiple channels to

reach them. On the other hand, Egyptian youth were not easy at all to reach especially by someone who will conduct research and they had no prior knowledge of or a relationship with.

I learned from the influencers interviews that it would be better to invite target participants by using a voice message. I used Facebook messenger to contact those identified as target fans with a message inviting them to participate in my study. The challenge I faced was that I was sending out messages to people who did not know me; they were not connected to me or friends with me on Facebook, so automatically the message went into their 'other inbox' or 'message request', which meant it would go in most cases unseen. To counter that, I went into the participants profile and if it was possible to comment, I would comment under a photograph and ask them to check their 'other inbox' or 'message request'. Where a profile was not public, I was not able to do that. There were some fans I couldn't message because they had closed the option to message them on their home page.

I started to get some responses, usually within a couple of hours of sending them the message. I had to send to many fans to get a reasonable number of responses; I sent out to 117 fans to get 17 responses with a response rate of 14%. I had a higher response rate from young men than young women (5 out of 17 were young women), this is due to women being more suspicious of messages and connecting with people that they don't know and also due to the culture and social restrictions and people being 'skeptical'. Women would be concerned that my account could be a fake account as there is no way

for them to verify this. That is why I used voice notes in the second round of invitations so that they trust that this is a real interview and that I am a woman not a man.

After facing these difficulties, I decided to use my own network of young people, which were basically formed from friends and colleagues of my children and approached them via WhatsApp after introducing myself. This approach helped me secure some face-to-face interviews as target participants felt that they knew me in a certain capacity.

When I reached out to fans to interview them, we agreed how we were going to conduct the interview. Target participants were clear about their preferred method and it was important that I agreed to this to gain their trust and to be able to conduct the interviews.

### **3.2.3. Conducting the interviews**

In total, I conducted 26 interviews with fans. The interviews were conducted in the period 10 March to 20 April 2019 as follows:

- 1) 11 phone interviews
- 2) 10 face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted at the time and place of choice of the participant, which included cafes, malls and on University Campus.
- 3) 5 Voice and Written notes interviews.

However, I discarded 8 interviews (6 phone and 2 face-to-face) because I discovered through the course of the interview that the participant met my exclusion criteria or that the interview was incomplete, i.e. the fan started the interview then chose to discontinue it.

Throughout the interviews I kept an open mind. In addition to the questions in the interview guide, I used probing questions and tried to elicit where possible specific examples. Fans were invited to add any comments or additions they wanted to at the end, this was taken up by a number of them. In spite of the interview protocol and guides, I took cues from the dialogue with the participants about what to ask them next. I made sure that the interaction/encounter was more of a conversation than an interview. In all of the interviews whether face-to-face or over the phone or using voice/written notes, I looked together with the participant at their profile to talk about how they presented themselves online.

In terms of documentation, after gaining verbal consent from participants, all phone interviews were recorded, four of the face-to-face interviews were video recorded using my mobile phone. In total the number of successful interviews were 18 (10 by phone/text/voice notes and 8 face-to-face). The successful fans interviewed were diverse: 11 female and 7 males; 9 from public education bodies and 9 from private education bodies; 12 from Cairo and 6 from other Governorates (mix of urban and rural Governorates) (See Annexes 5 and 6 for details and an overview of fans interviewed).

### **3.2.4. Post interview phase**

After the interviews, there was follow-up to thank the fans. Similar to influencers, it's worth highlighting that the number of fans interviewed was not predetermined. After conducting a number of interviews and going through the data collected, I judged that the data had reached an acceptable saturation point and that the research questions could be answered satisfactorily. I found that by the twelfth interview not much new data was being collected, however, I conducted additional interviews to ensure that saturation had been reached. When I found that the data collected was echoing that of previous interviews, I decided to conclude the interviewing process for the fans.

### **3.3. General points around the interviews**

For both influencers and fans, it's worth noting that some of the participants used English words in their interviews in conjunction with Arabic—which is very common for Arab speakers to do—partly as a reflection of their affinity towards everything global (See Chapter 1) and also to find the most appropriate word(s) to express themselves. Some of them switched between the two languages though the majority of the interview would be in Arabic.

Throughout the interview phase, I recorded my observations and commentary immediately after the interview in my research journal, if I had any. Some interviews did not render any commentary, they were successful interviews, with nothing surprising or unusual about them. Although I reflected about them, I didn't feel the need to write

anything about them, while others were thought provoking and jolted my ideas. As mentioned earlier, some participants insisted on using the phone only or text/voice messages for the interview. This took out the advantage of face-to-face interviews of seeing the non-verbal cues of the interviewee. Nevertheless, I had to respect their requests to be able to conduct the interviews in an agreeable manner.

## **Study Phase 4: Approaches to Data Analysis**

### **4.1. Transcription**

I transcribed each interview immediately after I had finished it. Where this was not feasible, I transcribed the interview within two days of conducting it at the latest. This was to ensure that I was familiar with the data collected and to help me judge when I had reached saturation in the interviews. I depended on transcribing each interview in English word for word. I used a verbatim approach whereby I tried to get every word they said and form sentences from it. All enunciations were transcribed literally. I indicated silences with (...), laughter with (laughs).

For the fans, I removed the identity of the participants from the transcripts to maintain their confidentiality and replaced their names with abbreviations such as P1, P2...etc. I later changed these into alias names. During the transcription, I took notes in my journal to reflect on how I felt during the transcription and my reaction to some of the things said. As Potter states:

Often some of the most revealing analytic insights come during transcription because a profound engagement with the material is needed to produce good transcript – it is always useful to make analytical notes in parallel to the actual transcription (Potter, 1996, p. 135).

Indeed, that is what I experienced, when I used my research journal to reflect on the transcripts as well as my open engagement with them.

## **4.2. Reviewing transcriptions**

I listened to each interview again and checked the transcription to guarantee accuracy. I read all the transcripts to reflect on the ideas being shared and to get a feel for different viewpoints.

## **4.3. Coding and analysis**

Coding allowed me to see clearer the perspectives of both influencers and their fans as coding is: “An iterative analytic practice, coding allows the ethnographer to break apart, relate, and recombine the materials generated in the research process” (Watson & Till, 2010, p. 128). Throughout coding I reflected on it in my research journal capturing unusual findings and points of interest. I started to code both influencer and fan interviews after three interviews from each category. In order to start coding and analyzing, I read the transcripts a number of times, interpretively and reflexively. I not only read through them but also beyond the data and became very familiar with it.

I hand coded the data using printed copies of the transcripts and highlighter pens. Following an inductive approach, and with an open mind I started with open coding, a clean slate. Open coding is “an emergent coding technique drawn from grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)” (Blair, 2015, p. 15). I carried out open coding and from that concepts and insights emerged. I then moved onto axial coding to interconnect the categories and then used selective coding to pick on certain codes to develop my ideas and thoughts.

When coding was completed, I looked to combine categories where possible. This process involved reviewing codes and merging categories that seemed analytically similar. Eventually, I developed themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. Under each theme I included subthemes and subcategories.

## **5 Validity and reliability**

Ensuring validity and reliability was one of my top priorities in the methodology of this study. According to Merriam (2009) the key to validity and reliability in qualitative research is to conduct the research in an ethical way. Validity in qualitative research can be both internal and external. She goes onto explain that internal validity refers to how far the research results are in harmony with reality and if they capture it. External validity is related to how far the research results are generalizable. Reliability is the replicability of research. There are a number of ways to ensure validity and reliability such as using



reflexivity and triangulation. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data to confirm findings (Merriam, 2009).

I employed a number of ways and tools to ensure both validity and reliability. As a starting point, as mentioned earlier, I took ethical considerations into account and gave them great importance in my study. Specifically, I ensured that I was clear with influencers and fans before, during and after the interviews. I ensured that I produced accurate transcripts and worked with rigor on the analysis and lastly, I safeguarded the identity of the fans as planned. I used reflexivity throughout the study to achieve internal validity and reflected on it throughout all steps of the way.

In terms of triangulation, I depended on multiple sources of data to achieve external validity and reliability. These sources included interviews, observations and multiple theories and approaches. I conducted interviews with different fans and influencers. I captured my own observations in the research journal when talking and meeting the participants and when observing online interactions. I used multiple theories, approaches and perspectives during the data analysis and interpretation such as Erikson's identity development, Goffman's dramaturgical approach, Leary's self-presentational tactics, appropriation, displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships as this will be demonstrated in the upcoming Chapters.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This Chapter aimed at presenting the methodology of the study. The study depended on qualitative research, with in-depth interviews at the heart of it (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Brinkmann, 2013; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Demarrais, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mason, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Rapley, 2004). This approach guaranteed the flexibility I needed to examine online identity and being able to operate within the Egyptian culture at the same time.

In the first section, I outlined the study design. In the second section, I gave an overview of my role as a researcher. I played multiple roles to enable me to conduct sound qualitative work: a follower/fan; an interviewer, data cgenerator and analyzer; and a reflexive researcher. In the third section, I looked at the ethical considerations which are of paramount importance to this study. In the fourth section, I looked at the four study phases: planning, developing the research tools, data generation and approaches to data analysis. I then detailed each phase, describing the various steps I took in each phase. In the fifth section, I outlined how validity and reliability are achieved in this study (Merriam, 2009).

The Chapter demonstrated that in qualitative research although planning is central to the success of the research, it is important to be flexible, reflective and reflexive throughout the different phases. Approaches for data collection and generation can be tweaked and

adapted based on target participants requirements and also the context the research is conducted within.



## **CHAPTER 4: Contrasting voices of influencers and fans: Online identity construction and self- presentation**

We put on a face to meet the faces we meet.

~ T.S. Eliot

## **Introduction**

In the previous Chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology of the study. The fieldwork provided me with an excellent opportunity to gain insights about how both influencers and their fans perceive and think about themselves, each other and their relationship. I shared the multiple roles I played in the study and the various considerations I took into account. One of the key tools that assisted me in the study was my research journal in which I reflected in on my various experiences and recorded my observations and feelings at different points of the study.

This Chapter and the subsequent Chapters aim to cover the various themes emerging from the analysis of the interviews. Their totality will encompass the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth. I contrast the voices of influencers and their fans drawing on the themes, subthemes and subcategories that emerged from the interviews and supporting this with theory. The Chapter is divided into

three main sections. The first section looks at the themes which emerged from both the influencer and fan interviews. The second section focuses on social media appropriation from the perspective of both influencers and fans. The third section covers the construction of online identity and self-presentation processes for influencers and fans. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the construction of online identity and self-presentation.

In the first section, I highlight the themes, subthemes and subcategories which emerged from the analysis of the influencer and fan interviews. In the analysis the overarching themes were online identity and self-presentation, perceptions and fandom experience. Although the themes that emerged were the same for influencers and fans, the subthemes and subcategories are different with some slight overlaps.

In the second section, I look at social media appropriation. I start with influencers and look at their motives for online self-presentation, platforms and their aspirations. I then move onto fans and I look at their usage and access, platforms, motivations, the dark side and their disconnect from their parents.

In the third section, I cover processes for online identity construction and self-presentation. I start with influencers and the key process they use in their online self-presentation which is displays of authenticity. Within that I look at the various practices they use to achieve it: content, going live, photographs and maintaining a distance. I then

move onto fans and the key processes they use in their online self-presentation: co-construction, photographs and sharing. I end the Chapter with my concluding thoughts about influencers and fans online identity construction and self-presentation.

It's worth noting that given that the participants were all very passionate in the interviews, I quote what they said directly from the interviews using their exact words. I indicate these direct quotes by using double style inverted commas and I include the influencers' name and fans' alias name.



# 1 Themes

## 1.1. Main themes emerging from analysis of influencer interviews

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the influencer interviews:

1) Online identity and self-presentation 2) Perceptions 3) Fandom Experience. Figure 1 shows the themes and their subthemes and subcategories.

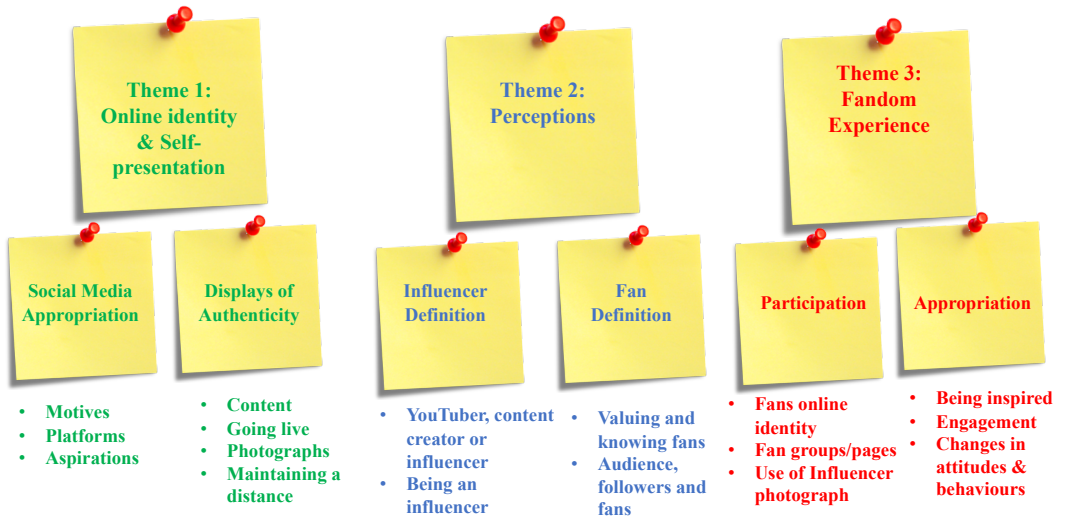


Figure 1 Main themes emerging from the analysis of influencer interviews

The first theme that emerged was online identity and self-presentation. Under that theme the subthemes of social media appropriation and displays of authenticity emerged. The subcategories included: motives;

platforms; aspirations; content; going live; photographs; and, maintaining a distance. The second theme was perceptions, under which the subthemes of influencer and fan definitions came. The subcategories included: YouTuber, content creator or influencer; being an influencer; valuing and knowing fans; and, audience, followers and fans. The third and last theme, fandom experience. Under which participation and appropriation came as subthemes. The subcategories were: fans online identity; fan groups/pages; use of influencer photograph; being inspired; engagement; and, changes in attitudes and behaviours. It is worth noting that these themes are all from the point of view of influencers and will be expressed through their voices.

## 1.2. Main themes emerging from analysis of fan interviews

Moving onto fans, three themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: 1) Online identity and self-presentation 2) Perceptions 3) Fandom Experience. Figure 2 shows the themes and their subthemes and subcategories.

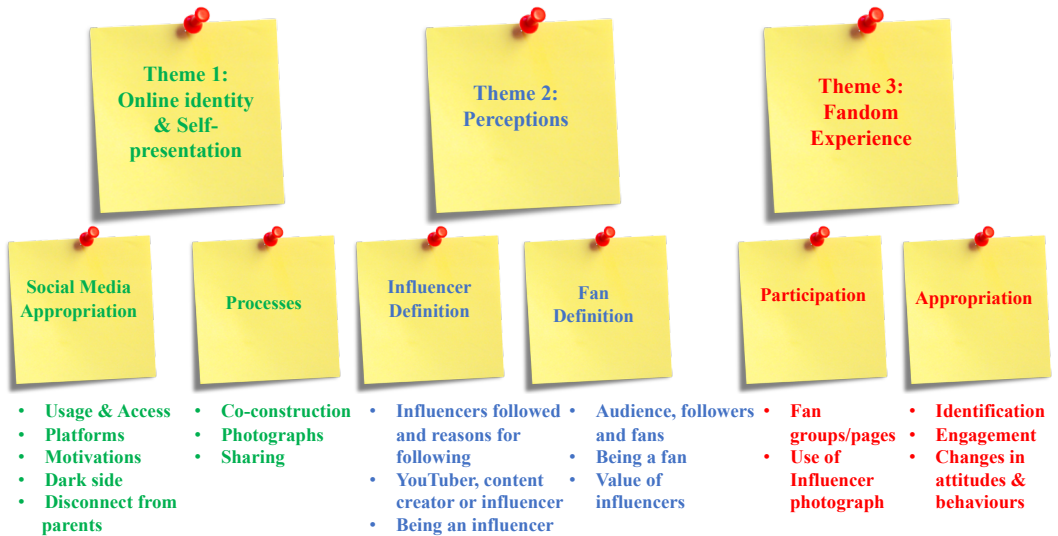


Figure 2 Main themes emerging from the analysis of the fan interviews

The first theme that emerged was online identity and self-presentation. Under that theme, came the subthemes of social media appropriation and processes. Its subcategories included: usage and access; platforms; motivations; dark side; disconnect from parents; co-construction; photographs; and, sharing. The second theme was perceptions, under

which the subthemes influencer and fan definitions came. Its subcategories included: influencers followed and reasons for following; YouTuber, content creator or influencer; being an influencer; audience, followers and fans; being a fan; and, value of influencers. The third and last theme: fandom experience as a result of following the influencers included two subthemes: participation and appropriation. The subcategories included: fan groups/pages; use of influencer photograph; identification; engagement; and, changes in attitudes and behaviours. It is worth noting that the following themes are all from the point of view of fans and will be expressed through their voices.

## **2 Social media appropriation**

This section will contrast the voices of influencers and fans in terms of their social media appropriation. I start by looking at how influencers appropriate social media and follow this by how fans appropriate social media.

### **2.1. Social media appropriation from an influencer perspective**

Influencers appropriate social media through their motives for online self-presentation, the platforms they use and their aspirations.

### **2.1.1. Motives for online self-presentation**

All influencers admitted that their start on social media was random, or it was a trial that could fail or succeed. When they found that they were well received, they decided to continue. Influencer Samar Ahmed stated: “I started that as a trial and there was nothing to lose and things worked out. I found people liking my channel and liking me”.

Influencer Nader Ahmed echoed this: “The start was a bit random, over the years, I learnt a number of things that helped me produce a video”. In spite of their random start and lack of a clear purpose, by time, they all eventually formed a purpose for themselves and set principles they would operate within. This was quite important for them to become meaningful to audiences and fans.

Influencers spoke about many motives to go online and establish their channels and pages. Although, they didn't have a message from the start, they eventually developed a message to get across to their fans.

Influencer Alaa Ghabour stated:

My main message is that every person to become a better person and this is the main thing I will continue to advocate for. Anything that I do is to make the viewer change his mind about a certain thing to become a better person.

Other messages were around entertainment of audiences and in some cases communicating values. Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy stated: “My objective is to entertain people I want them to see my videos and laugh, there isn't a specific message I just want people to laugh”.

Influencer Nader Ahmed echoed this: “I put an idea and things

between the lines so that everyone interprets the video according to their own understanding, they get something out of it based on themselves”. In that sense the content forms the message. When influencers were presenting self-developmental content the motive was to improve people’s lives. When the content presented was comedy the motive was to entertain people.

The strongest motive influencers spoke about was to grow their fan bases and cultivate their audiences. In that they utilized Leary’s (1996) self-presentational tactic of self-description. They used words on their profiles, pages and channels like: ‘Egyptian YouTuber’ ‘Trust in God’ (influencer Samar Ahmed), ‘Fashion, Beauty & Lifestyle’ ‘Civil Engineer’ (influencer Lamia Albardici), ‘Winner of YT Next up 2016’ ‘Vegan’ ‘Women empowerment’ ‘Mommy of 2’ (influencer Nada Fouda), ‘Engineer’ ‘Actor’ ‘YouTuber’ ‘Influencer’ (influencer Nader ElKomely) to describe themselves. These descriptions help their subscribers, followers and fans know what their content is about in a glance and make them focus on these specific aspects only.

Surprisingly, financial reward was not mentioned as a motive. On the contrary two influencers mentioned it as something they weren’t looking for. Influencer Samar Ahmed stated: “Money is not important for me, but my credibility is”. Influencer Nada Fouda echoed this:

My objective is not financial. If I had a financial objective, I wouldn't have started the channel at all (laughs), because profits from the channel take at least two years or even three to

materialize, and the income is not that high compared to the hard work that goes into it.

In this influencers do not fit the definition of seeking to monetize their presence (Abidin, 2015), but they are more into providing meaningful content.

### **2.1.2. Platforms**

Influencers had their preferred platform(s), which naturally had the majority of their fans on. Influencers who started on Facebook for example, like influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy garnered a large number of followers on Facebook and much less on YouTube and Instagram, while influencer Nada Fouda who started primarily on YouTube had a higher following on it than on Facebook and Instagram.

All influencers used multiple social media platforms to strengthen their presence and help to disseminate their content widely. Influencer Nader Ahmed said: “Other social media channels help me distribute the video ... so they all complement each other and help me reach the largest number of people who follow me with whatever new content I am presenting”.

### **2.1.3. Aspirations**

Influencers had different aspirations they spoke about. Some of the aspirations were related to their online presence while others were related to aspirations outside of social media that could be enabled by

their online presence. Aspirations related to social media presence included: “to inspire children and teens” (influencer Alaa Ghabour), “being different, and to be the most influential person on social media” (influencer Mohamed Abdalkader). Aspirations outside of social media that could be enabled by their online presence included: “having my own program” (influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy), “to become a TV presenter” (influencer Nada Fouda) and to have a “career in cinema” (influencer Nader Ahmed).

These aspirations came more from the male influencers, who viewed their social media presence as a backdoor or a bridge to mainstream traditional media especially TV and a step in a wider media-related career. These aspirations indicate that influencers were not only targeting fans with their content but also media owners and makers of celebrities and stars. Interestingly enough, none of the influencers spoke about fame or money as an aspiration in spite of them all monetizing their channels/pages through advertisements and sponsored content. Influencer Nada Fouda stated:

I don't think about being famous because it's not an objective of mine. Fame and financial things are not an objective, and this is what I say on my channel. They are means to get from your journey of spreading your message and values.

This was very much consistent with findings by Audrezet et al. (2018) and Moulard et al. (2014, 2015, 2016), that influencers are driven by their inner desires and passions more than by commercial goals.



## **2.2. Social media appropriation from a fan perspective**

Fans felt particularly excited and enthusiastic to talk about their experiences on social media especially Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. It enabled them to move smoothly onto talking about influencers and their relationship with them. Given that audience reception is potentially an active and selective process (Michelle, 2007), fans appropriate social media through their usage and access, platforms, motivations, the dark side and their disconnect with parents.

### **2.2.1. Usage and access**

Fans talked about their usage patterns and from where do they usually access social media. Through the interviews with the fans it can be deduced that social media have become an integral part of the everyday life of youth, it is interwoven in their day. Sahar said:

I access and use social media for more than 8 hours a day.

Mainly, from my laptop because my laptop is with me most of the time I am at University. Social media is open like running apps in the background.

David echoed this: “More than 10 hours a day”. Hanya stated: “In general, as long as I am free after coming back from University and in the evenings, I sit on the net. I access it from my mobile”.

There were primarily two modes of usage of social media, the first was for a considerable number of hours daily and the second mode was leaving social media running all the time in the background, by no means was it an add-on or something extra. In both cases the time

indicated heavy usage and how it is integrally built within the day of youth. This confirms the overview I gave in Chapter 1 about youth and the use of technology.

These patterns are aligned with studies about social media which indicate that age is a strong determinant of the frequency and quality of an individual's social media usage, and it is unsurprising that younger people are more comfortable with using social media than adults (Cheung et al., 2011; Junco, 2012; McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Thayer & Ray, 2006). These patterns are also consistent with the statistics and figures shared in Section 2.3. of Chapter 1, which indicated that youth are the heaviest users of social media in Egypt. The patterns of usage in terms of time and access are very much consistent with regional and global youth patterns. According to the Pew Research Center, roughly half of 18- to 29-year-old Americans (48%) say they go online almost constantly and 46% go online multiple times per day (Perrin & Kumar, 2019).

Fans indicated that although social media were accessed from both mobile, handheld tablets and laptop or desktop, access was higher from mobile and handheld tablets because it is with them all of the time; it is almost permanently carried with youth at all times. Mo said “5 hours a day from my mobile”. Osama said: “I open Facebook about 2 hours a day on my mobile, because it is always with me and the easiest way when I am not home”. This is in accordance with the widespread use of mobile devices especially smartphones and tablets amongst Egyptian youth (Kamel, 2014). Facebook and YouTube optimize their

interfaces for mobile platforms to enable users to access the platforms easily, while Instagram is an application for sharing photographs and videos from a smartphone, so naturally it facilitates accessibility for its users as long as they have their mobile phones with them. Notably, there was no differentiation of usage patterns and accessibility based on gender, education or socio-economic levels amongst the fans.

### **2.2.2. Platforms**

In terms of preferred social media, and in alignment with data about the top ten visited sites in Egypt according to Alexa, fans preferred using: Facebook, YouTube then Instagram (Alexa, n.d.). Less usage was mentioned of Snapchat and Twitter. Other apps which were mentioned by fans included WhatsApp, whom some included in their answer about social media. Hanya said: “I use Facebook most because I follow things easily and if there are links, I then access YouTube”. Adam stated: “YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram”. While Amal stated more or less the same thing: “I use Facebook, then YouTube then Insta”. David spoke about his preferences: “I will choose YouTube because of the content. There is content that is on YouTube that does not exist anywhere else, not even on Netflix and similar things”.

Notably, there was no differentiation of platform preference based on gender, education or socio-economic levels amongst the fans. This echoes the findings stated in various reports about social media use in

the Arab world whereby Facebook and YouTube continue to dominate social media use across the region and in Egypt (Salem, 2017).

### **2.2.3. Motivations**

Motivations varied widely for using social media. Youth stated: entertainment; socializing by following friends and family; releasing stress; finding information; studying; product reviews; and, gaming. David said: “I usually use social media to release stress”. Differences in use of Internet social platforms reflect different motivations for use (Kuss et al., 2013). The motivations mentioned by fans were in the line with the needs for gratification that social media meet: information gratification associated with use of informational content; hedonic gratification through use of entertainment content and, social gratification through social connections related to content (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Ellison et al., 2006; Gan, 2018; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Joinson, 2008; Lenhart, 2009; Park et al., 2009; Zhao & Jiang, 2011).

In a study looking at media habits of youth focusing on three countries in the Arab world (UAE, Jordan and Lebanon), it found that almost all surveyed participants had used online social networking (e.g. Facebook), and most used it for fun, to connect with family, existing and new friends (Melki, 2010). The results of this study can be extended to Egypt given the similarities between the Egyptian society and the Emirati, Jordanian and Lebanese societies, all of which have a similar social makeup as Egypt.

The reasons stated for following specific content or people were curiosity, whether the video is trending and how much it grabs their attention. Hussein said: “The topic, for example, a while ago I wanted to buy a certain laptop so when I find a video about it, I am intrigued to see it. This is what attracts me or if I have the curiosity to see it”.

Mona explained:

What makes me watch something? A large factor is the number of viewers, if there are millions, then yes, I can go in and watch it. That is one of the things I look at, have many people seen this video or not, is it trending or not, then let’s see it.

Notably, there was no differentiation in motivations based on gender, education or socio-economic levels amongst the fans.

#### **2.2.4. The dark side**

Fans expressed concerns about using social media, they noted a dark side to its use. MacDonald states: “The Internet as a source of communication, information and advice has positive effects but also has a dark side too” (2014, p. 146). While typically the dark side to the internet and social media in literature focuses on internet addiction, risks related to privacy, safety, communication competence, and health concerns (Kuss et al., 2013; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), these were not the concerns youth spoke about in the interviews.

The dark side as stated in the interviews had a number of aspects. The first aspect was linked to influencers who exploit their fans and present trivial content which depends on jokes and pranks; this has higher

viewership than more serious and useful content. Adam said: “Most trivial content has a lot of audience. For example, Shady Srour, he has exceeded a million fans but if you look at his content it is nothing and most people that follow him are underage and that is very dangerous”. Nisreen echoed this concern:

There were also another two, a guy and his wife, I think Zeinab and Ahmed, I went in and watched their videos ... I was one of the people for example that went in because they pissed me off, so it doesn't mean that everyone watching is following you, some people may watch out of curiosity to see what they are doing.

The second aspect of the dark side was being unhappy when following others, Mona explained this: “I felt it is consuming time and at the same time I am looking at people around me and seeing them on social media, they are much happier, they are much better”. This comment echos previous studies (Banet-Weiser, 2014; Błachnio et al., 2015; Chou & Edge, 2012; Kuss et al., 2013; McCormack, 2011; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), all of which have proven how social media can have a negative effect on personality and on self-esteem and can lead to depression. Studies about the dark side of SNS, found that individuals engage in various manners of social comparison through Facebook. These comparisons end up in making individuals feel less happy and satisfied with their lives (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). Some studies on the contrary, contradict this and state that using social media increases user happiness and can reduce depression if Facebook envy is controlled (Krasnova et al.,

2008; Tandoc et al., 2015). In the case of my study, the dark side was linked to unhappiness.

### **2.2.5. Disconnect from parents**

Some fans spoke about the disconnect between them and their parents when it comes to using social media. Motaz said: “My father and mother don’t know how to use the internet. They don’t know how to use Facebook”. Amr stated: “Nobody at home comments about what I do, they actually don’t know what I do on the net”. Eman stated: “They don’t interfere with this. They are okay with me following anyone, if I discuss with my father, he doesn’t say anything. It’s difficult for him to understand what I am listening to”. It is worth highlighting that these comments were mainly from participants coming from low socio-economic levels. This disconnect is fuelled by the fact that youth are digital savvy as mentioned in Chapter 1, while their parents aren’t. This is combined with the high rate of illiteracy in society which is prevalent in the older generations (State Information Service 2018, 2018; UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020), so for them using technology represents a challenge.

Subrahmanyam & Greenfield explored the question of what do parents know about the various communication forms and their teens’ use of them. They state that: “Although hard data on this question are limited, both adolescents and their parents agree that youth know more about the Internet than their parents do” (2008, p. 137). They share the figures of a Pew Report in 2001, which stated that 64% of teens

believed that they knew more than their parents about communicating online. This absence of some parents understanding of what youth do online means that youth are left free to follow whoever they want without any parental interference. Westenberg (2016), echoed this in her study and found that parents do not know often what their children do online or who are the YouTubers they follow. Although fans here are not children but the same applies to them, their parents do not know what they do online.

In the clinical report *The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families*, the reasons stated for parents finding it difficult to relate to their digitally savvy youngsters online included: lack of technical abilities, lack of time to keep up and a lack of understanding that kids' online lives are an extension of their offline lives (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). These reasons seem applicable to Egyptian people. The fans comments contradict some European and Western Studies which demonstrate a role for parents in monitoring adolescents use of the internet and social media (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Liau et al., 2008; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). A role, judging from the answers of fans interviewed for this study, that seems to be missing in Egypt.



### **3 Construction of online identity and self-presentation processes**

In this section, I contrast the voices of influencers and fans in what processes they undertake to construct their online identity and how they go about their self-presentation.

#### **3.1. Influencers displays of authenticity**

The key process influencers undertook in presenting themselves online was their displays of authenticity. This is in line with Goffman's dramaturgical approach whereby when influencers appear before others on social media—whether through video mainly or a post, a photograph or a story—they try to take control of the impression they give to their audience and fans; they put on a performance. In this performance influencers strive to display an authentic image. This is very much in line with Hurley's (2019) finding about how Arab female influencers craft an authentic image.

In the interviews influencers interpreted authenticity as how much deviation was between how they appear to be on screen and their real-life personality. This is aligned with how Marwick (2005) identifies authenticity in terms of a close correspondence between the online and the offline, as a pervasive norm on SNS. Although influencers wanted to create a certain image, they had a general feeling that they were authentic at the same time. Most mentioned that there was very little deviation: influencer Hoda Rashad stated: "What shows is very close

from the reality”. Influencer Lamia Albardici echoed this: “It’s exactly the same because I believe that to fake it or to act in a certain way is very difficult; to pretend is very difficult it's also difficult to pretend for a long time”. However, a couple of influencers commented that some aspects of the personality are hidden and downplayed, with emphasis on positive aspects mainly. Influencer Nada Fouda commented: “My personality on the screen is 85% my real personality. What appears on the camera is my real personality but there are some things which I hide”. This is similar to what Manago et al. (2008) found in their study, that online through the profile either the authentic self or selected aspects of the self can be represented. In this case it is what is projected through videos.

Displays of authenticity was noted as a key strategy for influencers to exist and thrive (Tolson, 2010). In many of their practices influencers will appropriate the practices of celebrities. Celebrities in their turn will deploy the practices that influencers use to display authenticity (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015). Influencers employed a number of practices to display this authentic image. In the following I examine more closely these practices, which emerged as subcategories from the analysis of the interviews.

### **3.1.1. Content**

One of the key practices to display their authenticity was developing original content and a conscious choice of topics to cover. The content they posted was original, developed and generated by them and not an

imitation of anyone else's. This is in line with findings by Savignac et al. (2012), that consumer bloggers construct an authentic image by self-publishing original content. A broader approach was taken by influencer Alaa Ghabour who believed she shared her lifestyle which encompasses food choices, sports and fashion along with daily vlogs of her activities. She said: "My content is basically that I share my lifestyle with youth simply to inspire them, to help them, I wanted us to encourage each other. It can be considered motivational or inspirational". In that she was similar to many influencers around the world who narrate their lives to their audiences. For influencers who provided content based on acting out situations in a comic manner, they depended on trends and on developing a good script, this was the case for influencers Ahmed El Barshoumy, Nader Ahmed and Nader ElKomely.

In terms of their conscious choice of topics influencers depended on what they know or could do best. For example, influencers Lamia Albardici, Samar Ahmed, Nada Fouda and Hoda Rashad depended on sharing their own experiences in using beauty and skin care products or their experiences in DIY or cooking with their audiences. Their channels were an extension of their own experiences. Within that realm they slipped in other topics such as relationships, building self-confidence, positive energy and other self-development related topics. This is in accordance with the practices of beauty and lifestyle vlogger Bubzbeauty, who purposefully aimed to convey an authentic message through talking about her own experience in using the beauty product (García-Rapp, 2016).

Influencers commented that they deliberately avoided topics involving sex, politics or religion. In that they are practicing Leary's (1996) tactic of conformity and compliance and they are observing the nature of the Egyptian society, which is keenly religious and conservative (Gadallah et al., 2017; Mensch et al., 2003). Religion was avoided in its direct form, however, indirectly some of them presented content with an implicit religious dimension to it. The content they presented would appeal to both Muslim and Christian audiences. Influencer Mohamed Abdalkader explained: "I focus more on social content with no religious dimension, so a Christian or a Muslim may watch it and be convinced totally that it is correct". Influencer Alaa Ghabour echoed this: "Yes, I share things any average person does such as if you are a Muslim you pray and if you are a Christian you go to the church but I don't talk about religion or topics related to it as I said not because of the sensitivity". Through this influencers are exercising Leary's (1996) tactic of attitude statements, which is reflected in the specific topics influencers tend to focus on or share.

One of the key aspects mentioned by influencers was how they show on social media only 'positive' aspects of their day. What they present is a snapshot and not who they are or what they do 24/7. Influencer Alaa Ghabour explained: "The photograph I take on Instagram is taken in one minute out of the 24 hours or YouTube is 10 minutes from 24 hours and there are a lot of things that are not totally real". Influencer Nada Fouda echoed this:

YouTubers or even the celebrities show only one side of their life, which is the positive, exciting, impressive and shiny part

of their lives. There are other parts they don't share; they share about 10% of their life. Viewers take this 10% and they imagine that this is their full life, they imagine that they go out and enjoy life and buy things. Actually, this part is a really small part of their lives and most probably its sponsored by companies.

### **3.1.2. Going live**

The second practice influencers used to display authenticity was to interact candidly, frequently and directly with fans. I call this 'going live' through utilizing 'stories' on Facebook and Instagram and live streaming of videos on YouTube. Influencers mainly used video blogs (vlogs) on different platforms. Many of them spoke about going live to be more intimate with their audiences. They wanted to give them a glimpse of themselves without being pre-recorded or presenting a staged video. Within that fans get 'backstage access' to the influencers who will share unscripted more intimate details with them. Marwick and Boyd (2011) found similarly that this practice was used by celebrities on Twitter to create an intimate and authentic persona. Vlogging, to display authenticity, has been connected with types of realism that aim to show real and authentic everyday experiences (Christian, 2011). Vlogs document an unpolished and unedited reality of YouTubers' personae and lifestyles (Berriman & Thomson, 2015).

Instagram was mentioned by influencers to be especially effective for direct interaction. Influencer Samar Ahmed said: "I can talk in the

story; I can have a discussion with you about the story, so that you get my point of view”. Influencer Nader ElKomely echoed this: “Sometimes I do live videos so that I can read their comments and if anyone wants to tell me anything, it’s better to communicate via the live videos on Instagram”. This is in line with findings by Jerslev (2016), who found that vloggers display a sense of authentic self through their straight-to-camera communication. It is also consistent with a study by Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) about A-list bloggers. They found that direct communication with the audience and asking for their opinions were strategies that were advantageous for the continued success of the blog.

### **3.1.3. Photographs**

The third practice influencers exercised was posting photographs especially selfies on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube community. It was an integral activity for influencers to display authenticity through these photographs. This is in line with Lobinger and Brantner’s (2015) views that selfies and self-photographs are important elements to construct authenticity. All influencers asked fans to follow them on Instagram which is mainly photograph-based. Audrezet et al., found that: “Authenticity was observable within SMIs' content through elements expressing creativity such as original pictures, text, and the occasional video” (2018, p. 6).

Influencers focused on images of ‘ordinary’ or ‘basic’ to come across as ‘authentic’. Influencer Nader Ahmed stated:

I am very natural on social media, so I don't post pictures of me in exotic locations, I post very basic photographs and stories. So, they feel I can do something like him, he is a normal person and has become very successful.

This is in accordance with the study by Hou (2018) which found that the representation of ordinariness helps influencers create a sense of authenticity. In general, photographs are believed to carry an aura of authenticity and to be true to life (Banks, 2015).

#### **3.1.4. Maintaining a distance**

The fourth practice to display authenticity, which was employed by two out of the nine influencers, was to keep deliberately a distance between them and their fans. They achieved this online through limiting disclosure of personal information and in real life by limiting meeting them. This distance is similar to what celebrities practice as they keep a distance deliberately so that they protect the value of the celebrity (Bielby, 1995).

Influencers aimed to keep a certain image for themselves in the mind of their fans. They believed that they have to create a mystique around them. Influencer Nader Ahmed explained:

I make sure to keep the imaginary part in people's minds about me there, so I don't meet them so that they have this imagination around me ... Like celebrities if you see them daily the passion and curiosity will decrease.

He went on to describe that if his fans meet him in person, maybe the “WOW factor” they have about him will decrease. This is very much in line with what Turner (2004) suggests that too much personal information whether it is real or fictitious may result in losing mystique as celebrity can be considered a hierarchical and exclusive phenomenon. This can be applied to influencers. Fung (2009) in a study about Chinese pop diva Faye Wong, explained that Faye maintained a distance between herself and her fans to create an allure of her myth. A goddess diva, as he describes her, should maintain her distance so that her myth may continue.

Some kept this distance to create the mystique around them, while others kept this distance due to the large number of fans. There was unanimous agreement that there was not enough time to answer each and every message and comment from fans. Especially, with fans assuming that the influencer is online 24 hours a day. Influencer Nada Fouda stated: “There was one time where I specified a certain amount of time to respond to messages and comments, but it was not enough. It needs someone to work only on this”. Chen (2012) argues that as audience grows to millions, it becomes very challenging to maintain a level of intimacy which micro-influencers for example have with their communities. Therefore, micro-influencers are perceived to be more authentic than mega-influencers who don’t have the time to deal with large numbers of audiences and fans and become less accessible by time (Bernazzani, 2019; Gottbrecht, 2016; Hatton, 2018; Langan, 2019; Marwick, 2013a).



### **3.2. Online identity construction and self-presentation processes of fans**

The second subtheme which emerged from the interviews with fans was their processes to construct their online identity and how they went about self-presentation, which is the core topic of this study. Similar to the influencers, Goffman's dramaturgical approach applied to the fans in terms of constructing their online identity. They set out to create an impression on others. However, their motivations differed from influencers in that they wanted to exist online and be visible to others. Nowadays, “if you’re not on Facebook it’s possible you don’t actually exist” (Hill, 2012, n. pag). “Simply belonging to Facebook is a statement of identity” (Davies, 2012, p. 27). Indeed that was the case of Egyptian youth in this study and demonstrates that they are at the heart of the participatory culture.

Given that youth is a period of identity experimentation, social media represent an opportunity for youth to experiment with their online identity (Erikson, 1968; Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Nurmi, 2013; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Drawing on Giddens’ (1991) concept of self-narrative, he argues that identity is routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual, therefore I see from the analysis of the interviews that fans aim to create an online self-narrative which is continuously evolving as long as they are online. The elements of this online self-narrative they spoke about included co-construction of their online identity; the use of

photographs; and, sharing content with others. These elements emerged as subcategories from the analysis of the interviews.

As youth undergo different experiences or get exposed to different sources of information—one of which is social media and influencers—they reflect on these experiences, reassess their thinking and attitudes and consequently their behaviours. All of these reflexive moments will impact on how they create their online narrative. It's worth highlighting that online identity construction is an ongoing process, it does not end with selecting a profile photograph or sharing some content as individuals continuously change how they appear online and also what they share and communicate. So although I looked together with participants at their profiles during the interviews, in reality their profiles are like moving targets, they change all the time.

Throughout the interviews, fans spoke of ownership of their profiles, their description of them came across as an extension of their offline identity and there was no talk of pretence to be someone else or presentation of a different identity. On the contrary, most spoke about presenting an authentic and honest portrayal of themselves. In the following I will examine the different processes of online identity construction and self-presentation.

### **3.2.1. Co-construction**

Each and every fan mentioned that they took others into consideration when they were online. Mona stated: “Definitely, I think of people’s reactions especially that I have my whole family on my page. So, they see what I do”. Keeping a certain image in front of others was important for fans and they had to be taken into consideration all the time. Others included parents, family, friends, employers and basically anyone connected to them on their profile. According to fans, online identity construction does not happen in isolation of others. This is backed up by a number of studies (Boyd, 2008; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Merchant, 2005).

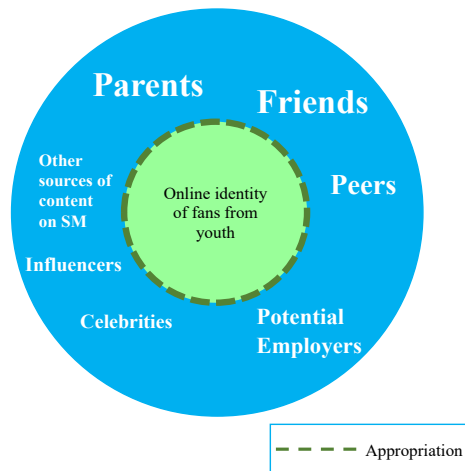
The most immediate concern to the fans was what is described as context collapse which Boyd (2008) specified as one of the dynamics of SNS. Within that context, networked publics bring together different groups of people such as family, friends and potential employers. Some fans singled out their parents as a group who specifically acted as ‘guardians’ of their accounts, they asked their sons and daughters to remove certain content. Potential employers were another group of people that fans took into consideration. David said: “I can’t share because there are employers and my parents, so I have to carry a certain image”. Notably, influencers were not mentioned among the others that played a role in co-constructing identity.

Parents were also seen as a source of disagreement or potential conflict in terms of what youth posted. Amr said: “My parents are on my account, so I don’t want problems”. Heba said:

I also think that people will say why does she share this. Also, my father can comment ... His philosophy was although this is my page, it could hurt people around me unintentionally. I won’t reach anything, so I stopped posting things.

These comments reflect that youth are aware of how their actions could be perceived by their imagined invisible audiences and accordingly they worked towards creating positive self-presentations in order to gain approvals (Yau & Reich, 2018).

People in youths immediate circle and who they know in real life such as their parents, peers and friends played a much more pronounced role in the co-construction of their online identity. Accordingly and as suggested in Figure 3, influencers are just ‘one’ of the players that play a role in the construction of the online identity of youth.



*Note:* The size of the font inside the circle depicts the strength of the relationship between the online identity of youth and each player

*Figure 3 Players which play a role in the construction of the online identity of youth*

### 3.2.2. Photographs

As part of creating an impression, fans selected and utilized photographs. Photographs are part of the front as described by Goffman (1959), alongside sharing, emojis and language used. “Insofar as, in social networking sites, identities are largely created as display identities” (Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013, p. 178). In fans’ selection of profile photographs, the type of settings of the account made a difference in the choice of photograph, whether the profile can be publicly accessed, or its privacy settings are for a specific audience. This was particularly related to female fans. Sahar said:

Yes, my account is private, so you won’t see details. I am not using my photograph because I don’t like to. It’s not a professional account, it’s a Facebook account to connect with

my friends and acquaintances, it's not important to put my photograph they know who I am.

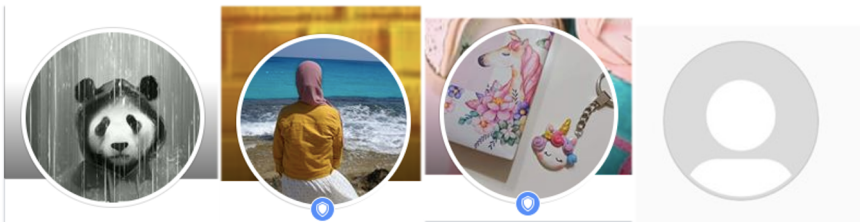
Amal said: “No, sometimes I use the photograph of me with my friends but it's not on public setting”. This is consistent with the notion that:

Teenagers are keener on sharing their privacy, so to speak –that is, on creating spaces for intimacy that, building on the links they establish to their peers, allow them to be themselves– than on protecting that privacy per se (Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013, p. 178).

It is also in line with the conservative nature of the Egyptian society.

Photographs were either of the fan themselves, or the account was left without any photograph, which appears as a shadowed individual.

Some fans used photographs of objects: books or plants; or photographs of animals; or an abstract photograph: a quote or an event as their profile photograph especially if their profile was public. See the following photographs as examples:



*Profile photographs screen grabbed February 5, 2020.*

These photographs do not ascertain the identity of the user, a name has to be used in conjunction for identification. Female fans explained how similar photographs are used frequently by them. Such photographs as those shown as examples contradict the notion of 'Who-I-am' tends to be expressed in a photograph (Wynn & Katz, 1997), as these photographs don't show who the person is and cannot be used to find out the person's identity.

Some female fans opted for not including their photograph due to safety concerns, societal constraints and religious reasons. Hanya said:

First of all, how can a girl publish her photograph on Facebook in public in this society which people concentrate and focus on everything, so I didn't want to publish my photograph on Facebook. My photograph belongs to me and I can share it with my friends on WhatsApp. I didn't find any benefit in publishing it on Facebook.

Eman stated: "I haven't put my photograph because I don't like to because of religious reasons, I was told that when I put my photograph and boys could see it then I have done something wrong religiously".

These choices of profile photographs reflect the keenly religious, conservative and skeptical nature of the Egyptian society (Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015).

Fans choices of profile photographs as indicated above contradict Western studies, which show that both males and females display photographs of themselves as profile photographs. For example, Young and Quan-Haase (2013) found that 98.7% of college students in

one study reported that they posted a photograph of themselves on Facebook. Hum et al. (2011), examined identity construction and gender roles in SNS by studying and comparing the profile photographs of male and female Facebook users. They found that profile photographs tended to be inactive, posed, appropriate, and only including the subject. There were no significant gender differences in content and amount of Facebook profile photographs. Strano (2008) looked at the choices people make when choosing public profile photographs on Facebook and found that women tend to change their profile photograph more often than men and emphasize friendship in these photographs.

Through the photographs showed earlier, I did not find the pattern of gendered displayed identities. The photographs used by some females in this study cannot represent a specific gender; they say very little about the account owner. However, gendered displayed identities through use of profile photographs is a common finding of many studies conducted in the West (Bond, 2009; Crescenzi et al., 2013; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Siibak, 2009; Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013).

### **3.2.3. Sharing**

One of the key processes was sharing content as a means to show their thinking and association with others. In this they were exercising Leary's fourth self-presentational tactic of social associations (Leary, 1996). Sharing was governed by considering others when posting



something, especially parents. This is consistent with studies which found that perceived parental support has an influence on youth's content posting behaviour (Akbulut et al., 2010; Englander et al., 2009; Kowalski et al., 2014).

The process of sharing content on the fan's profiles varied from those who rarely share to those who share many times a day. On sharing rarely, Amal said: "I don't usually share, what I do is I usually mention (or tag) someone, not sharing". Adam stated: "I don't share much at all. My page is public, and you can see it ... Nothing really, I just don't like to share". On sharing frequently, Perihan said: "I like to share my photographs and those of my friends". David stated: "Sometimes, one day I am very active, and two months can pass without me sharing anything at all. I started carrying myself on Facebook that there are certain things I can't do or certain memes I can't share". This is very typical behaviour online from youth.

In terms of sharing content from influencers, fans cited a number of examples of that. They mentioned that they shared influencers' content if it was strong or if it touched them and also to support the influencer and ensure that their content reached others. However, I would like to stress that using sharing as part of their online identity is ever evolving as fans decide to share sometimes or not to as indicated above.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

This Chapter aimed at sharing the themes which emerged from the analysis of the interviews for both the influencers and their fans and focusing on the first theme which is online identity and self-presentation.

In the first section, I shared the themes which emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The overarching themes were online identity construction and self-presentation, perceptions and fandom experience. The details of the subthemes and subcategories differed between influencers and fans.

In the second section, I looked at how influencers and their fans appropriated social media. Influencers appropriated social media and their main motivation to go online was to garner a large fan base. They used multiple platforms to widen their fan base. Most of them had aspirations both within the realm of social media and beyond it. I then looked at how fans appropriated social media. They used them heavily and accessed them mainly from handheld devices. They used social media to fulfil a variety of needs both personal and social. They had different motivations to go online and give a certain impression to others (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Gan, 2018; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Kuss et al., 2013). Fans had concerns for being online and saw a dark side to social media beyond the realm of typical concerns (Kuss et al., 2013; MacDonald, 2014; Way & Malvini Redden, 2017). Some fans

from low socio-economic levels spoke about a disconnect between them and their parents, mostly parents don't know what they do online or who they follow.

In the third section, I looked at the processes influencers and fans use to construct their online identity. The analysis revealed that Goffman's dramaturgical approach was applicable in a non-Western culture. Influencers aimed at building a certain image and a large fan base, towards that they appropriated social media. To achieve that they depended mainly on the process of creating and displaying an authentic image (Tolson, 2010). They used a number of practices borrowed from celebrities such as: content, going live, photographs and maintaining a distance between them and their fans (Audrezet et al., 2018; Berriman & Thomson, 2015; Bielby, 1995; Christian, 2011; Fung, 2009; Hou, 2018; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Savignac et al., 2012; Wynn & Katz, 1997). I then contrasted the views by influencers through sharing what fans had to say about the processes for their online identity construction and how they go about self-presentation. Similar to influencers but with different motivations, fans employed a number of processes to create their online identity: co-construction, selecting photographs and how and what they shared (Erikson, 1968; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Nurmi, 2013; Yau & Reich, 2018). They use photographs as identity markers and build their profiles around trying to create an impression on others. They gave a high value to others who co-construct their profiles with them such as parents, family and friends and even potential employers. Influencers were not part of this co-construction. Fans showed their association

with influencers through sharing their content sometimes. The fact that the fans are part of the Egyptian society influenced how they went about constructing their online identity and presenting themselves online (Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015) as was evident in how females chose their profile photograph and employ certain privacy settings.

The Chapter demonstrated that the processes provided by social media were used for different purposes and in different ways by both parties. Creating a specific image was key for both influencers and fans to give a certain impression. Goffman's dramaturgical approach was applicable in the context of social media and the context of Egypt.

## **CHAPTER 5: Contrasting voices of influencers and fans: Perceptions**

The more advanced the technology, on the whole, the more possible it is for a considerable number of human beings to imagine being somebody else.

~ Sociologist David Riesman

## **Introduction**

In the previous Chapter, I looked at the themes which emerged from the analysis of the influencer and fan interviews and the first theme of online identity construction and self-presentation. I contrasted the voices of influencers and fans. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach was applicable to influencers and fans as they both attempted to manage impressions of themselves to others through performing. I found that influencers deliberately aimed to build an image for themselves to garner audiences and fans (Tolson, 2010). They did that through displays of authenticity with the content they present, going live, the photographs they chose to share especially selfies, and some influencers purposefully maintained a distance between them and their fans (Audrezet et al., 2018; Berriman & Thomson, 2015; Bielby, 1995; Christian, 2011; Fung, 2009; Hou, 2018; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Savignac et al., 2012; Wynn & Katz, 1997). I found that fans on the other hand, aimed to create a certain impression of themselves to others through co-construction of their identity (Boyd, 2008;

Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Merchant, 2005). They selected and utilized photographs and associated themselves with certain influencers by sharing their content (Erikson, 1968; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Nurmi, 2013; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Yau & Reich, 2018).

This Chapter focuses on the second theme which emerged from the analysis of the interviews: perceptions. The Chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on being an influencer and the second section looks at being a fan. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about perceptions.

In the first section, I start with how influencers perceive themselves and contrast this with how their fans see them. I focus in particular on the different words used to talk about influencers and describe them such as YouTuber, content creator and influencer. I share how each party perceives the word influencer and the controversy around it.

In the second section, I start with how influencers perceive their fans and contrast this with how fans see themselves. I focus in particular on the different words used to talk about fans and describe them such as audience, followers and fans. In particular I focus on the behavior of each party and how they value on another.

I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the different perceptions covered in the Chapter. The differing views will help pave

the way for explaining the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth in the next Chapter.

## **1 Being an influencer**

The first section will focus on influencers perception of themselves and the second section will focus on fans perception of influencers and how they see them.

### **1.1. Influencer from an influencer perspective**

Throughout the interviews, influencers reflected on their own perceptions of how they saw themselves.

#### **1.1.1. YouTuber, content creator or influencer**

In all of the interviews and discussions with influencers—except for one—there was an initial reaction that they perceived themselves as YouTubers or someone normal or content creators, then as an afterthought, came the word ‘influencer’. Influencer Samar Ahmed stated: “I describe myself as a YouTuber”. Influencer Nader ElKomely said: “The word I love most is YouTuber, if someone sees me in the street and tells his parents for example that I am a YouTuber, this is really good for me”. Influencer Lamia Albardici said: “I would describe myself using is a YouTuber because I make videos but after time passed, I started to describe myself as an influencer”.

While influencer Nada Fouda’s description of herself was consistent with Facebook and YouTube references to influencers as creators



basically meaning those who produce videos for YouTube or content for Facebook in any form (Facebook, 2020; YouTube, 2020b).

She stated:

I say I am a content creator. Lately, when I noticed that there were a strong influence and people were influenced in their life by me and I saw it on the ground ... so I started to say that I'm an influencer.

Influencers definition of themselves was very distant from the typical definitions of influencers as third-party endorsers (Abidin, 2015; Freberg et al., 2011) or as opinion leaders or experts (Khamis et al., 2016; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Overall, influencer was not a word that sprung to participants minds immediately during the interviews.

### **1.1.2. Being an influencer**

When I distanced the discussion from creators and probed them specifically about the word influencer, they had certain preconceived ideas about what it meant and mostly it was linked to positive change.

Influencer Alaa Ghabour explained:

Like Ahmed Samir (Egychology) and El Daheeh, Ghandour. I see that all of us although we take science all our lives nobody likes it, we study it because we have to. They were able to influence small children and also old people like sixty-year old's, who were able to take information from them and benefit from them, so I see those two as strong influencers. Also, on Instagram, Hadia Ghaleb. I see her as a good influencer because she encourages girls to dress well.

Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy stated: “Influencer for me, means people who have a certain influence or those who give information”. Influencer Nader Ahmed echoed this: “The influence I see is always on the positive side”. This is consistent with Ayish and AlNajjar’s (2019) argument that influencers bring about significant transitions in their societies. I see this more appropriate as a description for influencers in this part of the world where the society has been governed by a strong set of traditional structures, such as family and societal norms for quite a long time so with the advent of social media youth are now turning to other sources of information as social references (Sabbagh et al., 2012). Consequently, influencers can play a role where they actually can bring about change.

Some controversy existed around the word, influencer Alaa Ghabour spoke about the misuse and misunderstandings of the word:

... influencer is a word that should be something very big, but people have used it in the wrong way. Anyone on social media and has above 10,000 followers or subscribers calls himself an influencer. But in reality, an influencer should be someone that influences and impacts the life of people.

Influencers explained that with becoming an influencer came a responsibility in what they need to do and how they should act towards their audiences and fans. It was something influencers did not take lightly. Influencer Nader Ahmed states: “I am quite afraid of the responsibility, so I take great care in what I present because there are two million watching or more”. This responsibility can be seen as a

burden but with a reward, as influencer Alaa Ghabour said:

“Sometimes you feel that this responsibility is a burden, but it gets compensated by feeling that people love you”.

Influencers felt they needed to keep their word if they tell their fans about anything they will deliver, and they also needed to give trusted reviews about products. This is linked to displaying authenticity through content. According to Boyd (2008) SNS are characterized by content which can be stored for a long time (forever), searched at any time, copied in an unlimited manner, which also means potential visibility is quite high. Influencers were quite aware of this, influencer Nader Ahmed said: “I always admit and take care of my history, what will my kids and grandkids say, will they say I was silly or good? Anything said stays forever, people take screen shots and downloads so I should take care”. What is stated by Nader Ahmed is aligned with views that digitally recorded and stored data is the record of identity (Vybiral et al., 2004). Influencer Alaa Ghabour echoed this:

The feeling that people are waiting for something from you, creates a responsibility and the other thing is knowing that people can copy or imitate you adds to the responsibility because they notice every detail you do.

Overall, influencers saw themselves primarily as YouTubers or content creators. They linked the word influencer to positive change and with it came the responsibility of what they present.

## **1.2. Influencer from a fan perspective**

Fans were selected based on being a fan of one or more of the influencers in this study (See Chapter 3 for inclusion criteria for participants). Fans spoke passionately about the influencers they followed and they were able to describe their behaviour towards them at great level of detail.

### **1.2.1. Influencers followed and reasons for following**

Fans were able to name the influencers they followed. The majority of influencers named were Egyptians, with reference to a few Arabs and Western influencers. Dalia said: “I am a fan of Nader. I also follow Aliaa Awee, Menna Ismail, Ebtessam Mostafa, they are beauty vloggers and make-up artists”. Amr stated: “On YouTube Nader Ahmed, Mohamed Wahba, Mohamed Khaled, Ahmed Negm, I also follow football and other things. I love El Daheeh, Egychology, also Sabaho Kora”.

Fans were able to recall specific content presented by influencers, which gives an indication that influencers are at the top of the minds of their fans. Adam said: “Yes, a couple of days ago Alaa did a video about how to wash your teeth, I still remember this video clearly”. Sahar stated:

Barshoumy posted a video recently (laughs), it was about Mother’s Day, he put it a couple of days ago and I felt it was a really good video because it raises the issue I have, that we

don't know what to get for our mum. It was a silly thing, but I felt many people have the same issue.

Similar to using social media, fans had various reasons for following influencers. On one level, reasons were content related such as: entertainment, usefulness, relevance of content, to get positive energy and other reasons (Gan, 2018; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). On another level, reasons were influencer-related such as: liking the influencer, their communication/presentation style, feeling respected by the influencer, and, the authenticity and the honesty of the influencer. This reflects the importance of influencers displaying authenticity. It is very much aligned with the study commissioned by Variety magazine to measure the awareness, likability and purchase influence of YouTube stars and traditional TV/Movie stars among 13-18-year old's; six of the top ten personalities in the study were YouTube stars. YouTube stars scored significantly higher than traditional celebrities across a range of characteristics. They were deemed to be more engaging and relatable. They feel that these celebrities aren't subjected to image enhancing strategies similar to traditional celebrities and that they are quite spontaneous, unlike traditional celebrities who's whole behaviour is calculated (Ault, 2014).

### **1.2.2. YouTuber, content creator or influencer**

When describing influencers, fans used other words to refer to them such as YouTubers or content creators. Hussein said: "Content creators is a more accurate word. Influencers can't be applied to all. Someone might create content, but it has no influence whatsoever". Adam

stated: “We can say YouTubers because that is the best thing that made them known and this is what they are active in all the time”.

Fans had different perceptions of what the word ‘influencer’ meant, some felt that it had to do with what the influencer did or how they behaved, others linked it to how the influencer treated their fans. In terms of what the influencer did or how they behaved, Dalia said talking about Influencer Nader Ahmed: “If I want to describe him, I would say he is joyful, he knows how to make people happy. He creates a very nice atmosphere and he is very powerful, spontaneous, and very rational”. These characteristics have been highlighted by scholars who sum up the key factors necessary to sustain long term public recognition: personality, providing compelling and distinct content, reach and generating meaningful engagement (Khamis et al., 2016; Tilton, 2011). These characteristics are in line with credible source characteristics as outlined in the Source Credibility Theory (See Chapter 2, Section 3.3. for details).

Others linked influencers to their fans and how they treated them and interacted with them, Dalia said talking about influencer Nader Ahmed:

Also, I like people who give importance to their fans and at the same time are humble, they don’t have a huge ego or are crazy to become famous. Also, people close to their fans, they communicate with them and listen to what they want. It’s not only about what they want to share, I like this, and all of this comes under the title of respecting the mentality of the viewer.

Some fans linked influencers to having presence and impact on the ground not only on the screen. Adam explained that he felt it was important for influencers to be accessible on the ground in real life and not on the screen only: “I refer to people that are on the internet as ‘temporary’, some people like Hossam Heikal started to go to events and be with people and he wrote a book. This makes him not temporary”.

### **1.2.3. Being an influencer**

Fans believed that the words content creator and YouTuber were not synonymous with the word influencer because the latter meant something bigger and was linked to being able to bring about change in others, especially positive change. This concurs with what influencers described earlier as influence i.e. they should make a positive difference.

Fans used positive words to describe influencers: “motivate us”, “help us”, “you are influenced by their personality”, “they are important to you”, “have an influence on the society one way or another”, “people who have some sort of social media power and they use it positively to influence others”, “supporting good messages for the community”, “anyone who makes you think”, and “anyone I will listen to who will inspire me in one way or another”.

It’s worth noting that similar to influencers, all the descriptions by fans were distant from the typical definitions of influencers as third-party

endorsers (Abidin, 2015; Freberg et al., 2011) or as opinion leaders or experts (Khamis et al., 2016; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006; Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Fans saw them more as a power that play a positive role in their lives. By no means did fans link influencers to the promotion of a brand or a marketing campaign although the majority of influencers in this study present sponsored videos and promote brands in their videos.

## **2 Being a fan**

A strong theme which emerged during the analysis of the influencer interviews was their perception of their fans. Two important questions arise, what converts a member of the audience into a subscriber or a follower or a fan? and is a fan an elevated status of being a follower?

In defining fans, on a basic level, I can use social media's definitions: Facebook and Instagram allow individuals to 'follow' influencers through a 'follow' button and they are stated clearly as 'followers' on their Facebook pages and Instagram accounts. However, Facebook additionally has 'Top fans', who are the people most active on the page of a public figures page whether influencer or celebrity. YouTube allows individuals to 'Subscribe' to influencers' channel(s) and they are clearly stated on the channel homepage as 'Subscribers'.

Jenkins considers fans to be the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties (Jenkins, 2010). In his book *Audience: Marketing in the age of subscribers, fans and followers*,



Rohrs distinguishes between subscribers, fans and followers through their expectations: subscribers look for convenience, fans look for passion empowered, and followers look for information shared. He goes on to explain that subscribers want content that is convenient, useful, delivered through the channel they choose and consistent with expectations set at the time of subscription. As for fans, “the essence of fandom is emotion [...] fans want to express and share their passion for something they want to enjoy” (2014, p. 46). Fans express their passion for brands, connect with like-minded people, gain benefits from their fandom and protect the brand where needed. Followers seek curated information from the source and aim to share it: “they follow to be followed” (Rohrs, 2014, p. 52). Followers want information, access, unique insights and shareable content that enables them to build their own followers. Along these same lines, Jenkins outlines what a fan is:

To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities. Yet it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defence of taste (1992, p. 23).

In the first section I will focus on influencers perception of their fans, how they see them, and in the second section I will focus on fans’ perception of themselves.

## **2.1. Fan from an influencer perspective**

### **2.1.1. Valuing and knowing fans**

Fans in general were important to influencers, as their perceived authenticity lies on the perception of others (Beverland et al., 2010; Rose & Wood, 2005). This came across strongly in the interviews. Influencer Nader ElKomely stated: “At the end of the day these people made me, they made me reach what I wanted. I wouldn’t have reached anything without them, so I love them”.

The number of fans an influencer had, impacted on the answers of influencers to a great extent. Where there were large numbers of fans, influencers spoke about their fans and how important they were to them, the discussion revolved more around fans. The smaller the number, the more the focus of the discussion was on the influencers themselves and revolved around them. I expected that influencers had some idea about their fans, however, I was surprised by the level of in-depth knowledge they had about them. Throughout the interviews they spoke about who they were targeting and also what they knew about them.

Many of the influencers had specific descriptions of their fans and spoke about them with a high level of familiarity and affection at the same time. They were able to provide an accurate overview of the demographics of their fan base whether the age, gender or the countries they come from. Some gave broad figures and sent more details after the interview but in all cases, influencers had the figures in

their minds. This gives an indication of how important fans are for the influencers.

All influencers utilized the digital tools and statistics that Facebook, YouTube and Instagram provided to know their audience profile. They all checked their statistics on a regular basis and could tell me off the top of their heads the demographic profile of their audiences, which countries they were from and even their socio-economic level.

Influencer Samar Ahmed said: “I know my audience composition from settings”. Influencer Lamia Albardici echoed this:

Yes, I know a great deal about them; I have more girls following me than boys. I can give you specific statistics, for example 80% of girls and 20% of boys, the age range is from 18-34 which are the majority.

Two of the influencers willingly sent me screen shots showing their audience composition after the interviews.

The geographical location of the influencer impacted on the target audience, if the influencer was based in Egypt, they would look to Egyptian audiences in the first instance. However, they expanded their target groups as they went along. Influencer Alaa Ghabour explained:

In the beginning I targeted Egyptians only but then I found people from outside of Egypt becoming part of my audience. They used to tell me why are you focusing only on Egyptians why don't you consider people outside of Egypt?

For influencers who provided non-gender specific content such as comedy videos, they all pointed out that if the influencer is a male, the

majority of the audience would be female and vice versa. Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy stated: “80% or more of my followers are girls due to the nature of the content”. This was echoed by Mohamed Abdalkader.

### **2.1.2. Audience, followers and fans**

When probed specifically about their audiences’ and how they describe them, influencers had split views. Whilst some didn’t want to use any description such as audience, fans or followers, others felt quite comfortable to do so. Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy stated: “The word I use most is fan but literally you can say the three words: audience, followers and fans. The word I use most is fans maybe because it's the easiest word to say”. Influencer Nader Ahmed said: “The only word I can use is it's a responsibility”. Influencer Mohamed Abdalkader stated: “I consider them my audience, that is the word I use to describe them. I feel the word fans is quite fake, it means I am hugely famous. Actually, audience is a nice word”.

The most prominent description of fans in each and every interview was neither of the words audience, followers or fans, but it was friends and family. Influencer Lamia Albardici stated sentimentally: “I feel that they are my friends or my brothers and sisters”. Influencer Nader ElKomely echoed this: “I always say that they are my brothers, they are the most important thing for me because if it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have existed. So of course, I say brothers”. Influencer Samar

Ahmed stated: “I like to use the word friends, because I talk with them ... I feel they are my friends”. Influencer Alaa Ghabour added:

I like to say that I am talking to my friends, because when I go out and say what is similar to what I say to my friends and not just any friends but those who are close to me.

Influencer Nada Fouda had a slightly different view: “On a professional level I consider them followers but on a personal level I consider them like my family, or my brothers and sisters”. This way of thinking and perceiving fans eased for many influencers talking in front of a camera.

Some influencers referred to fans becoming friends in real life.

Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy stated: “I got to know a lot of people, some of whom we became friends and I started to meet them in real life”. Influencer Samar Ahmed said: “I have made friends from fans, when they wake up, they send me a good morning message”. Defining fans in that way gives them a certain value and weight and influencers consider how their fans will receive their content. Mohamed

Abdalkader stated: “I care for my audience, I do consider them like my friends, I can’t deal with them naively or not care what they think, I do care for their feelings”.

An important insight mentioned was that when fans loved the influencer, they followed them regardless of the content presented.

Influencer Samar Ahmed said: “They say we watched the video because of you, it doesn't matter what you present, and this makes me happy. The content does not matter because they love the person”.

Nader ElKomely echoed this: “If someone follows me and loves me, he will comment on me and on anything I post. Why is he commenting? Because he likes what I do, as long as they love you, they comment”. Influencer Nada Fouda elaborated on this saying: “ ... there is a type of love and strong loyalty to the personality, that exists”. Influencer Nader Ahmed similarly stated: “Even if there aren’t videos there are stories, they like the personality so they like to see it in all its cases, so there is a strong influence on people”. This is significant because in these cases, the personality of the influencer overtakes the content they present and supersedes it.

## **2.2. Fan from a fan perspective**

### **2.2.1. Audience, followers and fans**

In the course of the interviews, I asked fans to differentiate between audience, followers and fans. Eman explained the difference for her, she described being a fan as:

People who I love on social media and impact on me I consider myself a fan of them, it means that I feel happy for their happiness and get upset if they are upset although I don’t know them personally, for me that is a fan.

While she described being a follower as: “For me a follower is that I go in and see something that I like in terms of content, so I see it even if I don’t like all of their content”. Motaz described his position similarly:

I am a lover. I go in and check regularly if they have uploaded a new video. Also, if I like something, I share it on my page or

put it as a story and so on, as I told you. It is more than a follower.

Osama presented a different view: “I consider I am a follower, not to the extent of a fan because I am a personality who depends on itself in a lot of things”. Mona stated:

Most probably I am a follower because I am not very passive, I don't just watch, I support through subscribe, or share or like but at the same time, I am not waiting for that specific person to upload a video to see it immediately and comment and send a message and I talk amongst people and say, have you seen that person.

From their comments, it seems that fans assigned the different words based on their feelings and behaviours towards the influencer.

### **2.2.2. Being a fan**

Fans spoke specifically about what it meant being a fan for them. They described it in the form of the behaviours they carried out towards the influencer. Being a fan manifests itself in both online and offline behaviours. Fans explained that they could carry out one or more of these behaviours which for them meant being a fan.

In terms of online behaviours, the first behaviour was waiting for videos in anticipation; checking regularly if anything has been uploaded and refreshing the page. Motaz said: “I go in and check regularly if they have uploaded a new video”. Eman said:

I really wait for her videos; I have notifications turned on for her channel so any videos she puts I see them as soon as they are uploaded. I wait for her videos and also stories on Facebook and Instagram, for me she is number 1.

The second behaviour was watching a video as soon as it is uploaded. Adam said: “This means as soon as he uploads a video, I see it within three minutes of uploading. I watch it immediately”. The third behaviour was watching all of the influencers’ videos and posts. Sahar said: “For Barshoumy I am a fan, I watch all of his videos”. The fourth behaviour was liking the video, post or story. Facebook states that people who click the Facebook Like button are more engaged, active, and connected than the average Facebook user (Facebook, 2010). The fifth behaviour was sending emojis to the influencer on a story. The sixth behaviour was commenting on the video, post or story. The seventh behaviour was sharing content on the fans profile which helps shape the profile, hence creating a certain online identity for that fan in association with the influencer. The eighth behaviour was to follow the influencer on all social media platforms. Amal said: “It means somebody who follows someone he loves and also loves the content presented”.

In terms of offline behaviours they included, first being loyal to the influencer and defending them all of the time. Osama explained: “For me fan it means that I defend that person all the time and that I am loyal to them”. The second behaviour was buying merchandise sold by the influencer. The third behaviour was loving the character of the influencer more than the content he or she presents. This behaviour



echoed what was mentioned by influencers. Indeed, fans invest and actively engage in their particular interest, and are intellectually, emotionally, behaviourally, and ideologically involved (Jenkins, 1992; Schimmel et al., 2007).

Dalia used the following words to sum up what being a fan is: “A fan is more someone who is influenced by the person”, “they follow them everywhere”, “they may go in and check their personal account on Facebook and Instagram and check the stories”, “they join the fan group on Facebook”, and, “someone who loves the character and supports him”. The key take away from her description is that being a fan is in relation to the personality of the influencer more than anything else.

### **2.2.3. Value of influencers**

Interestingly, within the course of the interviews, a hypothetical question was raised, which was ‘what if influencers disappeared tomorrow, how would that influence you as a fan?’

Responses were quite consistent whereby fans stated that they would have more spare time and that it won’t really make a huge difference to them. Hussein said:

For me they fill up a great deal of my spare time, when I open YouTube to fill my time. They take up a lot of my time because they are daily videos. So, if they don’t exist, I will have a lot of free time, or I can do something else on YouTube, I will search for something else.

David echoed this: “I will use social media less and do other things in my life, maybe take up sports”. Heba said: “I feel that I will be upset but after that it will be normal”. Sahar echoed this: “It won’t make a huge difference”. Osama stated: “Their existence is important, but I won’t die without them”. Adam explained: “As long as they are on the internet only, they are temporary and so if they disappear it won’t make a difference to anybody”.

These answers indicate that influencers in spite of fulfilling certain needs for fans, can be replaced with other types of content, activities or media personae.

## **Concluding thoughts**

The purpose of this Chapter was to examine the second theme emerging from the analysis of the interviews, which was perceptions. I contrasted the voices of influencers and fans in terms of how each of them perceived one another. In the first section, views of influencers and fans met in terms of describing what an influencer was, both saw influencers primarily as content creators or YouTubers. Both parties were in agreement that influencer meant bringing about positive change. Fans in their comments put more emphasis on influencers having a positive effect.

In the second section, there were differing views to what a fan is. Influencers used the tools social media provide to find out more about their audiences. Influencers saw fans as family and friends. Influencers

description of their fans was geared more towards social and demographic characteristics. Fans on the other hand described influencers as those who bring about positive change. They focused more on their behaviours towards the influencer and were able to articulate specific examples of those behaviours both online and offline (Jenkins, 1992; Schimmel et al., 2007).

The Chapter demonstrated that there are some different perceptions between influencers and fans in terms of how they perceive and think of one another and some agreements as well. It confirmed that both are equally valuable to one another. Influencers existence hinges on their growing fan bases and fans. In their turn fans use influencers to fulfil their needs, which they demonstrated that they can be satisfied by other sources of content and activities if influencers are absent.



## **CHAPTER 6: Contrasting voices of influencers and fans: Fandom experience**

Our identity is affected less and less by what we produce and more and more by what we consume.

~ Pete Sanders

## **Introduction**

In the previous Chapter, I looked at what it meant to be an influencer and what it meant to be a fan from two different perspectives: that of influencers and of fans. Both influencers and fans saw influencers primarily as content creators. They believed that being an influencer was linked to positive impact and bringing about change in fans and in society. Influencers knew their fans quite well in terms of their demographic characteristics and their geographic spread. Fans were very important for influencers. They believed that fans could be considered family and friends. While on the other hand fans believed that what made them a fan was their behaviour(s) towards the influencer. The behaviours, both online and offline, were varied and ranged from mere waiting in anticipation for a video till loving the influencer regardless of the content they provided.

This Chapter aims to cover the third and last theme which emerged from the interviews, the fandom experience. I look at it as an

individual experience and not a community one. Similar to the previous Chapters, this Chapter will contrast the voices of influencers and their fans in looking at the third and last theme and its various subthemes. The Chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section covers participation and the second section covers appropriation which represents the manifestations of becoming a fan. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the fandom experience.

In the first section, I cover participation. The participatory culture of social media dictates that individuals behave both individually and collectively and express themselves through a broad range of different forms and practices (Jenkins, 2016). I start by looking at participation from an influencer perspective with a focus on fans online identity, fans groups/pages and use of influencer photograph. I follow this by looking at participation from a fan perspective covering fan groups/pages and use of influencer photograph.

In the second section, I cover appropriation. I start with influencers and their views as to how fans appropriated their content. This appropriation took a number of forms such as being inspired, engagement and changes in attitudes and behaviours. Through these manifestations' influencers defined their relationship with their fans and the role they played in their lives. I then move onto how fans appropriated the content presented by influencers through identification, engagement and changes in attitudes and behaviours. Throughout the interviews fans spoke about taking in content from influencers and repurposing it.

# **1 Participation**

Being a fan is a participatory culture behaviour as fans are active audience members. Fans demonstrated their participation in a number of ways. In the first section, I will examine this participation from the point of view of influencers then in the second section I will examine it from the point of view of their fans.

## **1.1. Participation from an influencer perspective**

Influencers saw the participation of their fans in a number of ways: through their online identity, fan groups/pages and through using the influencers photographs. I will be examining these in more detail in the following.

### **1.1.1. Fans online identity**

Influencers spoke about the online identity of their fans. They raised an unexpected observation about it. They stated that females hide online behind male identities such as a brother, father, fiancé or husband. The account name that appears is not a pseudonym but a male name. Those fans when they write a comment, they always state that they are girls using their brother/father/fiancé/husbands account.

Influencers were aware of this because these misleading identities created a skew in the figures and statistics reported by social media in terms of the gender of their fan base. Two influencers specifically spoke about this. Influencer Samar Ahmed stated: “75% are girls and



25% men, although many who have a man's name are using their father or brother or husband's account and they write a comment and say I am a girl". Influencer Hoda Rashad echoed this: "You would be surprised by the number of males who are originally females. In her son's name for example and YouTube counts them as males. She doesn't want to write her name". She added:

Many girls and women log on with accounts that have male names, so YouTube shows these viewers as male. They all say in the comments I am a girl and my name is X, although the account is named something else.

This way of presenting online identity is misleading as these females do not exist as females online. They 'act' as females through the questions they ask and comments but are visible and seen by others as 'males'. This observation contradicts a Western study which found that girls and women use female nicknames, some which are sexualized nicknames to attract prospective partners (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003).

One plausible explanation for this behaviour is the influence of the Egyptian society where attitudes towards gender equality are quite conservative (Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015), so females tend to shy away behind male figures. The other plausible explanation is that youth tend to experiment with their online identities (Turkle, 1995), so these females may want to interact using a male counterpart account which doesn't carry their photograph or name to explore the online world without taking any risks such as online harassment or identity theft, especially that some female fans voiced

safety concerns, societal constraints and religious reasons around the use of their photographs as stated in the previous Chapters. It's worth noting that none of the female fans which participated in this study used male accounts, as I had looked with them at their profiles during the interviews. Accordingly, I was unable to explore with the fans this observation further.

### **1.1.2. Fan groups/pages**

Within the course of speaking about fans, fan groups/pages were mentioned but it was not a big thing for influencers. There were some influencers who were aware of groups/pages in their names through either conducting a search, being tagged or contacted by an administrator. While there were others who weren't aware of fan groups/pages in their names as they hadn't searched for or come across them.

Influencer Nader Ahmed was leveraging a large fan group on Facebook and clearly knew the value of such group. He stated:

There is a group on Facebook 'Nader Ahmed Lovers' (in Arabic), created by top fans, and they added me to the group. This group has 120K members and there is a lot of interaction of the group. I was added as an admin.

Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy said: "Yes, there is a profile on Instagram it is called Ahmed Barshoumy lovers, but I haven't reached the stage where there is an ultras or an army of fans. I feel my fans are much simpler than that".

One of the reasons stated by influencers for establishment of fan groups/pages was to get the attention of the influencer. Influencer Lamia Albardici, who didn't have a large fan base, believed that influencers themselves established these pages and that fan groups were not genuine, and they were made up by the influencers. She stated: "What I found out that those who have fan pages, in 90% of the cases they are the ones who make it for themselves not their fans. It is a way to show that people love them more, but I don't like to be fake". This view dismisses the power of fans; however, it was motivated by her having a relatively small fan base.

### **1.1.3. Use of influencer photograph**

The third method of participation as seen by influencers was fans using their photograph, whether as profile photographs or as background photographs on their mobile phones. Ellison et al. (2006) explain that photographs are used by people on the profile not only to visualize their looks, but also to emphasize the things and qualities that were important for them. Therefore, using an influencers' photograph as a profile photograph meant that the influencer was important to the fan.

Influencers spoke with great happiness about fans using their photographs either as profile photographs or as a background photograph on a mobile. Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy stated: "Yes, sometimes I come across girls who use my photo with the Orange veil as a profile photo (laughs). I laugh to death". Influencers added that fans edited their photographs and sent them to them.

Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy said: “Yes, (laughs) I feel happy because of that, it means that they love me”. Influencer Nader Ahmed said: “Yes, a lot, I find them in comments, I find my photograph as a profile photograph for an account”. Influencer Samar Ahmed stated: “Yes, I feel happy because of that, it means that they love me. Sometimes they show me my photograph as a background photograph on their phones or on Instagram”. Influencers stressed however, that their photograph should not be used by a fan if the fan will take their name as well i.e. impersonation.

## **1.2. Participation from a fan perspective**

### **1.2.1. Fan groups/pages**

An important point coming through the analysis of the interviews were that fans were ‘fans of influencers’ but not necessarily part of fan groups/pages which usually constitute fandoms or virtual communities. Fans who spoke of being a part of fan groups/pages for them, it was not a big thing and they were members of fan groups/pages of celebrities more than influencers. This was very much in line with influencers comments earlier about fan groups/pages. Only one fan mentioned that they were part of a fan group/page. Sahar stated: “I am a member of a fan page for Barhsoumy and for some other people like Dr. Mike. Because they put many updates on what is happening, we share our own jokes”.

### **1.2.2. Use of influencer photograph**

Given that youth are in the stage of identity exploration and experimentation, this was reflected in their online behaviour including choice of profile photograph and using the photograph as an expression of themselves and part of their visual personal narrative (Friedrichsen & Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013; Strano, 2008). Contrary to comments from influencers about use of their photographs by fans, fans did not like the idea of using someone else's photograph as their profile photograph even if it were an influencers'.

The reasons varied and were partly due to safeguarding their profile and their strong ownership of it and partly due to communication purposes and their need to be recognized by others. Osama said: "I feel that this is a sick idea to use someone else's photograph, people have their reasons to do it, but I don't think it's right". Dina stated: "When you use someone else's photograph on your account people can get mixed up and don't know who you are". David echoed these comments: "I take a photograph specially to change my profile photograph, just to let people know I am there and sometimes to tease certain people". This confirms what studies have found in that Facebook photographs are a practical and informative means of interpreting self-image and interpersonal impressions. They are an identity marker and a key tool for identity management (Eftekhar et al., 2014; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011; Pempek et al., 2009; Saslow et al., 2012; Siibak, 2009; Tosun, 2012; Van Der Heide et al., 2012).

## **2 Appropriation**

### **2.1. Appropriation from an influencer perspective**

Appropriation here represents the intersection of the perception of the influencer and what they present to their fans and how their fans utilise what is being presented in their online identity.

#### **2.1.1. Being inspired**

Influencers explained how fans aspire to be like them and live their lives. This draws on identification with influencers which creates an aspiration to be like them (Bandura, 1986; Burke, 1950; Kelman, 1961). Some influencers saw themselves viewed as role models by their fans who in turn wanted to be like them. In that they were inspirational for others. Influencer Samar Ahmed said: “Some young girls take me as an idol or a higher example”. Influencer Ahmed El Barshoumy similarly stated: “There are also boys who call me and say we would love to be like you, they feel I'm different and that I have put myself forward on social media and that I'm brave”. This is quite critical for fans given that their identities are being developed and there is a lack of other role models they can look up to (Jung et al., 2014). Influencer Nader ElKomely had a strategy to deal with this: “When people tell me that, I tell them try to find someone better than me and take them as an idol to be like him or imitate them but don't put this burden on me”.

Linked to this influencers believed that fans had high expectations from them and that they almost placed the influencer at an elevated level. Influencer Alaa Ghabour stated:

That's the whole problem, people raise their expectations and put you up in a certain place that you are perfect and that everything you do is correct and that you are always happy, so its natural if someone sees somebody like that they want to be like him.

### **2.1.2. Engagement**

Another way influencers saw appropriation is through the engagement of their fans with them. According to influencers, this takes a number of forms: comments under videos in YouTube or Facebook or Instagram, messages that are sent privately on Facebook messenger or Instagram direct messages, meeting fans by coincidence in the street and, meeting them in arranged meet ups. Engagement is very much linked to the displays of authenticity as Ellcessor explains: "Internet-based fame depends on the authenticity of a star's self-representation and on the notion of intimacy, experienced through the possibility of interaction rather than through simple familiarity" (2012, p. 51).

Therefore, it was important for influencers to engage with fans, however, maintaining this engagement from the influencer point of view proved to be a challenge for most of them due to time constraints.

The fact that most of them use multiple platforms to put out their content, influenced how far they were able to manage messages which

come through different platforms. For most Instagram was stated as one of the easiest ways to reach them. Influencer Samar Ahmed said: “They can communicate using email, messages, and comments on all social media sites but what I answer most is Instagram”. Influencer Nader Ahmed elaborated more on the challenge:

I respond to 1% of what comes daily. Instagram is the easiest way to communicate, every day I post a story and get replies, older stories get pushed down so I respond to 10-15 people daily, it’s difficult because each story can get anything from the range of 500 to 1K comments.

Accordingly, there was a weak chance of actual engagement through messages. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, influencers compensate this by ‘going live’ with their fans.

There was a practicality dimension from influencers point of view re meeting their fans face-to-face. Influencer Nader Ahmed spoke of an incident whereby he announced to his fans that he would be going to a specific mall in Alexandria. He arrived at the mall and there were hundreds of fans waiting for him. As a result of the congestion in the mall and the streets around it, the security staff of the mall had to escort him out through a back door and call the police to disperse the crowds. So, for him the option of suggesting again a meet up with his fans did not exist.



### **2.1.3. Changes in attitudes and behaviours**

Influencers spoke about appropriation in the form of changes in attitudes and behaviours that they understood that fans had experienced as a result of being their fan. Influencer Lamia Albardici stated:

“Anything we do no matter how small even if we imagine it doesn’t have an influence, it actually does”. They found out about these changes through the comments and messages they receive, in which fans detail the changes. Influencer Mohamed Abdalkader stated: “I know my influence from the messages I get, let me read one of them, while you are on the line with me”. Influencer Nader Ahmed said: “The influence is proven by the street, people stop you, talk with you, take photos with you, people love you”.

Many of the examples cited were around an intimacy fans have with them; taking their opinion in their problems or confiding in them; in addition to influencing attitudes and behaviours. Alaa Ghabour explained this:

Yes, people come and tell me you changed something in me, or you influenced me in a certain way, but I don’t think that this is because I am good, I feel that they just need a push. I am the one that gave them the push.

Influencer Nada Fouda stated: “My biggest influence is when people tell me how I have changed in the personality”. Influencer Samar Ahmed stated:

In my last video I was talking about how you can have positive energy, after it one of my audience told me I was depressed and

life was very dark, but I followed your steps and I felt that there is hope, I became more optimistic.

Influencer Lamia Albardici echoed this:

Yes, of course, they are influenced by your personality because they can use from you a face mask or a way to make up but they also want to know more about you when they know more about us they are influenced more with our ideas our personalities and the things we do.

One of the changes influencers spoke about was how fans imitated or mimicked them. Their descriptions of this ranged from imitation and mimicking things in an influencers appearance to imitation and mimicking of their behaviours. Influencer Nader ElKomely stated: “Everything gets imitated. People say, you bought a t-shirt, well I bought the same, you cut your hair like this, I cut mine the same. Actually, some girls cut their hair like mine (laughs)”. Influencer Lamia Albardici gave another example: “I have a favorite drink from Starbucks called latte caramel macchiato and it has really had an impact because a lot of people have tried it, they take photos of it and send them to me”. Nader Ahmed stated: “The influence I see is always on the positive side, people tell me that we started to joke like you, if we are bored while sitting together, we use a line from your videos”.

Studies have proven that millennials frequently identify with celebrities and borrow some aspects of their personalities and lifestyle in order to look like them (Boon & Lomore, 2001), this can be extended to influencers. Part of identification and trusting the source is

an affinity to become similar to them. When individuals feel that the influencer is similar to them they enact their behaviour (Bandura, 1989; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Kelman, 1961; Ohanian, 1990).

## **2.2. Appropriation from a fan perspective**

When fans identified with a certain influencer appropriation took a number of forms: they embedded the meanings from the influencer and started to interweave them with their own; fans appropriated the content presented by the influencers and through that appropriation they felt that becoming a fan is linked to changes in their attitudes and behaviours. This in turn ultimately reflected on how they presented themselves online.

### **2.2.1. Identification**

An important aspect for fans of following an influencer or becoming a fan, was identification with the influencer. This was a starting point as fans had to identify with the influencer first to be able to take in what they presented, they had to feel some sort of similarity and affinity (Kelman, 1961). Identification with the influencer, involved a number of behaviours being adopted (McLeod, 2016).

I would like to highlight that what the fans described here in terms of identification with an influencer, resonates very much with what the influencers said in terms of considering fans like family and friends or brothers and sisters; which were some of the words used to describe fans. This is in line with Caugheys' (1984) description of how fans

behave. Feeling some sort of affinity to or similarity with the influencer was something most fans expressed and spoke about. Sahar said: “I feel that Barshoumy is an Egyptian guy who goes through similar things as other youth in his age and he deals with these issues in a comic manner. I feel he is like me and my brothers”. Using these words indicate that a parasocial relationship is developing between the fan and the influencer, it is also a normal part of social development during adolescence as confirmed by studies (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Steele & Brown, 1995). Eman stated: “In terms of appearance and looks, I don’t wear her style. I love her honesty, and this is something I have, so I feel we are similar in that”. Perihan echoed this: “She is similar to me. She can talk and has a nice sense of humour. I like the way she dresses and her makeup”. This is in line with findings by Levine and Valle (1975) where similar people can inspire trust as the proposed solutions could also work for the audience due to the similarities between the speaker and the audience member. Another plausible explanation for the success of identifying with influencers is the Source Credibility Theory, which advocates that if individuals trust the source they may accept their message (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Ohanian, 1990; Teng et al., 2014).

### **2.2.2. Engagement**

When fans identified with influencers, they developed an aspiration to engage/interact or have some sort of relationship with them (Schramm & Wirth, 2010). For some engagement was only an aspiration but

others actually took steps to contact influencers whether through messages or face-to-face. To meet them in person would mean moving the relationship from an online to an offline level. Their identifications were reflected in their messages and comments to the influencers.

One impression fans had, was that influencers would be too busy to respond. Adam said: “I won’t send them any messages because they will not reply (laughs)”. Perihan stated: “No, I haven’t tried. Do you think they will respond?”. Other fans wished to interact with them. Amal said: “Yes, very much, I would love to meet him. Barshoumy is in Spain”. Fans perceptions about influencers not having time to engage with them is in line with what influencers mentioned earlier about the challenges they face to interact and engage with their fans. It also confirms that the relationship the fans have with influencers is an illusionary one, from the side of fans only. This is typical of parasocial relationships (Labrecque, 2014; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A few fans actually took the step. Motaz stated: “Yes, I wrote for him a comment on his page that I want to appear in one of his videos”.

Eman stated:

Once, she did a really good video, so I went in and sent her a message to thank her. Another time she asked a question and needed an answer, so I sent her my answer. When she disappeared for a while off social media, I was very upset and went in and sent her a message saying please don’t disappear for a long time.

These relationships fans reflected through their interaction and engagement can be considered parasocial relationships as they are from the side of the fan only (Caughey, 1984; Dibble et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Schramm and Wirth (2010) consider engagement through parasocial relationships as the extent to which the individual interacts psychologically with a media character.

### **2.2.3. Changes in attitudes and behaviours**

Fans spoke of their relationship with influencers and how they helped them change their attitudes and behaviours. Specific examples of changes that were mentioned included the following. Motaz stated: “He influences my life”. Eman said: “The other thing I took from her is that you should develop yourself all the time”. Dina said:

Yes, my thinking. Every year these people add something to my thinking, for example that something new should be included in my priority list. They add something to me. They talk about problems you face in real life. There are a lot of things I learned from them.

Basil’s (1996) study found that a spokesperson with whom the audience identifies ensures the greatest likelihood of achieving lasting attitude or behaviour change. This finding has parallels with the change’s influencers bring about in the attitudes and behaviours of their fans. He found that identification plays a significant role in determining message effects. People learn by observing others and adopt their behaviours, values, beliefs and attitudes. In this case, fans

learn by observing influencers over the screen. Dalia, speaking about influencer Nader Ahmed, stated: “When he says he loves something; many fans start to love this thing just because he loves it”.

One way these changes were reflected was in fans sharing the content of influencers on their own profiles. Heba said: “In the last period I shared any video they uploaded”. Mo echoed this: “I do share some of their content especially strong content and things that touch me and can touch others when I share it”. Some fans shared videos and content by influencers to reach others and spread that content. Sahar stated: “Yes, all the time. I share videos which I like. If I am on Facebook, I share Barshoumy because he shares many videos on Facebook”. Dalia elaborated: “I share his [Nader Ahmed] content to support him and also if I like what he presents I share it to reach more people”. In doing that fans achieve two things: the first is that they publicise that they are a fan and the second is that they endorse the influencers content, messages and ideas through sharing them on their own profiles. The impression others could take of them could be based on that content or those ideas, so they become part of their online identity.

Through the analysis of the fan interviews, it becomes evident that the four concepts of displays of authenticity, identification, Source Credibility Theory and parasocial relationships are interlinked and are on one same continuum. I suggest through Figure 4 how there may be a variation of the way appropriation by fans takes place through two suggested scenarios. The scenarios are based on fans’ descriptions and my interpretation of these descriptions.

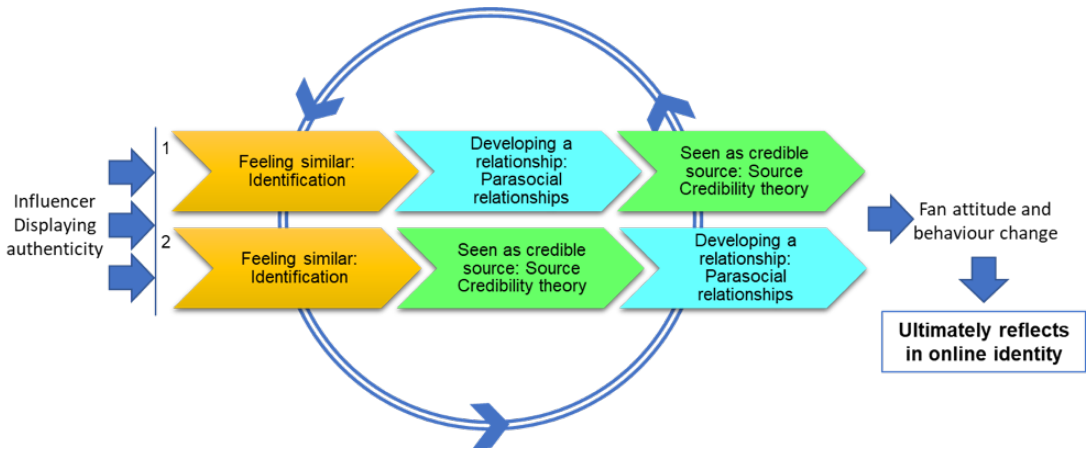


Figure 4 Two scenarios which may be experienced by fans in relation to influencers

The first scenario I suggest, is when influencers reflect an authentic persona (display authenticity), their fans feel similar to them (identification), through their repeated exposure to the influencers the fans start to feel a relationship developing with the influencer (parasocial relationship) and in turn see them as a credible trusted source (Source Credibility Theory), which may lead to attitude or behavioural change that reflects ultimately in their online identity.

The second scenario which I suggest, is when influencers reflect an authentic persona (display authenticity), fans may feel that they are similar to them (identification) and start to see them as a credible trusted source (Source Credibility Theory), then they start to develop a relationship with the influencer (parasocial relationship) and as a result enact certain attitudes and behaviours that reflects ultimately in their online identity.



Both scenarios start and end with the same processes, i.e. when influencers display authenticity this ultimately reflects in the online identity of their fans.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

This Chapter aimed and covering the third and last theme which emerged from the interviews, the fandom experience. I contrasted the voices of influencers and fans in two subthemes, participation and appropriation. In the first section, and reflecting on the participatory culture of social media, influencers spoke from their point of views about fans participation (Jenkins, 2016; Wood & Baughman, 2012). They raised the interesting observation of how some female fans hide behind male identities online. This reflects the attitudes towards gender equality which are quite conservative in the Egyptian society (Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). It could also represent part of experimentation with identity which youth undergo (Turkle, 1995). In this case females can freely interact online without the concern of their real identity being revealed so in a sense they are protected. Influencers spoke about fan groups/pages downplaying their importance. They spoke happily about how fans use of their photograph in their online presentation as profile photographs. Fans on the other hand, spoke about participation in terms of fan groups/pages echoing what the influencers said. Contrary to the views by influencers, fans did not entertain the idea of using influencers photographs in their online presentation given that they are an important identity marker (Eftekhar et al., 2014; Mendelson &

Papacharissi, 2011; Pempek et al., 2009; Saslow et al., 2012; Siibak, 2009; Tosun, 2012; Van Der Heide et al., 2012).

In the second section, I covered the second subtheme, appropriation (Ayaß, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2006; Yang & Stohl, 2020). Influencers believed that their fans appropriated the content they presented and repurposed it. Their fans do this in a number of ways such as being inspired by them, mimicking and imitating them and by wanting to engage and interact with them. Influencers were able to talk in great detail about the changes in attitudes and behaviours they brought about in fans as they were told by them. Fans on their part spoke about how they identified with influencers. They felt similar to them in some ways and felt an affinity towards them. Similar to influencers' views, fans wanted to engage with influencers and most of this engagement can sit within the concept of parasocial relationships, which are typically one-sided or unidirectional (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). The last form of appropriation was changes in attitudes and behaviours as a result of becoming a fan. When fans identified with an influencer there were certain manifestations whether in their attitudes or behaviours as a result of becoming a fan. Fans endorsed influencers' content by sometimes sharing it and in that they were associating themselves with the influencer.

This Chapter demonstrated that influencers add value to the lives of their fans and contribute to changes in their attitudes and behaviours. These changes in their attitudes and behaviours ultimately reflect on their online identity.

## **CHAPTER 7: Conclusions**

Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.

~ Oscar Wilde

## **Introduction**

In the previous three Chapters, I contrasted the voices of influencers and their fans around three main areas—which were the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participant interviews—online identity and self-presentation, perceptions and the fandom experience. I shared their voices and combined this with discussion embedding theory where possible. Both influencers and fans saw eye to eye on a number of topics such as what was a fan and how influencers bring about positive change. There was a discrepancy in their views related to other topics such as how they appropriated social media and how they went about creating their online identity and presenting themselves online. However, both parties valued one another and becoming a fan of an influencer ultimately reflected on the online identity of youth.

This Chapter is the culmination of the study, in which I present the key findings and conclusions. The Chapter ties together the various topics

to provide answers to the research questions. The Chapter is divided into six main sections. The first section covers an overview of the study. The second section highlights the findings pertaining to the research questions. The third section looks at the contribution of this study to literature and its practical implications. The fourth section links this study with previous research. The fifth section highlights the limitations of the study. The sixth section covers my recommendations for future research. I conclude the Chapter with my thoughts about the findings of the study.

In the first section, I focus on the context of this study. I pull out the elements that characterize the Egyptian society and its youth. Youth constitute a large group in the society and play an integral role in it. I look briefly at their outlook, the socio-economic challenges they face, the culture they live in and the social values they live by and their use of technology.

In the second section, I share and discuss the key findings. I start by answering the research questions pertaining to influencers then follow that by answering the research questions pertaining to fans. I conclude this section by answering the main research question on the relationship of influencers and the online identity of youth.

In the third section, I look at the contribution of my study to literature and the practical implications of the study. I focus on contribution to literature on influencers and the online identity of youth, reception of social media and literature utilizing Goffman's dramaturgical

approach. I highlight how my study fills a gap that exists in research especially that conducted in the Arab world and Egypt. I follow that by highlighting the practical implications of this study to decision and policy makers, educators and parents.

In the fourth section, I link the findings of my study to previous research conducted. I share studies which have findings in line with my study and other studies which contradict some of the findings in my study.

In the fifth section, I focus on the limitations of the study. I consider them as challenges that I encountered throughout the study. I put my utmost efforts to tackle these challenges.

In the sixth and last section, I highlight my recommendations for future studies. There is scope for a number of studies which could spin off from this study. My study provides some extendibility which can be built on in future.

## **1 Overview of study**

This study, set against the backdrop of Egypt, is context sensitive and should be viewed through the lens of the Egyptian society and its youth. The Egyptian society, in which youth interact in daily, is less of a liberal society and more of a traditional, patriarchal, religiously keen one where attitudes towards gender equality remain conservative

(Gadallah et al., 2017; Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015; Sabbagh et al., 2012; Therborn, 2004).

This society is characterised by having a pronounced youth bulge (Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015; State Information Service, 2018; UNFPA Egypt, 2020). Youth are an important and valuable group in society. They are viewed as agents of change and can help the society move forward effectively on many socio-economic fronts (United Nations, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2016). However, similar to youth around the world they are facing challenges and in Egypt specifically, there is a delay in the major personal milestones for them such as marriage and employment (Dhillion & Yousef, 2009; Mulderig, 2013; Rashad et al., 2005; Willis, 2003). This has a knock-on effect on their identity development, whereby, it is in a stage similar to that of adolescents more than that of emerging adults (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). Combined with this, youth channel their time onto social media especially Facebook, YouTube and Instagram (Alexa, n.d.). They spend a high percentage of time on social media, all of which have been developed in the West, with no local alternative and with an existing busy traditional media scene. Naturally, over time they start to become fans of influencers. Egyptian influencers are rising in their numbers with a wide range of content being created and presented. The youth bulge is a huge driver for the increase in the number of influencers (Dubai Media City and Dubai Press Club, 2018).

The literature review highlighted a gap in research as the majority of the existing literature around social media, influencers and the online identity of youth focuses on Western societies. These societies are characterized by having a very different socio-economic and cultural makeup as well as dynamics than the Arab world and Egypt. Western societies have a significantly lower percentage of youth. They boast a more liberal outlook with diverse social composition. Notions such as gender equality and women empowerment are well developed in comparison with the Arab world and Egypt where the culture is more traditional, religiously conservative and such notions are at primitive stages. Therefore, my study will contribute to filling this gap in research.

It was deemed that a qualitative methodology will be the most appropriate given the context of the study and the complex nature of the topic at hand, which is online identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Mason, 2002). Overall, the design of this study is inherent to the Egyptian society, its culture and youth. The study utilised the framework of reception studies and drew upon theories of identity development and self-presentation.

The first important group in this study were the nine Egyptian influencers who created and presented a range of content. The second important group in this study were the eighteen fans from Egyptian youth. Accordingly, the study set out to address the following research question and sub questions:



What is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of their fans from Egyptian youth?

Questions pertaining to influencers:

How do influencers present themselves online?

How do they see their fans?

How do they see themselves and their role in relation to their fans?

Questions pertaining to fans of influencers from Egyptian youth:

How do fans construct and present their online identity?

How do fans see influencers?

How do fans see themselves in relation to influencers?

The study depended on semi-structured in-depth interviews with both influencers and their fans from youth. The interviews generated a wealth of data and insights. Both parties spoke openly about their feelings, perceptions and behaviours on social media. Fans described their perceptions of influencers and their behaviours towards them. The Egyptian society, culture and its intricacies have significant bearing on the findings and interpretation of the findings of this study as I will demonstrate in the subsequent sections.

## **2 Key findings**

I will start with the sub questions then conclude with the main research question. In the answers to the research sub questions and questions, I will focus on the most prominent findings from my point of view.

### **2.1. How do influencers present themselves online?**

Influencers set out to perform to build their fan bases. They aimed to create a certain impression on their audience and fans; build their online persona; and, to be approachable and intimate with their fans, in that they were in line with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach. The lack of gatekeepers gave influencers an opportunity to access their fans directly and get their messages across. However, an important insight was that not all influencers had clear and crystallized messages they wanted to get across or even knew what they were doing at the beginning of their appearance on social media. They developed their messages over time. Influencers perform authentically; they act in a calculating manner to create a certain impression. They do this through displaying authenticity which is paramount for them (Papacharissi, 2002; Tolson, 2010). They understand that this is what fans look for in an influencer so that through their authenticity they become trustworthy and credible sources of content (Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Ohanian, 1990).

They achieve this through a number of practices. These practices are in line with practices described in various studies by Audrezet et al., 2018; Berriman & Thomson, 2015; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Bielby, 1995; Christian, 2011; Font, 2018; Fung, 2009; Hou, 2018; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Savignac et al., 2012; Wynn & Katz, 1997. They create authenticity through how they describe themselves on their pages/accounts, selecting words which create a certain impression about who they are and what they do building on Leary's (1996) tactic of self-description. They develop and post original content and avoid topics related to religion, sex and politics, which are considered as taboos in the Egyptian society which is conservative and keenly religious (Gadallah et al., 2017; Mensch et al., 2003). In that they are in line with Leary's (1996) tactic of conformity and compliance. They post selfies and go live with their audiences. In spite of them being 'front stage' most of the time, influencers give 'backstage access' to their fans because this makes them come across as more authentic. In some cases, influencers—borrowing a practice from celebrities—maintained a distance between them and their fans to create a certain aura of mystique around them. Influencers admitted that they downplayed some aspects of their personality when on screen. So, in spite of projecting an authentic image, that image did not reflect their totality because they were sharing a snapshot or slice of their day and life.

## **2.2. How do influencers see their fans?**

Influencers saw their fans as being of great importance to them and valued them immensely. They knew a great deal about their fans especially their socio-demographic makeup. Influencers considered their fans as family and friends; this helped them present to a camera. They spoke about them with great affection. Some influencers even spoke about fans becoming friends in real life.

Many influencers propagated the idea that their fans liked them for who they are and not necessarily for the content they present. When they become fans, they will follow the influencer regardless of the content they present.

## **2.3. How do influencers see themselves and their role in relation to their fans?**

Influencers saw themselves primarily as content creators or YouTubers, then came the perception of being an influencer. Influencers linked the word influencer to bringing about positive change. Change that would impact on the quality of the daily life of the individual. In that they were capitalizing on the nature of the Egyptian society which for a long time has been governed by strong traditional structures and now there are new sources of information to refer to. Influencers saw that as an opportunity and that they could play a role and bring about change (Ayish & Alnajjar, 2019; Gadallah et al., 2017;

Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015; Sabbagh et al., 2012; Therborn, 2004).

What their fans told them shaped the view influencer had about themselves and gave them perspective on what they do. Influencers saw themselves as role models for their fans as they were told by them. While influencers felt flattered that they could be perceived as a role model or idols by some, they felt a responsibility and a burden, which shows that there are two sides to an influencer. Some felt that fans put them in an elevated place, which represents a pressure on them. Influencers felt they needed to keep their word if they told their fans about anything they will deliver, and they also needed to give trusted reviews about products.

Influencers described the changes they were told they brought about in their fans. These changes included: changes in attitudes and behaviours; an intimacy fans have with them; taking their opinion in their problems or confiding in them; in addition to mimicking and imitation of appearance and behaviours. They were able to cite numerous examples of how their fans imitated or mimicked them. In spite of influencers admitting that fans are the reason they exist and have grown, some of them wanted to keep a distance between them to safeguard the image they had built in the mind of the fans. This was relatively effortless to achieve as influencers were not able to respond to most comments and messages from their fans due to time constraints.

## **2.4. How do fans construct and present their online identity?**

Youth are at a critical stage in their identity development and a heightened period of identity experimentation especially online and with their peers (Erikson, 1968; Nurmi, 2013; Turkle, 1995). They seek to build an identity that is self-satisfying and at the same time recognized and appreciated by others (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). They tend to create a self-narrative and reflect all the time on their identity, therefore it is continuously being constructed (Giddens, 1991; Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001). Youth seek to exist online and actively create an impression on others and reflect continuously on this impression and how they present themselves online (Baumeister, 1982). In that they are in line with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach.

Fans safeguarded their profiles and gave huge value to others who may see their profile or interact with them. There was a process of co-construction of their profile with others (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Cerulo, 1997; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Merchant, 2005; Walther et al., 2008). On the top of the list of others were parents, family and friends, the list went on to include connections and future or potential employers. Influencers were not mentioned as a group that co-constructed the profile with fans. This finding concurs with the notion that peer relationships are an important aspect of identity development as youth present themselves to one another and experiment with aspects of their identities (Nurmi, 2013; Turkle, 1995). It also reflects

the fact that for a long time the society was based on patriarchal traditional structures, such as the family, so parents are of paramount importance.

Youths' selection and use of photographs to present themselves online was a key identity marker for them (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Mallan & Giardina, 2009). The influence of the Egyptian society as a conservative, religiously keen society played a role in the selection of photographs. There were disparate views and ways to select them; males and some females selected profile photographs differently. Males used their photographs to represent themselves on their profiles while some females opted for more abstract photographs of objects, plants, animals, events or did not use a photograph at all. The females stated safety concerns, societal constraints and religious reasons (Mensch et al., 2003; Roushdy & Sieverding, 2015). This contradicts findings in Western studies in which both males and females actively use their photographs on social media, differences if existent, are related to the type of photograph not the subject of it and there are gendered display identities (Bond, 2009; Crescenzi et al., 2013; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Siibak, 2009; Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). Fans did not entertain the idea of using influencers photographs as their own profile photograph regardless of their degree of admiration of the influencer, which was contradictory to what was stated by influencers. Females also safeguarded their profiles by adjusting the privacy settings to make the account private instead of public and in that they were able to control who viewed their profile.

An important finding was how females hid behind male identities of their brother/father/fiancé/husbands' account and masked their identity. So, experimentation here takes the form of experimenting with an identity which is not one's own. This behaviour conforms very much with the Egyptian society which is patriarchal and attitudes towards gender equality remain quite conservative in the society (Mensch et al., 2003; Therborn, 2004). This behaviour also allows females to experiment with their identity without being recognised or taking any risks, in a sense they are protected and free from any societal constraints. Where fans used their name, it was their real one with no alias or pseudonyms. There was no pretense as well, fans wanted to be known as themselves, in this sense their online identity was an extension of their offline identity. Fans also used the process of sharing and in that when they shared content of influencers on their own profiles, they created a social association with the influencer and endorsed their ideas.

## **2.5. How do fans see influencers?**

Fans valued influencers. Their initial perception was that influencers were content creators or YouTubers. They called them influencers if they felt that they brought about positive changes in individuals and societies. When fans perceived the influencer as a credible source, they started to trust them and accept the content they presented and interacted with it.



Fans were able to give specific descriptions around what an influencer did for them such as motivating them, making them think and inspiring them. They highlighted specific examples of changes in their attitudes and behaviours. Fans did not put much weight on the aspect of influencers as third party endorsers (Abidin, 2015; Freberg et al., 2011).

## **2.6. How do fans see themselves in relation to influencers?**

Fans described what it meant to be a fan and it was all based on their online and offline behaviours towards the influencer. These behaviours included: waiting for videos in anticipation; checking regularly if anything has been uploaded and refreshing the page; watching a video as soon as it is uploaded; watching all of the influencers' videos and posts; liking the video, post or story; sending emojis to the influencer on a story; commenting on the video, post or story; sharing content on profile; being loyal to the influencer and defending them all of the time; following the influencer on all social media platforms; buying merchandise sold by the influencer; and, loving the character of the influencer regardless of the content he or she presents.

Fans took in content from influencers on their own terms; they appropriated and repurposed it. They did that because influencers jolted their thinking. The study found that for fans to allow influencers to play a role with them, they needed to identify with them first. They needed to feel some sort of affinity towards them and some sort of

similarity. This identification resulted in accepting and taking in what influencers say (Basil, 1996; Kelman, 1961). Many fans developed parasocial relationships with the influencers, imagining that they want to engage with them (Caughey, 1984; Dibble et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). This helped in them being impacted by their ideas and content. Some fans shared the content presented by the influencer and publicized through it that they are a fan, exercising Leary's (1996) tactic of social associations.

## **2.7. What is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of their fans from Egyptian youth?**

In describing the relationship between influencers and the online identity of youth, there is evidence that influencers play an indirect role in the construction of the online identity of youth through inspiring their fans to change their attitudes and behaviours. Specific changes in attitudes and behaviours as described by fans included: influencing their lives, adding to their thinking and helping them develop all the time. Additionally, by following an influencer and identifying with them, a fan may share their specific content as is or disseminate their ideas on their page, which ultimately reflects on their online identity and create a certain impression.

Influencers can be considered as catalysts for change amongst their youth fans. This is critical because these youth fans are in a stage of their identity development which is geared more towards adolescence than emerging adults due to the delays in marriage and employment. In

a sense, they are waiting to enter into adulthood. Linked to this was the insight around some parents not being aware of what their children (who are youth) do online or who they follow. This has significant implications in terms of influencers playing a role in the online identity of youth even if it is an indirect role. Some parents in this study—especially those from low socio-economic levels— do not provide guidance to their children on who to follow or not, so in that sense youth are left to their own devices. In this case they are following influencers who originally did not have a clear message in mind. The relationship between the influencer and youth's online identity may not show in a direct way such as using the influencers photograph as a profile photograph but will ultimately reflect on how youth present themselves online.

### **3 Contribution to literature and practical implications**

This study contributes to knowledge through exploring the way in which influencers' and their fans' processes of identity construction are connected through their online performances and interactions in a non-Western developing culture. The findings of this study contribute to the literature and have important practical implications.

Theoretically, findings add to the literature on influencers and online identity of youth. For the last decade the majority of topics researched in this part of the world and especially Egypt revolved around social media, youth and debating the extent of online mobilization as opposed

to action on the ground during the Arab Spring (Attia et al., 2011; Herrera, 2012; Khamis et al., 2012; Morozov, 2011; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). Therefore, I believe that more studies are needed to show the differing roles social media can play such as societal roles. In addition, the majority of studies conducted about identity in Egypt and the Arab world focused on identity per se with no focus on online identity. This study contributes to filling this void in the research as revealed by the literature review, especially in this part of the world and from this specific perspective about influencers.

The study contributes to the literature on reception of social media (Carpentier, 2011; Cayari, 2011; Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015; Jensen & Sørensen, 2014; Livingstone, 2004; Mathieu & Pavlíčková, 2017). It provides new insights related to how youth fans appropriate content presented by influencers. It shows the different manifestations of becoming a fan and how that ultimately reflects on youths' online identity.

The study contributes to literature utilizing Goffman, his work and other self-presentation theories (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Nesvadba, 2017; Psathas, 1996; Serpa & Ferreira, 2018). It takes a new spin on his dramaturgical approach and links performance to displays of authenticity. Influencers use the front most of the time but give backstage access to their audience through their live stories. The study shows that although influencers and fans perform when they are online to create a certain impression, their motivations are different. While

influencers set out to build their fan bases, fans aimed at creating an identity that can fit with their peer groups and connections.

In terms of practical implications, this study raises some alarm bells, given the heavy time youth spend on social media and in becoming fans of influencers. The first alarm bell is fans considering influencers as role models. Many influencers started off by having no clear message in mind, they downplayed aspects of their personality and shared snapshots of their life, so are they fit to be role models? and, are they best placed to be role models?

The second alarm bell is the disconnect between some parents and their children (in this case youth) especially those from low socio-economic levels and the influence this has whether in selecting whom to follow or in their identity construction and experimentation. Some parents in this study were not aware who their children (in this case youth) are following and are not providing any parental supervision in terms of online activities and behaviours. The third alarm bell is fans building parasocial relationships with influencers who eventually play an indirect role in shaping their attitudes and behaviours and may not be best placed to do so or qualified from a psychological or educational point of view.

Overall, the findings can provide insights into how influencers play a role in online identity, this can be utilized by decision and policymakers who want to advance the youth agenda in Egypt. They can use the findings to leverage influencers who play a role with their

youth fans to help create awareness of national issues and causes in society such as female genital mutilation, gender equality and harassment. Educators can benefit from the findings in this study to work with parents on raising awareness of their children's online behaviours to help them navigate social media and deal with any online identity construction challenges they may face.

## **4 Relationship with previous research**

In terms of links with previous research—in addition to what I have included in previous Chapters—I will focus on specific studies which I have found to have an aspect or two in line with the findings of this study. I will include studies with findings that contradict the findings of this study as well.

In terms of findings of studies which are in some respects in line with the findings of this study, the first study is Westenberg's study (2016), which found that Dutch teenagers felt more attracted to YouTubers than television celebrities. They imitate YouTubers in several things: their clothes, makeup and jokes. She found that in some cases they imitated negative behaviour as well. Some parents, especially those from low socio-economic levels, were not totally aware of what their children did online or who they followed and endorsed. In spite of the younger age group of the study, the results are quite similar as Egyptian fans tend to imitate the looks and behaviours of influencers and some parents are not aware of their children's (in this case youth) online behaviour. The second study is by Perez-Torres et al. (2018)

which found that YouTubers are a social reference for present-day adolescents. In spite of the younger age group in the Spanish study, the results are similar in that Egyptian youth are inspired and influenced in their attitudes and behaviours by influencers. The third study is by Zhao and Jiang (2011) which found cultural differences in visual self-presentation through SNS profiles. My study found similarly differences in visual self-presentation amongst fans through their profiles especially in the use of photographs and hiding of identities. These differences reflect the conservative nature of the Egyptian culture.

In terms of findings of studies which are in some respects in contradiction with the findings of this study, the first study is by Aran-Ramspott et al., which found that Spanish preadolescents “consider youtubers as referents for entertainment and for closeness to a teen digital culture, but not really as role models or bearers of values as influencers” (2018, p. 71). However, this was not the same in Egypt whereby many fans viewed influencers as role models or idols they looked up to in addition to following them for entertainment purposes. Secondly, the findings in my study contradict a number of Western studies in terms of profile photographs (Bond, 2009; Crescenzi et al., 2013; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Siibak, 2009; Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). These studies reveal that photographs are used by males and females to express their identity online. Where there are differences, they are related to the content of the photograph but not its use to express identity. However, in the case

of my study, there was a difference between the choice of males and some females of their profile photograph.

It can be inferred that the cultural context of each study and the structure, nature and intricacies of each society plays a role in the relationship between influencers and their fans. In Egypt, the relationship is governed by the conservative nature of the society (Gadallah et al., 2017; Mensch et al., 2003).

## **5 Limitations of study**

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some potential limitations. These potential limitations could be addressed in future research although every attempt was taken to minimize the limitations.

The first limitation concerns the lack of previous similar studies conducted in Egypt as revealed by the literature review. The impact of this meant that there were very few studies to review and learn from them what worked or didn't in the context of Egypt. However, to minimize this limitation I depended on my local knowledge as a researcher.

The second limitation concerns the recruitment of participants for the study without a prior relationship with them. In terms of influencers especially mega-influencers it was quite difficult to recruit them if they were not already familiar with the researcher or if there was no



monetary incentive in place. In spite of several attempts through different means to reach them, it was not possible to do so. Linked to this was recruiting the fans; this was quite challenging. The main way was to contact them on their social media accounts either by message if it was an available option or by a comment. Even when I reached out to them, there was a lack of willingness to participate in the study. This impacted on the time to recruit participants; it took longer than I had originally anticipated and prolonged the time of the fieldwork.

The third limitation concerns the preference and insistence of some participants to conduct the interview by phone or text messages or by voice notes ruling out any opportunity for a face-to-face interview. This resulted in my inability to draw from the visual aspects such as facial and body expressions which face-to-face interviews provide. It was challenging to create rapport over the phone or through messages as opposed to a face-to-face interview although I tried my utmost to do so.

The fourth and last limitation concerns a linguistic aspect. This study was conducted in Egypt, with Egyptian participants whether influencers or fans. The interviews were conducted mainly in Arabic. Although every attempt was taken to not only translate the interviews but to project an accurate meaning of every word said, still the reader may miss some local nuances.

## **6 Recommendations for future studies**

This study could spin off future studies around influencers, online identity and youth as it is quite a timeless large area of study. Future studies would likely benefit from: changing the context, population and participants of the study; its methodology; and exploring other social media personae, content and platforms.

In terms of context, this study can be conducted in Western societies or other Arab societies such as the Gulf countries and I expect it would render different results due to the nature of each society. In terms of the population and participants of future studies, they can include additional groups such as parents of the fans or their friends and peers. Future studies could also benefit from different participants such as children (with the needed permissions) or young working professionals. Future studies could include a larger sample of interview participants.

Future studies would likely benefit from employing other methodologies. I suggest employing ethnographic methodologies such as observation in universities or clubs (if appropriate permissions are obtained). Another alternative is to conduct a longitudinal study by following a small group of fans throughout childhood, their early adolescence and youth years and tracking their relationships with influencers and how they evolve over time.

To reflect the ever-changing social media scene, the relationship between youth and other social media personae, content and platforms can be explored in future studies. I suggest a focus on social media which is gaining momentum in the Egyptian society such as Tik Tok and Musical.ly. Tik Tok recently held an event to celebrate its huge success in Egypt (Deyaa', 2019). Another set of studies can revolve around comparing influencers and traditional celebrities and their role in the construction of the online identity of youth or possibly other groups in the society. An interesting study could look at the community fandom experience, possibly focusing on one or two of the mega-influencers and their fandoms. Lastly, I suggest a set of studies which can examine the role influencers play in youths' identity per se, not focusing on the online identity. In conclusion, many future studies can spin off from this study.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This Chapter—the last—concludes this thesis and pulls its different Chapters together. Starting from the research question of what is the relationship between influencers and the online identity of Egyptian youth? I set out to explore the nature of this relationship given the substantial amount of time that youth spend online. I chose a qualitative approach for the study because it was deemed more appropriate taking both the context and topic of the study into consideration. The study building on reception as its framework employed in-depth interviews to illicit the views of influencers and their fans.

Context was key due to the unique nature of the culture of the Egyptian society and its youth. A culture built on long-standing traditions, conservative outlooks and daily struggles for gender equality and diversity affected the findings of this study. On the influencers' side this was apparent in their choice of topics to focus on and the role they thought they played with their fans. On the fans' side, the influence of the Egyptian culture was evident in co-constructing their online identity with parents due to the patriarchal culture which gives weight to parents. It was also apparent in how some females choose to represent themselves in their profile photographs and in using privacy settings. In addition, in some cases females hid behind male identities.

Nevertheless, influencers were found to play an indirect role in the online identity of their fans. By becoming a fan and identifying with the influencer and possibly developing parasocial relations with them, fans aspire to be like the influencer and in many ways take on their ideas and messages. Fans do not necessarily reflect their fan status in their online identity by using the influencers photographs. They appropriate the influencers ideas and messages which in turn influences their attitudes and behaviours and ultimately reflects on their online identity.

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[The relationship between the exposure to talk shows in television and the cultural identity of Egyptian youth].  
*المجلة المصرية لبحوث الإعلام*  
48, 73–139.

# Annexes

## Annex 1: Interview Guide and Protocol – Influencers

<p><b>Preamble</b></p> <p>(Before starting to record)</p>          <p><b>Introduction</b></p>	<p>My name is Hanan Ezzat and I am conducting a PhD study about social media influencers and the online identity of Egyptian Youth.</p> <p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Let me start by mentioning that any information you share during the interview will be used for academic purposes only, for this study. Also, if you want to stop during any point in the interview please let me know.</p> <p>I will be taking some notes during the interview, I can't possibly write fast enough to get it all down. So, I will be recording our interview so as not to miss any of your comments. Is that okay with you?</p> <p>When I start to record, I will ask again for your consent so that I have it recorded. Are there any questions about what I have just explained?</p> <p>Are you willing to participate in this interview?</p> <p>Shall we get started?</p> <p>Today is ....., we are .....o'clock. I have with me</p>
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	<p>.....</p> <p>I will start recording, are you okay with that?</p>
<p><b>Part 1: Questions about the influencer and the content presented</b></p>	<p>Can you tell me about the content you present; topics and social media used; view of yourself; role; message and values; online identity;</p>
<p><b>Part 2: Questions about influencers' relationship with fans</b></p>	<p>Can you shed the light or provide an overview of your audience; view of audience; communication with fans whether through messages or face-to-face; fans who aspire to be you; fan groups/pages; online identity of fans; relationship with your fans</p> <p>Any additional comments/views?</p>

## Annex 2: Interview Guide and Protocol – Fans

<p><b>Preamble</b></p> <p>(Before starting to record)</p>	<p>My name is Hanan Ezzat and I am conducting a PhD study about fans of social media influencers and their online identity.</p> <p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Let me start by mentioning that any information you share during the interview will be used for academic purposes only, for this study. It will be shared without naming you, so it will be anonymous. Also, if you want to stop during any point in the interview please let me know.</p>
<p><b>Introduction</b></p>	<p>I will be taking some notes during the interview, I can't possibly write fast enough to get it all down. So, I will be recording our interview so as not to miss any of your comments. Is that okay with you?</p> <p>When I start to record, I will ask again for your consent so that I have it recorded. Are there any questions about what I have just explained? Are you willing to participate in this interview? Shall we get started?</p> <p>Today is ....., we are .....o'clock. I have with me .....</p> <p>I will start recording, are you okay with that?</p>

<b>Part 1: Questions about use of social media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Duration and place of accessing and checking social media sites daily; favourite social media; subscription to certain channels; following specific people; and why.</li> </ul>
<b>Part 2: Questions about Influencers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fan of any Egyptian Influencer; meaning of ‘influencer’; similarities/differences in appearance and personality; aspirations to be like influencer; role of influencer; communication with influencer whether through messages or face-to-face.</li> <li>• What word describes you best, in relation to the influencer, audience, follower or fan; membership of fan groups; importance of influencers.</li> </ul>
<b>Part 3: Online identity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can we have a look at your Facebook profile and/or Instagram account together; profile photograph choice; influencers and presenting yourself online.</li> <li>• Is there anything you want to add?</li> </ul>
<b>Demographics</b>	Ask about their education, age and where they are living.

### Annex 3: Influencers interviewed

In alphabetical order

S	Influencer	G	Content/Topics	Date Interviewed	YouTube	Total fan base*
1	Ahmed El Barshoumy (Barshoumy)	M	Comedy  Imitation of girls	5 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR4Iq9LIVChkkOH4DDsv4_w">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR4Iq9LIVChkkOH4DDsv4_w</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Abarshoumy/">https://www.facebook.com/Abarshoumy/</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/ahmadbarshoumy/">https://www.instagram.com/ahmadbarshoumy/</a>	13.8K YT  459K FB  25.7K I  <b>Total 498.5K</b>
2	Alaa Ghabour	F	How and why do things happen  Lifestyle  Sports  Interpersonal Skills	5 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3YmAMujqQOhAb0PhKA7x9w">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3YmAMujqQOhAb0PhKA7x9w</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/alaahabour97">https://www.facebook.com/alaahabour97</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/alaahabour/?hl=en">https://www.instagram.com/alaahabour/?hl=en</a>	201K YT  11.7K FB  36.7 K I  <b>Total 249.4K</b>

3	Dudy Fouda(Dudy Lifestyle)	F	Lifestyle  Beauty & Skin-care  Self-developme nt	20 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/dudylifestyle">https://www.youtube.com/user/dudylifestyle</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/dudylifestyle">https://www.facebook.com/dudylifestyle</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/dudylifestyle_channel/">https://www.instagram.com/dudylifestyle_channel/</a>	423K YT  113K FB  27.4K I  <b>Total: 563.4K</b>
4	Hoda Rashad (Banat 7awa) (Chefista)	F	Lifestyle  Beauty & Skincare  Cooking	28 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZJZTXN7nKifJIVc9woFsWw/featured">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZJZTXN7nKifJIVc9woFsWw/featured</a>  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3wH5IO5yR9-CBbK9Q;9Ffw">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3wH5IO5yR9-CBbK9Q;9Ffw</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/banatt7awa/">https://www.facebook.com/banatt7awa/</a>  <a href="https://www.facebook.com/chefistaa/?hc_ref=ARTqg aqrrTad0Za74k8h97V8vSBgIvy-01IV-tH0sGvly5cN4P0yD6UjZNG9REARj9s&amp;fref=nf">https://www.facebook.com/chefistaa/?hc_ref=ARTqg aqrrTad0Za74k8h97V8vSBgIvy-01IV-tH0sGvly5cN4P0yD6UjZNG9REARj9s&amp;fref=nf</a>	1.4M YT (Two Channels)  106K FB (Two pages)  2K I  <b>Total: 1.5M</b>

					I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/hoda_banat7wa/">https://www.instagram.com/hoda_banat7wa/</a>	
5	Lamia Albardici (Style Loma)	F	Beauty & Skincare  Tips and product reviews	1 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/STYLELOMA">https://www.youtube.com/user/STYLELOMA</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/lamiaalbardici/">https://www.facebook.com/lamiaalbardici/</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/lamiaalbardiciofficial/">https://www.instagram.com/lamiaalbardiciofficial/</a>	170K YT  41K FB  60K I  <b>Total: 271K</b>
6	Mohamad Abdalkader	M	Values and traditions  Relationsh ips  Interperso nal Skills	19 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/albashmoze3?fbclid=IwAR39xiNu8vsMAQON7UoNZPx19aUJnnD4BPtqLRrpy0_xQO6HhB0aTQxlSOM">https://www.youtube.com/albashmoze3?fbclid=IwAR39xiNu8vsMAQON7UoNZPx19aUJnnD4BPtqLRrpy0_xQO6HhB0aTQxlSOM</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/albashmozi3/">https://www.facebook.com/albashmozi3/</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/mohamadabdalkader/">https://www.instagram.com/mohamadabdalkader/</a>	35.8K YT  1.1. M FB  50.9K I  <b>Total: 1.86M</b>

7	Nader Ahmed (Nader Ahmed & Nader Ahmed Vlogs)	M	Comedy  Short Sketches  Daily life Situations	19 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1pFSEvXGiqHS6uGUq7O1_w">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1pFSEvXGiqHS6uGUq7O1_w</a>  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1xFu4C6L7SN4X7vKIyggVg">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1xFu4C6L7SN4X7vKIyggVg</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/NaderAhmedf/">https://www.facebook.com/NaderAhmedf/</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/naderahmedhegazy/?hl=en">https://www.instagram.com/naderahmedhegazy/?hl=en</a>	5.27M YT (Two channels)  1.5M FB  732K I  <b>Total 7.5M</b>
8	Nader ElKomely	M	Comedy  Short Sketches  Daily life  Situations (girlfriend/ boyfriend)	27 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCejPwzG1DoztbNP01OrgWDQ/featured">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCejPwzG1DoztbNP01OrgWDQ/featured</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/nadereikomely">https://www.facebook.com/nadereikomely</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/nadernabill/">https://www.instagram.com/nadernabill/</a>	735K YT  465K FB  318K I  <b>Total: 1.5 M</b>

9	Samar Ahmed	F	Lifestyle  Beauty  Interpersonal & Life Skills	4 Feb	YT: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMEh0qV-CQJnK0YMMCczjSQ">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMEh0qV-CQJnK0YMMCczjSQ</a>  FB: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/smora.staar">https://www.facebook.com/smora.staar</a>  I: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/samerr.ahmed/">https://www.instagram.com/samerr.ahmed/</a>	267K YT  147K I  <b>Total: 414K</b>
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\* In March 2020.



## Annex 4: Overview of influencers

### 1. Ahmed El Barshoumy (Barshoumy)

Ahmed El Barshoumy is an Egyptian influencer. He presents his videos on Facebook mainly as Barshoumy since September of 2016. In the About section he uses the following hashtags #You're\_strong and Comedy Club. The hashtag #You're\_strong in Arabic refers to females as he believes in women empowerment.

His videos are comedy focusing mainly on imitating girls in a sarcastic manner in different situations such as shopping, dating, going out with friends, studying, etc. The second platform he uses is Instagram. He uses hashtags such as fashion blogger or fashionista or men's fashion or modelling. He also uses YouTube, Snapchat and Twitter. Ahmed has 4 very small groups as fan groups on Facebook. Ahmed is from Alexandria and lives in Spain.



Screenshot grabbed: 21 March 2020.

## **2. Alaa Ghabour**

Alaa Ghabour is an Egyptian influencer born in 1998. Alaa studies dentistry at a Private University in Egypt. She started her YouTube channel in 2016. She describes herself on Instagram as a sports addict and that she has the curiosity to know how everything around her works through seeking knowledge or experiencing it and capturing this on her channel. Her use of Instagram is to share photographs mainly. She uses Facebook to a lesser extent.

She initially started her channel focusing on topics such as being veiled, how to study and daily vlogs covering her activities at University and the gym. From the beginning of 2019, she shifted her focus to how things around her work or how they should be done, such as how to brush your teeth, how to deal with depression and how to become more confident. She won the YouTube Next up competition and travelled to the UK. She appeared on national TV once to talk about her channel. Alaa lives in Cairo. Alaa has two small fan pages on Instagram with less than 100 followers each.

فيديو كل أسبوعنا وجمعة ١٠ بالليل

Vlog

آلاء غبور

Instagram Facebook

**Alaa Ghabour** ✓  
201K subscribers

SUBSCRIBED

HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY CHANNELS ABOUT

توجدت السفر ▶ PLAY ALL

Video Title	Duration	Views	Time Ago
إيه أوحش حاجة قلبتها في أمريكا؟	8:34	17K views	4 months ago
أشهر مطاعم الأكل و العاهي في أمريكا	6:16	13K views	4 months ago
شروع في أمريكا ممنوع فيه التخزين قانوناً	4:39	14K views	5 months ago
درجة رجال الأعمال أطول رحلة في...مسار الطيران (٤٠ ألف جنيه ل ١٢	6:24		
ازاي البنت تقنع أهلها بتسافر	9:01	85K views	1 year ago

Screenshot grabbed: 21 March 2020.

### 3. Hoda Rashad (Banat 7awa & Chefista)

Hoda Rashad is an Egyptian influencer. Hoda is a graduate of Economics and Political Sciences. Hoda started her YouTube channel 'Banat 7awa' meaning 'Eve's Girls' in 2016 and her other YouTube channel 'Chefista' in 2017. She celebrated a million subscribers on Banat 7awa in 26 December 2019.

Banat 7awa focuses on cooking, fashion, beauty and homemade masks. She also gives relationship advice. Chefista is a cooking channel, presenting recipes and showing how they are made in short videos. In Chefista, Hoda does not appear but only shows her hands. She recently launched her Instagram page with her name, Hoda Rashad and not using the channels' names. She appeared for the first time on a nation-wide private TV channel (El Nahar Channel) in November 2019 to cook a recipe live. There are no fan pages or groups for Hoda. She lives in Cairo.

**BANAT HWA** بنات حوا

**هدى رشاد** HODA RASHAD

facebook

**بنات حوا - Banat 7wa** 1.11M subscribers

SUBSCRIBE

HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY CHANNELS ABOUT

Popular uploads ▶ PLAY ALL

قنوات مميزة

تليبات الحظ | 7 طرق للتخلص من الشعر الزائد بدون ألم + تصحيحي الخاصة 4.4M views • 1 year ago

اختفاء حبوب الوجه نهائيا 2.9M views • 1 year ago

أدوات طبخ الشيف 2.4M views • 1 year ago

Best 5 moments of gold finding by gold hunters! 2.2M views • 2 years ago

Chefista SUBSCRIBED

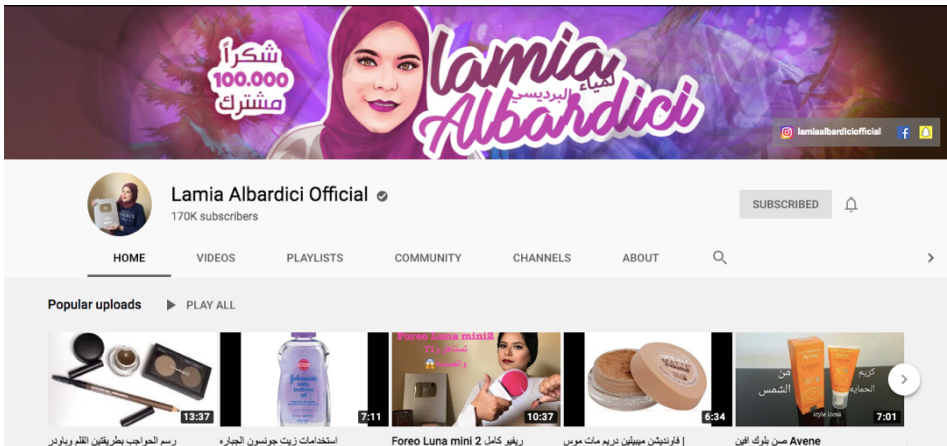
The screenshot shows the YouTube channel page for 'Chefista'. At the top, there is a banner with a cartoon chef character and the text 'تذوق اكتشاف أسرار المطبخ' and 'Chefista'. Below the banner, the channel name 'Chefista - شيفستا' is displayed with a subscriber count of 209K. The navigation menu includes HOME, VIDEOS, PLAYLISTS, COMMUNITY, CHANNELS, and ABOUT. A video thumbnail is visible with the title '!! السر الوحيد وراء خلطة كنتاكي في ساعة فقط' and a duration of 11:13. The video is from the channel 'Banat 7wa' and has a 'SUBSCRIBE' button next to it.

Screenshots grabbed: 21 March 2020.

#### 4. Lamia Albardici Official

Lamia Albardici is an Egyptian influencer born in 1988. Lamia is an Engineering graduate. She describes herself on Instagram as a blogger and YouTuber. She uses the hashtags Beauty, Fashion and Lifestyle. She started her channel in 2014. She uses YouTube mainly and complements this with Instagram and with Facebook to a lesser extent.

She focuses on beauty product reviews, makeup tutorials, fashion trends and also features some of her activities like going to the cinema, coffee shops and restaurants. Lamia regularly collaborates with companies to promote certain products and she mentions this in her videos. There are no fan pages or groups for Lamia. She lives in Cairo.



Screenshot grabbed: 21 March 2020.

## 5. Mohamed Abdalkader

Mohamed Abdalkader is an Egyptian influencer born in 1989. He started to present his videos on Facebook in 2017. He calls himself “BashMoze” which means more than a presenter (the literal translation is the “elevated presenter”). He presents short videos about values and ethical behaviour in society.

In May 2019, he started to present a slot of a TV program on a private TV Channel. On 17 December 2019, he celebrated 1 million followers on Facebook. He also signed a book contract; the book was published at the end of January 2020. Mohamed has one official large fan group on Facebook with over 104K members (January 2020). Mohamed lives in Cairo.

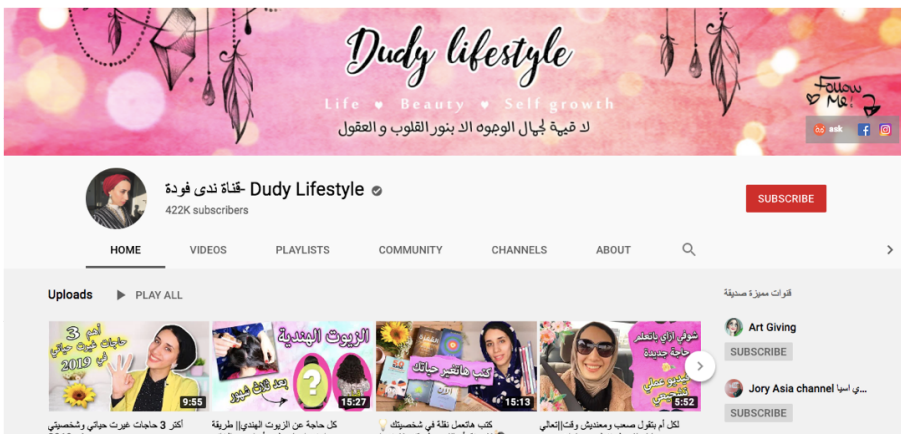


Screenshot grabbed: January 3, 2020.

## 6. Nada Fouda (Dudy Lifestyle)

Nada Fouda is an Egyptian influencer born in 1990. Nada started her YouTube channel 'Dudy Lifestyle' in 2014. She describes herself on Instagram as Content creator (bold mummy), Winner of YouTube Next-up 2016, Mummy of 2. She uses the words lifestyle, beauty and inspirations on her profile. On her Facebook profile she writes: 'I'm Nada Fouda, content creator and Lifestyle video blogger'. She has three main types of videos on her channel: lifestyle, DIY and self-development.

Nada regularly collaborates with sponsors and companies to promote certain products. She presents a broad range of topics. She won the YouTube Next up competition in 2016 and travelled to the UK. She represented the Arab world in the 'Global YouTube Camp' in New York in 2017. She was chosen in 2017 by Facebook as one of the 60 most influential persons on Facebook. Nada has no fan pages or groups. Nada lives in Cairo.



Screenshot grabbed: 21 March 2020.



## 7. Nader Ahmed

Nader Ahmed is an Egyptian influencer born in 1999. He started his first YouTube channel in 2017 and his second channel for daily vlogs also in 2017. He describes himself on his YouTube Channel as ‘Muslim, 20-year-old, here is my crazy comedian life, be a part of my life, Make your life more enjoyable with me’. On Instagram, he describes himself as ‘Muslim’ and puts a link to his YouTube channel. In his videos he acts out simple situations with his friends and sometimes alone. These situations are everyday situations such as studying, waiting for exam results and going out with friends.

Nader runs an official large fan group and there are a number of fan groups and pages in his name, within that he positions himself as part of his own fandom. In January of 2020 he featured in an advertisement for one of the largest mobile operators in Egypt. Nader lives in Cairo.

Nader Ahmed

Subscribe now Okay!!

I do this for you

Nader Ahmed VLOGS

Nader Ahmed

3.12M subscribers

SUBSCRIBE

HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY CHANNELS ABOUT

لما فروح تقدم على شغل "الترافير" | نادر احمد - عبدالله رجا

1,401,198 views • 1 month ago

فيديو كوميدي عن الاستهانة بالشعاع في مقابلات العمل "الترافير"  
طبعاً مشاهدتك ديم كبير أيا التي اكمل سن الام نقول راتيك في تعليق وتعمل لايك لتغيبو  
عشان تصلي الطور من المحتوى

لما فروح تقدم على شغل "الترافير" | نادر احمد - عبدالله رجا  
[https://youtu.be/pZkibOPG\\_SU](https://youtu.be/pZkibOPG_SU)

التشارك في القناة عشان مقدرش اعيش من خيوك (٠)

READ MORE

VLOGS !! حياتي المعجولة

Nader Ahmed Vlogs

SUBSCRIBE

**Nader Ahmed Vlogs**

1.72M subscribers

HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY CHANNELS **ABOUT**

**Description**

Nader Ahmed | نادر احمد  
مسلم | Muslim  
20 year old  
Here is my crazy comedian life, be a part of my life  
Make your life more enjoyable with me  
★★★★

For business : naderahmedmedia@yahoo.com  
whatsapp : 00201030904480

**Stats**

Joined Feb 15, 2017

57,749,381 views

FAV

**Nader Ahmed**

SUBSCRIBE

Screenshots grabbed: 21 March 2020.

## 8. Nader ElKomely

Nader El Komely is an Egyptian influencer born in 1997. He started his YouTube channel in 2017. He describes himself on his YouTube as 'Actor, Director and YouTuber'. On Instagram he describes himself as 'Engineer, actor, YouTube and influencer'. His focus is on presenting daily situations and relationships with a funny twist to them. There are two large fan groups in Nader's name. Nader lives in Alexandria.

ereikomely  
nababil

Nader Elkomely  
734K subscribers

اشترك يا عم 😂  
اشترك الان  
في الاسبوع كام فيديو

اشترك الان

مجلس الرسمية

SUBSCRIBE

HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY CHANNELS ABOUT

مش هفرح بيكي يا !! - Nader Elkomely

2,841,297 views • 2 years ago

خبر هام: فيديو جديد كل يوم اثنين وجمعه الساعة 5:00pm بتوقيت مصر  
اسم الاكروت بناغي علي الانستجرام: \_nadernabil\_ اصلولي اولو عشان المسابقة  
وعشان انحللكم جروب الواتس بناغي  
لدعي لو الفيديو [#مملكة نادر الكوملي](#) العما لنعلمو اشترك الي القناة وتحموا لأكبر مملكة  
عجبكم وشكرا علي دعمكم يا ديدما ومتنوشو لنعلمو انك  
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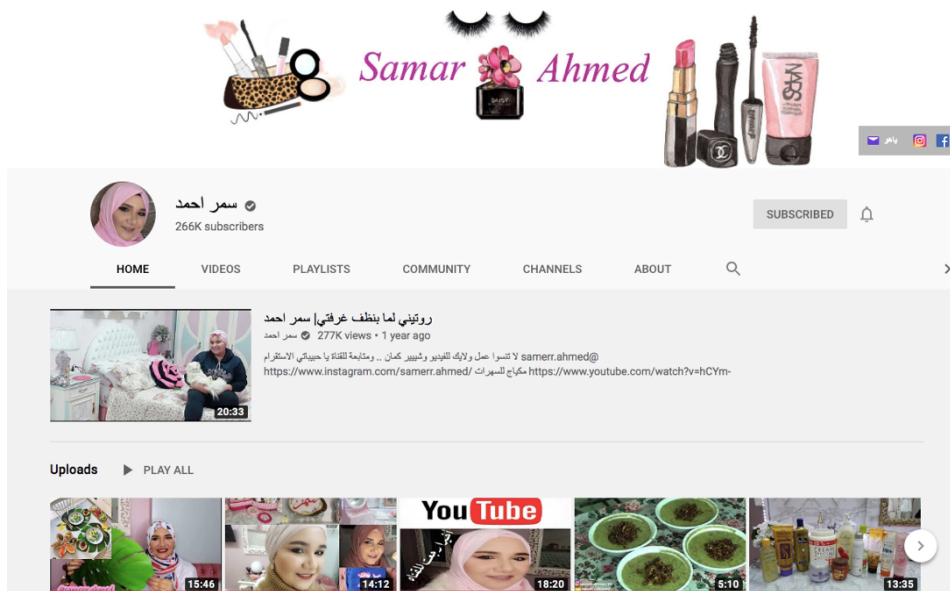
Instagram @nader\_nadi\_  
Facebook Nader Elkomely

Screenshot grabbed: 21 March 2020.

## 9. Samar Ahmed

Samar Ahmed is an Egyptian influencer. She started her channel in 2015. She describes herself on her Instagram account as an ‘Egyptian YouTuber’. She uses the statement: ‘Trust God.... Trust Yourself....Achieve your dream’ on her account. Her YouTube channel focuses on beauty tips, makeup tutorials and DIY.

Samar regularly promotes products and collaborates with companies. She also features her mother cooking by showing her hands only in the videos. There are a number of fan groups and pages for Samar. She lives in Alexandria.



Screenshot grabbed: 21 March 2020.

## Annex 5: Successful fan interviews

S	Gender	Age	Date	Method	Education	City/ Governorate
1	F	20	12 March	Phone	Government University	Cairo
2	M	24	15 March	Phone	Government Institute	Cairo
3	F	20	15 March	Phone	Government University	Cairo
4	M	21	18 March	Phone	Government University	ElGharbeya
5	M	19	18 March	FB Messenger Voice Notes	Government University	Alexandria
6	M	24	20 March	FB Messenger Voice Notes	Government University	Saudi Arabia (Originally from Alexandria)
7	F	21	18 March	Phone	Government University	Giza
8	F	24	19 March	Phone	Government University	Cairo (Originally from Sohag, Upper Egypt)
9	M	19	19 March	FB Messenger Voice Notes	Government University	El Menoufia

10	F	18	19 March	FB Messenger Voice Notes	Private School	Alexandria
11	F	21	28 March	F2F	Private University	Cairo
12	F	23	1 April	F2F	Private University	Cairo
13	M	21	3 April	F2F	Private University	Alexandria (currently staying in dorms in Cairo)
14	F	21	3 April	F2F	Private University	Cairo
15	F	21	10 April	F2F	Private University	Cairo
16	F	22	10 April	F2F	Private University	Cairo
17	M	21	10 April	F2F	Private University	Cairo (Originally from Alexandria)
18	F	21	10 April	F2F	Private University	Cairo

## **Annex 6: Overview of fans**

The fans in this study, all from the same age bracket (18-24 years), were purposefully diverse in terms of gender, geographic location as fans come from 5 different Governorates across Egypt and in terms of education and socio-economic levels they represent. In the following I share a short description of each of the fans. I have given each fan an alias name and ordered them in the alphabetical order of the alias names.

### **1. Adam**

Adam is 21 years old. He is studying Engineering at a public University. He lives in the rural city of El Gharbeya. Adam is from a low socio-economic level based on his residential district. He is a fan of Alaa Ghabour. He uses Facebook primarily and his main interest is traveling.

### **2. Amal**

Amal is 20 years old, in her third year, studying Spanish at a public University. She lives in Cairo. Amal is from a middle-class socio-economic level based on her residential district. Amal is a fan of Barshoumy; she likes comedy. Amal primarily uses Facebook.

### **3. Amr**

Amr is 19 years of age. He is studying at a public University. He lives in the rural city of Menoufia. Amr is from a low socio-economic level based on his residential district. Amr is a fan of Nader Ahmed. His

interests are football and comedy. Amr primarily uses Facebook and YouTube.

#### **4. Dalia**

Dalia is 18 years old. She is in her last year in an international private school. She lives in Alexandria. Dalia is from an upper socio-economic level based on her residential district. Dalia is a fan of Nader Ahmed. Her interests are comedy, makeup and beauty.

Dalia revealed during the interview that she is managing the official fan group for Nader Ahmed. Her role as administrator entails moderating conversations and monitoring the group. She takes screen shots of comments and sends them to Nader and any artwork such as illustrations or designs made by fans for him. Dalia uses primarily Facebook and has a private Instagram account.

#### **5. David**

David is 21 years old. He is studying political sciences at a private University. David is originally from Alexandria but is currently living at the University dorms in Cairo. He is from a middle socio-economic level based on his original residential district. His interests are varied: history, comedy, music and science. David uses primarily Facebook and YouTube.

#### **6. Dina**

Dina is 24 years old. She has her own business on social media. She lives in Cairo. Dina is from a low socio-economic level based on her



residential district. She is a fan of Nada Fouda. She is interested in self-development. She uses all social media platforms.

### **7. Eman**

Eman is 21 years of age. She is in her last year at a public University. Eman lives in Cairo. She is from a low socio-economic level based on her residential district. Eman is a fan of Nada Fouda. She is interested in self-development. She uses primarily Facebook and YouTube.

### **8. Hanya**

Hanya is 20 years old. She is studying accounting at a public University. She lives in Cairo. She is from a middle socio-economic level based on her residential district. She is a fan of Mohamed Abdalkader. She is interested in self-development. She primarily uses Facebook.

### **9. Heba**

Heba is 21 years old. She is studying at a private University. She lives in Cairo. She is from a middle socio-economic level based on her residential district. She is interested in religion. She uses Facebook primarily.

### **10. Hussein**

Hussein is 21 years old. He is in his fourth year, studying at a private University. He is originally from Alexandria, but lives now in Cairo. He is from a middle-class socio-economic level based on his

residential district. He is interested in gaming and technology. He uses YouTube primarily and Facebook.

### **11. Lobna**

Lobna is 21 years old. She is in her fourth year, studying at a private University. She lives in Cairo. She is from an upper-class socio-economic level based on her residential district. She is interested in sports and fashion. She uses primarily Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.

### **12. Mo**

Mo is 19 years old. He is studying at a Public University. He lives in Alexandria. Mo is from a middle-class socio-economic level based on his residential district. He is interested in religion. He uses all social media platforms.

### **13. Mona**

Mona is 21 years old. She is in her fourth year studying computer science at a private University. She lives in Cairo. She is from a middle socio-economic level based on her residential district. She has varied interests: series, makeup and beauty, shopping hauls, comedy, movies and religion. She uses primarily YouTube and Facebook.

### **14. Motaz**

Motaz is 24 years. He has graduated from a public Institute. He lives in Cairo. Motaz is from a low socio-economic level based on his residential district. He is a fan of Mohamed Abdalkader. Motaz is

interested in comedy and self-development. He uses primarily Facebook.

### **15. Nisreen**

Nisreen is 22 years old. She is in her fourth year at a private University. She lives in Cairo. She is from a middle-class socio-economic level based on her residential district. She is interested in fashion, beauty and makeup. She uses primarily Facebook, YouTube and has a private Instagram account.

### **16. Osama**

Osama is 24 years old. He works as an accountant in a company in Saudi Arabia. He is originally from Alexandria. He is from a middle-class socio-economic level based on his original residential district. Osama is fan of Alaa Ghabour. He is interested in self-development and psychology. He uses primarily Facebook and YouTube.

### **17. Perihan**

Perihan is 23 years old. She is studying at a private University. She lives in Cairo. Perihan is from an upper socio-economic level based on her residential district. She is interested in fashion and beauty. Perihan uses primarily Facebook and has a private Instagram account.

### **18. Sahar**

Sahar is 21 years old. She is studying at a Private University. She lives in Cairo. Sahar is from an upper socio-economic level based on her residential district. Sahar is a fan of Barshoumy, she is interested in

shopping hauls and comedy. Sahar has a Facebook account only. She uses primarily YouTube.



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