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**A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Influencer Self-Representation on
Instagram**
Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Self-representation on social media has become an important part of contemporary digital identity, especially in the case of influencers whose public personas are continuously displayed and negotiated online. The thesis explores how influencer self-representation is constructed on Instagram through the interaction of images, captions and audience comments. The research material consists of selected public posts by three influencer case studies, namely Emma Chamberlain, Bretman Rock and Zoë Sugg. The data comprises 90 posts, with 30 posts selected from each influencer and all published in 2025 and includes 900 sampled audience comments in total. For each post the image, caption and 10 sampled audience comments were analysed. The selected posts were analysed through Multimodal Discourse Analysis, with images, captions and comments examined as separate but connected layers. The Discourse-Historical Approach used as supporting interpretive tool to identify patterns of representation, stance and evaluation. The qualitative findings were further supported by corpus-assisted linguistic analysis of keywords, n-grams and concordance lines, which helped identify recurring lexical and phraseological patterns across captions and comments. The findings reveal distinct but recurring representational tendencies across the three case studies. Emma Chamberlain's posts construct a professional and editorial persona, Bretman Rock's posts foreground expressive and affective self-performance, and Zoë Sugg's posts present a domestic, family-centred and lifestyle-oriented persona. Across the three case studies, audience comments play an important role in stabilising influencer personas by affirming appearance, lifestyle, emotional tone and personal appeal. The comments largely reinforce rather than challenge the personas presented in the posts, showing how audience interaction contributes to the continued shaping and validation of influencer self-representation. The thesis concludes that Instagram self-representation is a multimodal and interactional process in which visual choices and textual framing construct the initial persona, while audience comments help reinforce, stabilise or lightly redirect its meaning.

Keywords

self-representation; influencer discourse; Instagram; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Discourse-Historical Approach

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Anotacija

Savirepresentacija socialiniuose tinkluose yra svarbi šiuolaikinės skaitmeninės tapatybės dalis, ypač kalbant apie nuomonės formuotojus, kurių viešasis įvaizdis nuolat matomas, kuriamas ir vertinamas vartotojų. Šiame baigiamajame darbe analizuojama, kaip nuomonės formuotojų savirepresentacija konstruojama „Instagram“ platformoje per vaizdą, įrašų aprašą ir vartotojų komentarų sąveiką. Darbo tikslas – ištirti, kaip trijų pasirinktų nuomonės formuotojų – Emmos Chamberlain, Bretmano Rocko ir Zoë Sugg – savirepresentacija formuojama skirtingais vizualiniais, tekstiniais ir komentarų lygmens elementais. Tyrimo medžiagą sudaro 90 viešų „Instagram“ įrašų, paskelbtų 2025 metais: po 30 įrašų iš kiekvieno nuomonės formuotojo paskyros, taip pat 900 atrinktų vartotojų komentarų. Kiekvieno įrašo analizė apima vaizdą, įrašo aprašą ir 10 atrinktų vartotojų komentarų. Darbe taikoma multimodalinė diskurso analizė, kurioje vaizdai, įrašų aprašai ir vartotojų komentarai nagrinėjami kaip atskiri, bet tarpusavyje susiję lygmenys. Diskurso istorinė prieiga paremtos kategorijos naudojamos kaip papildomas interpretacinis įrankis reprezentacijos, pozicijos ir vertinimo modeliams atpažinti. Kokybiniai rezultatai papildomi tekstynų lingvistikos duomenimis paremta reikšminių žodžių, n-gramų ir vartosenos pavyzdžių analize, kuri padėjo nustatyti pasikartojančius leksinius ir frazeologinius modelius įrašų aprašuose ir komentatuose. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad nuomonės formuotojų savirepresentacija išreiškiama skirtingomis, tačiau pasikartojančiomis tendencijomis. Emmos Chamberlain įrašai kuria profesionaliai kuriojamą ir vizualiai apgalvotą viešąjį įvaizdį, Bretmano Rocko įrašai išryškina ekspresyvų ir emociškai paveiktą savęs pristatymą, o Zoë Sugg įrašuose kuriamas šeimos, namų ir gyvenimo būdo temomis paremtas įvaizdis. Vartotojų komentarai dažniausiai palaiko, o ne kvestionuoja įrašuose kuriamas reprezentacijas, todėl prisideda prie jų įtvirtinimo. Darbe daroma išvada, kad savirepresentacija „Instagram“ platformoje yra multimodalus ir interaktyvus procesas: vaizdiniai sprendimai ir tekstinis įrėminimas kuria pradinį viešąjį įvaizdį, o vartotojų komentarai padeda jį sustiprinti, įtvirtinti arba nežymiai pakreipti jo reikšmę.

Raktiniai žodžiai

savirepresentacija; nuomonės formuotojų diskursas; „Instagram“ platforma; multimodalinė diskurso analizė; diskurso istorinė prieiga

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1. Introduction

1.1 Social media and influencer self-representation

Over the past decade, social media has become an integral part of our everyday lives, from making video calls and picture sharing to accessing news from around the world in a matter of minutes. While most users may initially associate social media with personal content designed to present themselves and the life they wish to show, its influence runs deeper. Social media functions as a unique platform for shaping identity, where users curate their image by selectively posting, sharing, and liking content, ultimately presenting a condensed version of themselves (Khamis et al. 2017: 196). This thesis treats identity as something produced through discourse and social interaction, not as a fixed personal essence, following Bucholtz and Hall's definition of identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (2005: 586). Given the considerable weight representation holds in media discourse, it is becoming increasingly important to study how language and images shape the portrayal of people, their ideas, and values.

In this context, influencers play a significant role in digital culture, because the audiences they gather, allow them to transmit information and amplify messages, this way shaping public discourse and public opinion (Abidin 2018: 71). The term *influencer* is commonly associated with persuasion, lifestyle and consumption. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines an influencer as "a person active on social media who is able to influence people's opinions or to persuade them to follow a particular lifestyle or buy a particular product" (2025). Abidin defines influencers as sustained and highly branded social media personalities who are able to attract an audience with their content (2018: 71). In this thesis, influencers are understood as public digital actors whose authority relies on a consistent and recognisable online persona.

This idea is closely linked to self-branding, which refers to the construction of a distinctive public image for commercial gain and social recognition (Khamis et al. 2017: 191). Accordingly, this thesis approaches influencers more broadly as public digital actors who construct recognisable online persona through multimodal self-representation. To keep their audience's attention, these online figures need to know how to construct and maintain an identity that is engaging and attractive enough for their followers. As Khamis et al. point out, influencers create a public persona that is strategic and relevant to their audience (2017: 196). Therefore, understanding influencer self-representation is crucial for grasping how their influence is constructed, delivered, and maintained within the contemporary media environment.

1.2 Instagram as a multimodal and interactional platform

The platform of Instagram is of particular interest in this area due to its multimodal *affordances*. Here, affordances are treated as the possibilities and restrictions shaped by the platform's technical and

social design, affecting how user content is produced, shared and engaged with (Boyd 2010: 39). Instagram's affordances include image-centred posting, captions, carousel formats, hashtags, likes and comment sections, which together allow users to combine visual, textual and interactive elements in the construction of online self-representation. Instagram is a predominantly visual platform that foregrounds curated self-representation through images, followed by captions and interactions in the comments section. For this reason, this platform is particularly relevant for the present study, as textual material is embedded within visual or audio-visual posts, and its communicative strength relies on images and videos (Tenca 2022: 425–426).

However, self-representation based on Instagram extends beyond simple sharing of personal moments. In influencer culture, visual posts can become strategic resources through which online figures build audience attachment, visibility and commercial value. Ethnographic research on Singaporean influencers demonstrates how selfies can function as affective and economic resources by merging visual curation, advertorial aesthetics, and performative authenticity (Abidin 2016). The research reveals how a strategic use of “subversive frivolity” (playful or shallow behaviour performed online) can result in economic and cultural value (Abidin 2016: 2). Another study carried out by Ghaffari (2020) explores how Instagram posts can challenge dominating femininity ideals while attracting misogynistic and body-shaming language. The results demonstrate that female celebrities' performances of authenticity on social media often come at the cost of emotional labour, as personal self-representation exposes them to hostile discourses that pressure them to manage hate and conform to gendered expectations, potentially undermining broader collective political struggle (Ghaffari 2020: 13).

From a more industry-oriented perspective, Jaworska's research examines how corporate reputation is restored through the collaborative use of linguistic, visual, and auditory modes (2023: 95–108). The findings demonstrate that the key strategically employed elements to regain user trust are personalisation, emotional storytelling, and nostalgia, with emphasis being put on the power of persuasion and the ideology of multimodal discourse, which has the capacity to influence public opinion (Jaworska 2023: 105). Taken together, these studies show that multimodal practices not only serve a decorative purpose but also help to shape self-representation, values, and social position. Consequently, analysing influencer identity requires attention to how visual, linguistic and interactional elements work together to construct meaning.

In social media discourse, identity is not only represented by the content producer but is also shaped through interactions with the audience. Specifically, the analysis of social media discourse developed by Page demonstrates that linguistic features such as hashtags, informal tweets, and colloquial phrases contribute to creating intimacy while serving self-branding goals (2012: 183). Similarly,

Zappavigna's concept of "ambient affiliation" captures how users create shared values and collective belonging through searchable, affectively charged discourse (2019: 40). In this context, *affiliation* can be understood as alignment around shared values, while *ambient* emphasises that such bonding can occur in social media spaces even without direct interaction between users. This means that influencer self-representation is constructed through visuals as well as captions and audience comments. This thesis approaches each Instagram post as a multimodal unit where images, captions and audience interactions together contribute to influencer representation of self.

Although the existing research has explored influencers through the lenses of marketing, authenticity, and digital labour, there is a relative lack of in-depth studies on how the influencer self-representation is constructed in individual Instagram posts through a combination of visual, linguistic, and interactive elements. This gap is significant because Instagram identity is not produced through a single mode, but through the combined work of images, captions, platform affordances and audience interaction, which together construct a curated but personal self-representation (Tenca 2022: 425). This is especially relevant to influencer self-representation, which depends on the strategic construction of a distinctive public image for audience recognition (Khamis et al. 2017: 191). As a result, understanding this phenomenon requires attention not only to what influencers show and say, but also how audiences engage with, confirming or negotiating the meanings linked to that representation. Bolander and Locher describe online identity construction as emerging through interaction between the initial post and responses (2015: 99). Therefore, this thesis considers not only what influencers show and say, but also how audience responses participate in confirming, extending or negotiating self-representation.

1.3 The scope of the present study

The research explores how multimodal resources in Instagram posts contribute to constructing influencer self-representation. Since the study is positioned within Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), the analysis focuses on how Instagram posts combine images, captions and audience interaction to construct influencer self-representation. The primary visual framework is Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic visual grammar, which provides tools for analysing how images construct representational, interactive and compositional meanings. The linguistic and interactional layers are both informed by Zappavigna and Martin's communing affiliation framework (2017). The caption analysis focuses on how author-produced text supports or modifies visual self-representation, while the comment analysis focuses on how audience responses express evaluation and affiliation around shared values (Zappavigna & Martin 2017). DHA-informed categories are used only as a supporting coding tool for identifying broader patterns of representation, stance and evaluation; they are not treated as a separate historical analysis (Reisigl & Wodak 2016). These

frameworks allow influencer self-representation to be examined through visuals, captions and audience comments.

Building on these frameworks, the thesis will analyse self-representation in the Instagram posts of three case studies: Emma Chamberlain, Bretman Rock and Zoë Sugg. The reasoning for choosing these three public figures is the thematic diversity of their accounts, which may reveal different types of self-representation, as well as their appeal to similar age groups among millennial and Gen Z audiences. By conducting a Multimodal Discourse Analysis of influencer Instagram posts, the study aims to examine how visual, textual and audience-generated resources contribute to construction of influencer self-representation, audience engagement and digital self-branding. To fulfil this aim, the following research questions were established:

- 1) How do visual design choices contribute to the construction of influencer persona?
- 2) What caption features, such as communicative function, stance and evaluation, shape self-presentation?
- 3) How do the audience interactions contribute to, validate, or challenge influencer identity through comments?

These questions provide the analytical basis for the analysis of influencer self-representation as a multimodal and interactional process.

The thesis is organised as follows. The following sections position the study within research on influencer culture, multimodality and digital identity construction, with particular attention to the frameworks that directly inform the analysis of images, captions and audience comments. The data and methods section describes the dataset and explains the analytical design, including the qualitative coding procedure, the DHA-informed supporting categories and the supplementary quantitative corpus-assisted analysis. The results and discussion section focuses on the qualitative findings in two main parts: it first analyses the visual mode together with captions, before turning to the audience comments. The multimodal interpretation combines the three modes to compare the case studies. To strengthen the empirical grounding of the analysis, the qualitative component is supported by the supplementary quantitative analysis through the application of AntConc (Anthony 2024). Finally, the conclusions section of the thesis summarizes the results of the research, address the limitations, and proposing possible future research.

1.4 Previous research on influencer culture

Influencers are often discussed in relation to their ability to shape consumer behaviour and promote products (De Veirman et al. 2017: 798–800; Lou & Yuan 2018: 4). However, they can also be viewed as role models by showing audiences possible ways of presenting the oneself online. Thus, in this

thesis identity is treated not as *a priori*, but as an interactionally emergent process constructed through discourse, interaction and multimodal representation (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 587). Previous studies have established that influencers play a significant role in influencing cultural norms, consumer behaviours, and modes of communication in online spaces (Abidin, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017). A study carried out by De Veirman et al. revealed that, although a higher number of followers does not necessarily indicate an automatic perception of an influencer as being an opinion leader, they do indicate a higher perception of popularity and higher likeability (2017: 807). Moreover, the study states that consumers usually rely on the influencers to present a certain product and then evaluate whether a product is something that they need (De Veirman et al. 2017: 807–808). Similarly, the study carried out by Lou and Yuan found that depending whether an influencer is perceived as trustworthy, attractive and similar to their followers, it positively affects their trust in the influencer's branded posts (2018: 23). Consequently, the positive evaluation of the influencers branded posts results in higher followers' purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan 2018: 22). This indicates that the credibility and relatability of influencers can have power in shaping consumer trust, attitudes toward brands, and purchasing decisions.

At the same time, influencer communication depends on a persona that appears trustworthy and relatable to followers. Influencer culture is increasingly understood not only in terms of marketing and consumption, but as a complex social and communicative practice where identity, influence and interaction come together. Frequent encounters with influencer content make advertising messages part of daily social media use, while also positioning the influencers as examples of lifestyle, self-expression and online identity positioning (Lou & Yuan 2018: 4; Khamis et al. 2017: 191). This reflects wider changes in celebrity culture. In their study on celebrity news, Dubied and Hanitzsch state that celebrities present audiences with identity orientation, functioning as models for ways of life, values, and self-expression (2014: 140). Influencers further expand this role as their public identities are constantly evaluated, shared and responded to by followers. Social media requires influencers to balance personal closeness and public exposure by producing content that feels personal but is directed at broad audiences. Thus, influencer communication relies on recognisable communicative styles that maintain engagement across large audiences.

However, while existing research has highlighted the social importance of influencers and their impact on consumption and communication, there is still a lack of studies that investigate how influencers construct their self-representation through visual, textual, and interactive elements within individual Instagram posts.

1.5 Theoretical and analytical framework

The different modes of communication, together with interactions in the comments section, contribute to the shared meaning produced through each post. This approach suits Instagram where posts combine visual self-representation with linguistic and interactional elements. A multimodal perspective is therefore useful for examining identity as constructed through the interaction of images, captions and audience comments. Following van Dijk, discourse is approached here as socially situated and connected to the production and circulation of knowledge, values and identities, as both discourse and knowledge operate across cognitive, social and interactional levels (2014: 173). This approach emphasises that meaning-making is not confined to the text itself but must be analysed within its broader context, including interpretation and societal response (van Dijk 2014: 223). In digital environments such as Instagram, influencer posts function as public discursive acts whose meanings are continuously reconstructed through audience interaction. Building on van Dijk's view that recipients' interpretations impact subsequent exchanges (2014: 233), comments play a crucial role in the discourse practices that negotiate and solidify influencer identities. For this reason, the thesis uses Multimodal Discourse Analysis as an umbrella framework, within which visual grammar accounts for images, linguistic analysis accounts for captions and corpus-assisted findings, and communing affiliation accounts for audience interaction in comments. MDA research therefore provides the broader theoretical and interpretive lens for the introduction and discussion, framing influencer communication as both socially meaningful and shaped by power dynamics, while the empirical analysis employs multimodal, linguistic and interactional approaches. In this thesis, these approaches correspond to the analysis of images, captions and audience comments respectively, while their detailed operationalisation is provided in the data and methods section.

For the first part of the analysis, namely the visual mode, the research will apply Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic framework of visual grammar. This framework offers clear and concise tools for examining how visual design is used to convey self-representation. The authors identify three metafunctions that shape meaning in images, which are linked to the three metafunctions proposed by Halliday (2004) when analysing verbal language: *representational* (ideational); *interactive* (interpersonal); and *compositional* (textual) meanings, later operationalised in more detail in the data and methods section. The social semiotic framework is crucial for analysing Instagram images as it offers a structured method for investigating how visual elements, such as gaze, composition, and symbolic elements, communicate the intended meaning and contribute to the formation of identity. The application of this framework to the present study will be beneficial in revealing how influencers position themselves, the identities they create, and how they engage with the viewers.

The second part of the analysis focuses on the linguistic mode, namely the captions accompanying each Instagram post. Captions are treated as author-produced textual resources that guide the interpretation of the image by foregrounding values, stance and evaluative meanings. Drawing on Zappavigna and Martin's communing affiliation framework, this layer examines how captions support or modify the visual self-representation by aligning them with particular meanings and values (Zappavigna & Martin 2017: 2–5). This framework helps to explain how captions contribute to influencer self-representation by directing the viewer's interpretation of the image and connecting it to specific values, moods or persona features.

The third part of the analysis focuses on user comments, with a specific focus on how identity is constructed within the engagement with the audience. This section will rely on communing affiliation framework proposed by Zappavigna and Martin (2017). The concept of communing affiliation is defined as the way social media users can align around particular values without any direct interaction (Zappavigna & Martin 2017: 2). The research proposes three systems of meaning that are used to build social alignment: *convoking* (calling together a community to bond), *finessing* (positioning one's stance in relation to other possible stances), and *promoting* (highlighting the value that is wanted to be shared) (Zappavigna & Martin 2017: 5). This framework helps to explain how an influencer's audience participates in shaping their identity through shared values, reactions, and evaluative comments.

Although comments are not authored by the influencer, sociocultural linguistics conceptualises identity as an emergent, relational, and interactionally constructed phenomenon (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Identity does not precede discourse but is produced through semiotic practices unfolding in interaction, including evaluations, alignments, and positionings by others (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 606). In this context, semiotic practices are understood as the use of different meaning-making resources, including words, images, evaluative language and interactional positioning. From this perspective, audience reactions play a vital role in shaping identity, as they reveal how followers confirm, challenge or attach different identity meanings to an influencer's self-presentation (Bolander & Locher 2015: 99). Comment sections, therefore, provide access to the relational and intersubjective dimensions of identity, showing how influencers are positioned, what values they are associated with, and what affective relationships, understood here as relationships built through expressions of emotion, attachment or appreciation, are established in interaction. All three sections of the analysis provide a structured, multi-level approach for analysing social media posts, demonstrating how influencers represent themselves through intentional visual presentation, affective language use, and strategies through which audiences align with, negotiate or challenge the influencer's self-representation.

To conclude, this section has emphasised the importance of examining influencer self-representation on Instagram, identified central theoretical frameworks, and explained the thesis's analytical approach. By establishing the relevance of multimodal and critical perspective, it sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of how influencers construct and negotiate their identities in digital spaces. Understanding these processes is crucial, as influencers play a growing role in shaping cultural values, consumer behaviour, and public discourse in contemporary society. The preceding literature review positions this research within the broader academic conversation and provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis.

2. Data and methods

This section outlines the procedures used for data collection and analysis and describes the methodological approach adopted in this research.

2.1 Data collection

In this study, Instagram influencer posts are treated as mediated, interactive multimodal forms of discourse. Each post is therefore approached as a site of engagement, where influencer-produced material, audience responses, platform affordances and wider socio-cultural expectations come together to shape the emergent process of influencer self-representation (Jones 2014: 41–42). The unit of analysis is the complete Instagram post, treated as a multimodal unit comprising static images, captions and comments. Within this context, images and captions created by the influencer provide the primary self-representation material, while audience comments are treated as a secondary interactional layer, revealing how that representation is received, validated, negotiated or challenged. The dataset comprises 90 Instagram posts collected from the public Instagram profiles of three selected social media influencers: Emma Chamberlain, Bretman Rock and Zoë Sugg (Chamberlain n.d.; Rock n.d.; Sugg n.d.). Data collection followed a sampling approach of two stages, combining stratified purposive sampling for influencer selection and systematic sampling for post selection. The first stage involved selecting influencers through stratified purposive sampling, which means that the selection was intentional and based on specific criteria conducive to identifying information-rich cases with relevant knowledge or experience of the specific phenomenon (Palinkas et al. 2015: 534), since the study aimed to compare public accounts with similar characteristics but different audience sizes. The selection requirements included influencers speaking English language, a verified badge on their Instagram account, a larger follower base, which is a commonly used indicator of perceived popularity and audience reach (De Veirman et al. 2017: 800). Engagement rate was used as an additional criterion of the level of active audience interaction with content in relation to its reach or account size (Newberry 2025). While the follower count reflects the size of the audience, engagement rate measures audience interaction level with the post, which is essential when analysing impact and

communicative effectiveness. The engagement rate formula and the calculations for individual posts are included in the Appendix 1, while the main discussion uses engagement rate only as a selection criterion.

To maintain transparency and consistency in data collection, in the second stage Instagram posts were selected through systematic sampling (Bijeikienė & Tamošiūnaitė 2013: 47). A one-year timeframe of posts published in 2025 (1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025) was chosen to ensure systematic and comparable post selection as well as representativeness across all influencers. The data were collected manually, as automated Instagram scraping requires specialised technical procedures and may raise ethical concerns, while third-party downloader services proved to be unreliable when retrieving all necessary materials, namely images, captions and comments. Systematic sampling was applied with $k = 3$ interval, meaning that every third eligible post was selected (Bijeikienė & Tamošiūnaitė 2013: 47). This approach was adopted to make post sampling more transparent and to minimise potential selection bias. To maintain consistency and avoid miscounting, posts were chosen based on Instagram's three-column layout from left to right, which meant that the sampled post in each row was the one on the right. If this position contained a video, it was omitted and replaced with the next suitable static post. Given the scope of the study, video materials were excluded from the dataset.

Majority of the Instagram posts contained carousels. A *carousel* was understood as a single Instagram post containing multiple images, which users can navigate slide by slide (Instagram n.d.). In the study, the first image of the carousel was treated as the initial self-representational frame, as it is the first visual seen by the viewer, with later images treated as extension, modification or contextualisation of this frame. Thus, the final dataset consisted of 30 posts per influencer.

For every selected post, both author-produced and audience-produced components were collected. The material produced by the author consisted of the static images in the post and its accompanying caption. Audience-generated material included 10 publicly visible comments under each post: five most liked comments and five additional comments from the remaining comment thread. In total, the dataset comprised 90 multimodal Instagram posts: images accompanied by captions and a collection of 900 analysed user comments. This distinction enabled the study to foreground the multimodal representation created by the influencer, while using comments as a secondary interactional layer that demonstrates how followers interpret and evaluate the emerging persona.

Qualitative analysis was operationalised through the repetitive and systematic reading of all gathered posts. The steps taken were as follows: (1) selecting a single post from one of the three case studies; (2) examining the visual material; (3) analysing the caption of the post; and (4) analysing 10

comments (5 most popular and 5 randomly selected) underneath it; (5) findings from all components were combined in the multimodal interpretation. Each individual post was reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarisation with the data, with noting down the initial interpretations, which were later revisited during subsequent stages of analysis. Structured Excel-based codebooks were used to record coding decisions consistently and to support comparison across posts.

To improve the internal consistency of the analysis, an intra-rater reliability procedure was used as an additional self-checking procedure (Kang & Rubin 2012). One month after the initial coding, approximately 10% of the sample was re-analysed and re-coded. Since the procedure was intended to assess qualitative consistency, statistical reliability coefficients were not calculated. When differences emerged between the first and second analytical rounds, the classification criteria were revisited and adjusted to ensure a more consistent application across the dataset.

The data collection process was guided by the ethical and copyright-related considerations. These measures align with the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical guidelines, which emphasise risk minimisation, anonymisation, and safeguarding users when working with online data (Franzke et al. 2020). Further guidance concerning social media data, anonymisation and reproduction was consulted from LSE Research Ethics Review Board (2026), UK Data Service (n.d.), the Association of University Presses (2022), Vilnius University Library (n.d.) and Instagram's Terms of Use (Instagram n.d.). The guidance informed the decision to use only publicly available content from influencer accounts, with public availability established as a priori criterion before systematic sampling was applied. As an additional precaution, the three influencers included in the dataset were contacted via Instagram direct message to notify them of the study and ask whether their publicly available posts and captions could be referred to for academic research purposes. As no response had been received by the time of writing, the absence of response was not considered as consent. Consequently, the study abstained from using direct quotations and opted for paraphrasing and analytical description. No interaction with commenting users took place. Although the analysed content was publicly available and produced by public-facing social media influencers whose Instagram profiles form part of their digital personas, this did not remove the ethical considerations of the study. As online research, the study still accounted for users' expectations and reduced possible harm through anonymisation or pseudonymisation (Franzke et al. 2020: 7–8). Accordingly, the thesis does not directly reproduce influencer images, instead visual materials are presented through non-identifiable descriptions based on the same coding categories used in the analysis. Usernames, profile links, @mentions and other directly identifying details were not stored separately and were not included in the analytical dataset or Appendix. Anonymised labels (E.4, B.2...) were used to locate relevant material in the Appendix without revealing personally identifiable information. This allows

the analysis to remain verifiable without direct exposure of identifiable user generated content. Although selected posts and comments were retained to preserve the systematic structure of the dataset, sensitive or potentially identifying material was not quoted directly and was instead anonymised, omitted or described in general terms where necessary.

2.2 Data analysis

To address the research aim of exploring how influencers construct their self-representation, communicate their identities and manage relationships with their audience, the current study adopted a Multimodal Discourse Analysis to examine both the visual and textual elements of the gathered Instagram posts. The visual material was analysed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic framework of visual grammar, which conceptualises image meaning through three metafunctions:

- a) *representational meaning*, where the analysis considered who or what is shown in the image and whether the image constructs a *narrative* form of representation (actions, events or processes of change) or *conceptual* form of representation (classification, structure or symbolic meaning);
- b) *interactive meaning*, which was applied to analyse how the viewer is positioned through gaze, social distance, and horizontal or vertical angle;
- c) *compositional meaning*, which was used to explore how the visual message is organised through salience, framing, information value and modality features, including colour saturation, contextualisation and illumination.

These metafunctions were operationalised through a set of visual indicators used consistently across all three datasets. The coding first recorded observable features of the first image in each post and then assigned the post to the visual self-representation type whose indicators were most strongly represented. As a heuristic threshold, a post was assigned to a type when at least three core indicators associated with that category were present in the first image. In cases of overlap, the dominant representational function was determined on the basis of overall visual salience while the caption was used only as contextual support. Table 1 illustrates the operational logic used to identify the visual self-representation types, while the additional operational definitions of selected visual indicators are provided in Appendix 2A.

Table 1. Operational indicators for visual self-representation types

Visual self-representation type	Core indicators
Editorial/fashion-event	Fashion, public event, controlled pose, stylised or high-fashion clothing, polished composition, high salience, brand, collaborator or magazine references

Everyday/creative	Informal or domestic setting, casual clothing, home, pets, food or everyday objects, creative process, natural framing, playful interactions
Conceptual/theatrical	Costumes or character-like styling, exaggerated theme, staged setting, fantasy or conceptual composition, performative pose
Brand-based	Salient product, campaign setting, promotional styling, brand names or packaging, commercial framing, product-oriented framing
Travel/place-based	Destination markers, urban or tropical scenery, mobility, place-specific clothing or activities, cultural or tourism setting
Family/lifestyle	Family members, children, domestic activities, meals, celebrations, connected participants, everyday relational actions
Style/consumer-lifestyle	Outfits, accessories, beauty or hair, selected personal objects, product aesthetics, sentimental or lifestyle arrangement

The textual data, comprising post captions and user comments, were analysed using Zappavigna and Martin’s framework of *communing affiliation*, which explains how social media users align around shared values, attitudes and feelings in online interactions (2017: 5). In this study, *communing* function refers to whether a comment presents evaluation as an individual response or makes it socially shareable by inviting, adjusting or strengthening alignment around shared values. *Convoking* was interpreted as inviting or evoking shared values (e.g. “This speaks for everyone” in E.20.03), *finessing* as adjustment of alignment through evaluative positioning (e.g. “I admire you, but the outfit is confusing” in E.6.04), and *promoting* as strengthening or circulating those values within the interaction (e.g. “we are eager to see you return” in Z.27.1). Captions were further coded according to their primary communicative function. The caption categories were derived heuristically from repeated patterns observed across the dataset rather than taken from a pre-existing classification. The resulting categories included: *no caption*, *content announcement*, *brand/event/collaborator affiliation*, *mood framing*, *self-performance*, *place/travel framing*, *family/lifestyle framing*, *style/beauty/product framing* and *reflective framing*. Each caption was assigned to the category that best reflected its dominant communicative function, such as *branding*, *content announcement*, *mood*, *family life*, *routines* or *self-performance*. Finally, comments were analysed through *communing* function to show how they convoked, finessed or promoted shared values.

User comments were coded using several study-specific categories designed to capture how audiences responded to influencer self-representation. First, comment polarity was coded into *positive*, *negative*, *mixed* or *none*. Second, comments were classified by attitude type as *appreciation*, *affect*, *judgement* or *none*, drawing on the Appraisal framework used by Zappavigna and Martin (2017) to examine evaluative alignment in social media discourse. Third, each comment’s relation to

the post was coded through study-specific categories: *support*, *intensification*, *reframing*, *challenge* or *unrelated* response. Ideational focus was then coded to identify the aspects of the post that each comment responded to, such as *the influencer*, *appearance*, *overall post*, *activity*, *object*, *product* or *other content*. In this category, comments focused on the influencer were understood as responses to the influencer's broader persona, identity, character or public image, while comments focused on appearance referred specifically to physical appearance, clothing, hair or makeup.

A separate DHA-informed codebook was applied as a supporting interpretive layer within the Multimodal Discourse Analysis, rather than as a separate full DHA analysis (Reisigl & Wodak 2026: 32–33). The categories of *nomination/foregrounding*, *predication/evaluation*, *representational logic/reduced argumentation*, *perspectivisation/stance* and *intensification/mitigation* were used as overlapping analytical prompts to support the interpretation of self-representation across images, captions and comments. They were not treated as mutually exclusive strategies, instead, they helped ensure that the analysis consistently considered who or what was foregrounded, what qualities or values were attached to the persona, what stance was constructed, how representation was intensified or softened and what broader representational logic made the persona recognisable. A detailed operationalisation of the DHA-informed coding categories is provided in Appendix 3.

To identify the systematic linguistic patterns and support the qualitative part, a corpus-assisted analysis focused on the textual material gathered from captions and user comments, which were treated as separate subcorpora to reflect the differences between influencer communication and audience responses. This resulted in six separate subcorpora: one caption corpus and one comment corpus for each of the three influencers. The coded datasets were analysed using AntConc to examine n-grams, keywords, and concordance lines (Anthony 2024). The analysis used n-grams and keywords to identify repeated lexical and phraseological patterns, while concordance lines were analysed to explore the contextual use of selected lexical markers.

Overall, the methodological structure can be summarized as follows: visual analysis examined image based self-representation; caption analysis examined textual anchoring; comment analysis examined audience response and affiliation; DHA-informed coding supported the interpretation of representational patterns; and corpus-assisted analysis provided supplementary evidence of repeated lexical and phraseological tendencies.

3. Results and discussion

The results and discussion section is organised in three main subsections. Section 3.1 analyses the visual mode and caption anchoring, focusing on how influencer self-representation is constructed through visual choices and caption context across the three case studies. Within this subsection,

Emma Chamberlain, Bretman Rock and Zoë Sugg are discussed separately, followed by supplementary corpus-assisted evidence from the caption subcorpora. Section 3.2 examines audience comments, focusing on how users support, expand or reframe these representations and is followed by supplementary corpus-assisted analysis from the comment subcorpora. Section 3.3 provides a multimodal interpretation by bringing together visual, textual and audience-generated components.

3.1 The visual mode: aesthetic choices and contextual anchoring through captions

The visual layer of the post is one of the main resources through which influencer self-representation is constructed in this research. The analysis places each Instagram post as a multimodal unit, where the visuals and the caption of the post form the primary post-level meaning and comments under the post extend this meaning through audience interaction. To reduce subjective interpretation, the analysis first coded observable indicators of self-representation, such as setting, participants, gaze, pose and composition, to categorize the posts into the visual representation types and analyse the personas created through those visual elements. As noted in the methodology, the visual self-representation types were established from the full dataset and applied to all three influencer datasets. The following sections therefore use the same categories, but indicate which shared types are most prominent in each case and how they are realised through specific indicator combinations.

The analysis demonstrates that the first image of the post often sets the dominant theme, while the following images in the carousel extend, soften or modulate the initial impression. For instance, in post E.1. the first image constructs a winter setting with the influencer at the centre of it, while later images add playful and relational indicators through the display of the snowman, influencer in different body positions, smiling and more actively engaged. Therefore, the interpretation of the post as positive and playful is based on identifiable visual indicators such as setting, body positioning, facial expressions and interaction with objects. Thus, the primary image functions as the key self-representational frame of the post in this analysis. This aligns with Goffman’s idea that the public self is not the direct expression of an inner self, but rather is produced through appearance, behaviour, setting and is brought to life through interaction (1956: 197). Therefore, the public self is not the inner self that is revealed but rather is constructed, with the first image being the post-level frame.

The selected posts are discussed through structured visual descriptions based on the visual coding categories. Table 2 presents selected examples that illustrate how visual self-representation types were identified in the analysis. While this table focuses on selected analytical examples, Appendix 2B provides the full category distribution by influencer.

Table 2. Structured visual descriptions of selected examples

Post	Representation type	Key visual indicators	Analytical function
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E.4.1	Editorial/fashion-event	Magazine-cover format, controlled pose, glamorous styling, fashion context, centred composition	Constructs a controlled and editorially curated persona
E.9.1	Everyday/creative	Informal framing, pet, caring interaction, close social distance, casual everyday context	Presents the influencer as intimate, playful and relatable
E.28.1	Conceptual/theatrical	Themed styling, fantasy visual concept, staged performance, product oriented composition	Constructs a playful and visually experimental persona
B.3.1	Editorial/fashion-event	Event context, polished styling, controlled pose, public oriented gaze, glamorous composition	Presents the influencer as glamorous and confident
B.9.1	Brand-based	Product-oriented setting, salient product, stylised composition, campaign positioning, playful commercial framing	Connects the influencer's persona to promotion and self-branding
B.24.1	Travel/place-based	Destination setting, travel imagery, fashionable posing, place-based caption anchoring, cultural reference	Frames the influencer as mobile, stylish and emotionally attached to place
B.23.1	Family/lifestyle	Two participants, shared positioning, informal celebratory context, affectionate framing	Presents the influencer as affectionate and relational
Z.16.1	Family/lifestyle	Family-centred activity, everyday setting, participant interaction, domestic context	Constructs family life as active and emotionally accessible
Z.22.1	Travel/place-based	Outdoor setting, seasonal context, place-based context, family member interaction	Presents place-based family activity
Z.20.1	Style/consumer-lifestyle	Jewellery, personal photographs, arranged objects, product-centred composition, affective memory framing	Frames style and consumption through memories and affection

These selected examples present how the same coding categories are realised differently across the three influencer datasets, depending on whether the post foregrounds editorial staging, everyday intimacy, branding, travel, family life or consumer-lifestyle aesthetics.

3.1.1 *The case of Emma Chamberlain*

Across Emma Chamberlain's dataset, three visual self-representation types are especially prominent: *editorial/fashion-event*, *everyday/creative* and *conceptual/theatrical representation*. The first pattern, *editorial/fashion-event representation* is identified through indicators such as fashion-related setting,

controlled composition, stylised pose, high salience and brand or magazine context that occur together. E.4.1 illustrates this pattern through a magazine-cover format, controlled pose and glamorous styling, which position the influencer within an editorial fashion context, constructing a visually controlled and highly curated form of influencer self-representation.

The second dominant type found in the dataset is an *everyday/creative representation*. The posts within this category are identified through informal settings, everyday objects, pets, food, domestic or hotel room contexts and daily life scenes. In E.9.1, the influencer is captured in a home environment holding a cat and smiling at the camera. This type is represented through interaction with a pet, everyday relatability and informal framing. The representation type differs in this example as instead of showing the influencer in a static fashion pose, it presents her through interaction with a cat. This and the informal framing, make self-representation intimate, playful and relatable.

The third prominent type is *conceptual/theatrical representation*. This type is recognized through thematic styling, exaggerated visual concepts, costume elements, staging and theatrical settings. In Emma Chamberlain's dataset, there is an occurrence of grandma style, futuristic and bee themed visual concepts. E.28.1 include an image of the influencer in a field dressed in a bee's costume. Here, the themed styling and fantasy-like concept create a staged performance. This constructs the persona through visual design, as playful, performative, artistic and experimental.

The analysis of captions underneath Emma Chamberlain's posts demonstrates a recurring tendency of textual information usually being absent or minimal. These minimal captions add selective contextual information, as they usually name a brand, event, collaborators or context related to platform. In this sense, the captions guide what is primarily presented through the visual layer, which aligns with Gran's thought that self-representation is seen not through what is shown, but how it is performed through style, symbols emotion and visual design (2025: 1). Across the dataset, emotional narration or self-reflection is rare, instead the captions fall into the patterns listed in Table 3 below:

Table 3. *Types of captions in Emma Chamberlain's Instagram posts*

Caption type	Topics	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Content announcement	New content, usually a new YouTube video	5	16.7%
Brand/event/collaborator affiliation	Brands, magazines, fashion houses, events, collaborators or crediting stylists, artists	14	46.7%

Mood framing	Emojis, symbolic words, short playful phrases to frame the tone of the post	2	6.7%
Short self-framing	Naming the self or the post	2	6.7%
Absence of caption	No written text	7	23.3%
Total		30	100%

The most frequent caption type, in Emma Chamberlain's dataset is *brand/event/collaborator affiliation*, which accounts for 46.7% (N=14 out of 30) of captions in this dataset, while 23.3% (N=7) do not include any textual information at all. The repeating sentence indicating a content announcement takes up 16.7% (N=5) of the gathered data, and *mood framing* and *self-framing* account for 6.7% each (N=2 each). This distribution indicates that captions play a secondary but strategic role in constructing the influencer's image by anchoring the visuals through professional, platform-related or affective markers without expanding into personal narration.

For example, in E.4.1, the caption names the magazine and credits the creative team. This anchors the image from being a glamorous, fashion-focused portrait to a professional editorial collaboration. In addition, the caption redirects the attention from the influencer being at the centre to positioning her as a part of a creative network in fashion industry. The last line in the caption saying that the influencer is grateful, provides an affective, personal layer to the overall message, presenting the influencer as appreciative and sincere. Therefore, the combination of visual indicators such as the magazine cover format and caption elements like collaborator naming and gratitude, presents an editorially legitimised but emotionally approachable influencer persona. In contrast, the minimal caption in E.9.1, redirects the image towards the new content that the influencer produced beyond Instagram. While the visual elements such as informal presence and interaction with a cat display relatable self-representation, the caption links the image to the influencer as a creator of broader media content. Here, the use of informal visual indicators and content announcing caption show the influencer as ordinary, accessible but still maintaining a digital creator position.

In E.28.1, the image is staged through styling and composition oriented towards the product, while the caption provides strong context by explicitly naming the product line of the influencer's brand. This further presents the influencer as not only the person in the image but also the figure behind the branded product. Following a pattern seen in the caption under E.9.1, the short wording and use of emojis add a playful tone, making the promotional post less commercial. This can be viewed through

Gran's concept of implicit theatricality, as the post is staged and promotional, but the theatrical means are softened so that the post continues to appear warm and natural (2025: 4). The interplay of staged promotional visuals and playful caption elements presents the influencer as curated yet relatable brand figure. Across these examples, Emma Chamberlain's captions shape the interpretation while preserving a restrained and image-focused form of self-representation.

3.1.2 The case of Bretman Rock

In Bretman Rock's dataset, the most salient visual self-representation types are *editorial/fashion-event*, *brand-based*, *travel/place-based* and *family/lifestyle representation*. The first one is identified through glamour portraits, the imagery focused on beauty, polished styling, direct gaze, public event context and controlled posing. B.3.1 depicts the influencer in elegant clothes and participating in an event, where direct gaze, polished style, glamorous makeup and controlled pose represent the influencer as visually commanding and editorially staged, which constructs a publicly recognizable self-representation.

The second self-representation type found in this dataset is *brand-based representation*. These posts are recognized through products, campaigns, partnerships, slogans, conceptual brand worlds and have a strong visual relation between the influencer identity and the promoted item. The image in B.9.1 shows the influencer posing with a phone case in a vivid, commercial setting foregrounding colours, style and the branded object. B.9.1 illustrates brand-based representation through a product-oriented setting shaped by stylised commercial composition. The product-oriented setting, stylised composition and the link between the influencer and promoted product produce a self-representation tied to commercial promotion. The influencer is seen not only as a person in the image but as a brand figure.

The third type of self-representation is *travel/place-based representation*. In such cases, the posts are distinguished through destination markers, tropical or urban scenery, travel diaries, and aesthetics connected to a certain culture or place. The image in B.24.1 displays the influencer posing in a street setting against urban background. In this case, the place-based setting and a staged pose connect travel imagery with self-representation based on style. These indicators frame the influencer as aspirational and oriented toward a place.

The fourth self-representation type found in this dataset is *family/celebratory representation*. This type is identified through display of family members, relational positioning, shared activities and celebratory settings. The image in B.23.1 shows the influencer in a close-up photo with another person, who is indicated in the caption to be their mom. In this example, the inclusion of two

participants in a shared positioning and informal celebratory positioning constructs the post as relational. These elements portray the influencer as affectionate, grounded and interpersonally engaging.

In contrast to captions produced by the first influencer, the analysed captions underneath Bretman Rock's posts are more expressive, playful and voiced. There is a recurrent humorous expression, use of exaggeration, irony, self-assertion or emotional framing, which suggests that the captions act as active tools used for shaping the influencer's representation. In Hall's terms, captions can be seen not only as descriptions of the image, but they also act as resources that contribute to the construction of the represented persona (1997: 1). The four main types of captions found in the analysed Bretman Rock's posts are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. *Types of captions in Bretman Rock's Instagram posts*

Caption type	Topics	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Self-performance	Influencer's voice through humour, self-reference, exaggeration or stylised self-representation	10	33.3%
Place/travel framing	Location, travel, cultural setting, experience in the place	10	33.3%
Brand/event affiliation	Brands, products, events, collaborators or contests	7	23.3%
Family related/celebratory framing	Affection, family related bonds or birthday celebrations	3	10%
Total		30	100%

Across Bretman Rock's posts, there are two equally frequent caption styles used for Instagram posts, namely *self-performance* and *place/travel framing*, each accounting for 33.3% (N=10 out of 30) of the data. *Brand/event affiliation* accounts for 23.3% (N=7), while *family related/celebratory framing* is the least frequent caption type at 10% (N=3). This suggests that captions in Bretman Rock's dataset play an active role in shaping meaning. Rather than only describing the images, they guide the audience towards reading the post as voiced, humorous, promotional or emotionally engaged.

For instance, in B.3.1, the caption anchors the context of the post by explicitly naming the event and positioning it as the influencer's first attendance. While the visual elements include polished styling, direct gaze, controlled composition, which display editorial self-representation, the caption introduces a personal and professional significance. The phrase "had to show out" amplifies the polished theme of the image by implying that the occasion calls for exceptional public performance. Together, the combination of glamorous visual elements and event-oriented caption indicators constructs a prestigious, performative and socially admired influencer persona. In B.9.1, the caption presents the influencer in a slightly different light, emphasizing the brand-based image by using language associated with product launch and promotion. While the visual indicators link the influencer and the product using composition, styling and campaign positioning, the caption includes promotional words such as "find" and "shop" alongside playful phrases of self-branding. This shows that the influencer is not only shown as someone appearing in a promotional image, but as a curator and distinctive brand figure that adds value to the product. Overall, the combination of visual elements oriented towards product and promotional caption indicators helps frame the influencer as a legible brand persona within digital culture.

Further, in B.24.1, the caption is partly written in Korean, which separates it from the previously discussed examples and adds cultural specificity to the post. While the visuals present the destination through travel imagery and fashionable posing, the caption anchors the setting as personally meaningful. The interplay of place-based visual indicators and affective caption elements presents the influencer as a culturally mobile and emotionally attached to a place. In B.23.1 the caption identifies the second participant as the influencer's mother, which allows for an explicit relational reading of the image. Without the caption, the post could be seen as a shared lifestyle moment, however, the phrase "love my twin so much" adds a playful and affectionate dimension, while informal framing and shared positioning visually support this relational reading. Therefore, the combination of relational visual elements and affectionate caption represents the influencer as a sincere and family oriented. Overall, Bretman Rock's posts show that self-representation emerges through the combined work of images and captions. The images establish glamour, branding, attachment to place and family relation, while captions intensify these meanings using humour, self-reference, promotional language and affective positioning.

3.1.3 The case of Zoë Sugg

Zoë Sugg's dataset is mainly structured around family life, routines, seasonal patterns and narrative continuity. These patterns are realised through three prominent visual self-representation types: *family/lifestyle*, *travel/place-based* and *style/consumer-lifestyle representation*.

The first type is identified through presence of children, home, meals, family activities and events. The image in Z.16.1 portrays the influencer with another person holding hands in a sunny garden setting. The family-centred activity, everyday setting and focus on interaction rather than posing, construct the self as natural, relational and emotionally accessible.

The second visual representation is *travel/place-based representation*. The posts of this category display beach, parks, holidays, and family leisure time spent outside. In these cases, place and seasonal references contribute to self-representation by portraying the influencer as oriented towards family routines, the creation of memories and ordinary seasonal experiences. This can be seen in the example Z.22.1, where the image shows a close-up family moment centred on child's hands reaching toward berries held by an adult. The image presents the outdoor setting, seasonal context, family oriented activity and daily interaction, which function as visual indicators of care and relationality. Through them, the influencer is portrayed as emotionally accessible and rooted in everyday family life.

The third visual representation type is *style/consumer-lifestyle representation*. This type is recognized through outfits, hair, accessories, beauty, products and branded content. In Z.20.1, the image shows jewellery arranged among family photos, creating a personal product-focused scene. Here, personal photographs, jewellery, and arrangement of objects construct a stylish but sentimental self-representation. Accordingly, the product is positioned not as a commercial item, but as a part of a lifestyle filled with personal and emotional meaning.

In Zoë Sugg's dataset, captions hold significant narrative and contextual value. Beyond anchoring individual images, they often organise the entire carousel as an ongoing account of family life, everyday routines and seasonal activities. Many captions begin with "Week X of 2025", which creates a recurring diary-like pattern and organises the whole post as an ongoing daily life narrative. This repetition is meaningful because recurring discursive practices may help reinforce and stabilise a particular identity position over time (Moore 2017: 260). The four main types of captions identified in the dataset of Zoë Sugg's posts are presented in Table 5 below:

Table 5. *Types of captions in Zoë Sugg's Instagram posts*

Caption type	Topics	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Family/lifestyle framing	Family life, routines, meals, domestic moments	10	33.3%
Place/outings/seasonal framing	Gardens, beaches, walks, holidays, seasonal traditions	14	46.7%

Style/beauty/product framing	Beauty, outfits, hair, products	4	13.3%
Reflective framing	Anxiety, emotional difficulty, adjustments	2	6.7%
Total		30	100%

In Zoë Sugg's, dataset *place/outings/seasonal framing* is the most frequent caption type, accounting for 46.7% (N=14 out of 30). The second most frequent caption type is *family/lifestyle framing* representing 33.3% (N=10) of data, while *style/beauty/product framing* accounts for 13.3% (N=4) and the remaining 6.7% (N=2) belong to *reflective framing*. In this dataset, captions do not simply supplement the visuals but they organise and expand the meaning of the carousel by connecting separate images into a coherent narrative. For example, in Z.16.1, the visual indicators such as family-centred activity, everyday setting and interaction of participants portray a relational and domestic self-representation. The caption provides context to the post with short descriptions of moments shown in the carousel, framing the post as a summary of shared holiday experience. Thus, the interplay of family-focused visual elements and diary-like caption structure presents the influencer as family-oriented, emotionally relatable and grounded in everyday life experiences. Similarly, in Z.22.1, the visual indicators, such as outdoor setting, family activity and daily interaction, frame the representation as place-based and relational. The caption expands this meaning with the description of weekly family moments, creative activities and humorous details. Therefore, the combination of seasonal visual elements and caption focused on family life narration portrays the influencer as caring, creative and anchored in everyday family experience. In Z.20.1, the post is focused on product promotion; however, the caption presents the product in terms of personal memory and affective meaning.

The visual elements, such as jewellery, personal photographs and carefully composed objects produce a style-focused and aesthetically curated self-representation. The caption anchors this image by announcing the return of jewellery from the influencer's earlier collection and by connecting the rings to her loved ones and birthstones. Thus, the interplay of visual indicators oriented towards the product and personal caption framing portrays the influencer as credible and emotionally engaged brand collaborator. Overall, Zoë Sugg's posts construct a self-representation structured around family life, routines, seasonal patterns and organised narrative captioning. The images display domestic and relational lifestyle, while the captions connect these meanings into a continuous personal narrative.

3.1.4 Supplementary corpus-assisted analysis of captions

The supplementary corpus-assisted analysis of captions supports the qualitative caption analysis by revealing repeated lexical and phraseological tendencies across the three caption subcorpora. In Emma Chamberlain's case, concordance lines reflect patterns of crediting collaborators, keywords point to editorial or production related language, and n-grams display repeating formulaic patterns of content announcement. These findings suggest that her captions are minimal, professional and mainly function as contextual support. The concordance lines in Bretman Rock's caption corpus point to a stronger emphasis on personal voice and emotional expression. Keywords highlight self-reference, gratitude and emotional positioning, while n-grams show recurring interpersonal and evaluative phrasing. This strengthens the interpretation of his captions as personal, performative and emotionally engaging. In Zoë Sugg's caption corpus, concordance lines indicate recurring references to weekly routines and daily family moments. The keyword patterns show emphasis on family, routines and lifestyle-oriented language, while n-grams indicate repeated forms of diary-like narrative structure. These findings suggest that her captions are centred on family life, routines and ongoing narrative. Overall, corpus-assisted analysis reinforces the qualitative analysis by demonstrating that each influencer's captions are lexically distinctive and contribute to self-representation in different ways.

Although the self-representation types differ across the three datasets, they do not contradict each other. Instead, all forms of representation contribute to a broader influencer persona. In Goffman's view, these recurring patterns can be interpreted as producing an "idealized view of situation" by drawing attention to the aspects of the self that are desirable and socially legible (1956: 22). In addition, Gran proposes the idea that even though there is a certain type of representation portrayed, it does not restrict the user from switching between those representations whether on the same platform or between different social media platforms (2025: 2). Therefore, the repeated patterns across the posts suggest that influencer self-representation emerges from consistent and selective visual choices rather than through isolated images alone.

3.2 The textual mode: user comments and audience engagement

Audience comments are analysed as interactional responses to the posts as they reveal how the audience responds to, validates, extends or redirects the self-representation constructed through images and captions. Thus, comments are analysed as part of the relational work surrounding influencer self-representation, because they help maintain, reproduce or adjust the relationship between the influencer and the audience (Locher et al. 2015: 3). Moreover, social media profiles can provide a representation of a person and function as "the locus of interaction", meaning that users cannot fully control how they are represented, since comments and other contributions are also part

of the profile (Boyd 2010: 43). Figure 1 below illustrates the polarity distribution of comments across three datasets:

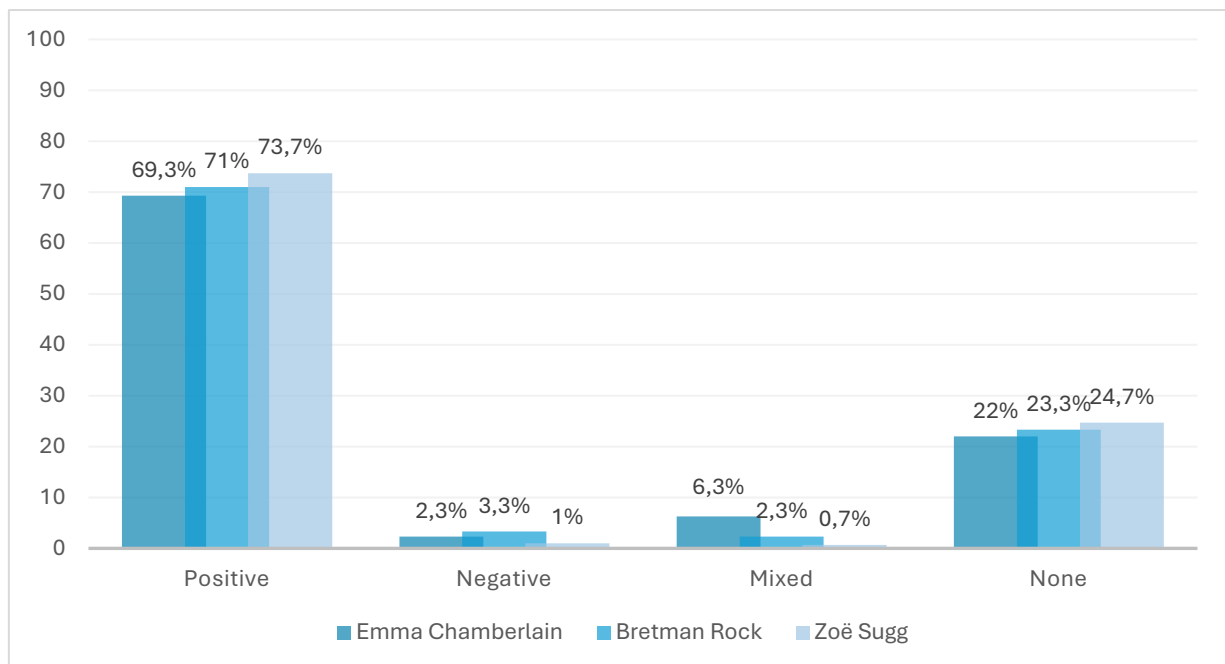


Figure 1. *Comment polarity distribution across the three influencer datasets*

Figure 1 shows that positive comments dominate all three datasets, taking up 69.3% (N=208 out of 300) of Emma Chamberlain's, 71% (N=213) of Bretman Rock's and 73.7% (N=221) of Zoë Sugg's. By contrast, negative and mixed comments are rare in all three datasets: negative comments account for 2.3% (N=7) in Emma Chamberlain's dataset, 3.3% (N=10) in Bretman Rock's dataset and 1% (N=3) in Zoë Sugg's dataset, whereas mixed comments remain below 7% in each case. These findings suggest that the comments across all three datasets tend to be very positive towards the influencers and mostly validate their self-representation.

Analysing audience's attitude in the comment section helps to see how each influencer is evaluated beyond providing a positive or negative response. These evaluative responses can be treated as forms of stance-taking, since commenters evaluate the influencer or post, express an affective position and align with the represented persona (Du Bois 2007: 139, 143).

Figure 2 below displays the tendencies that have been observed in the dataset:

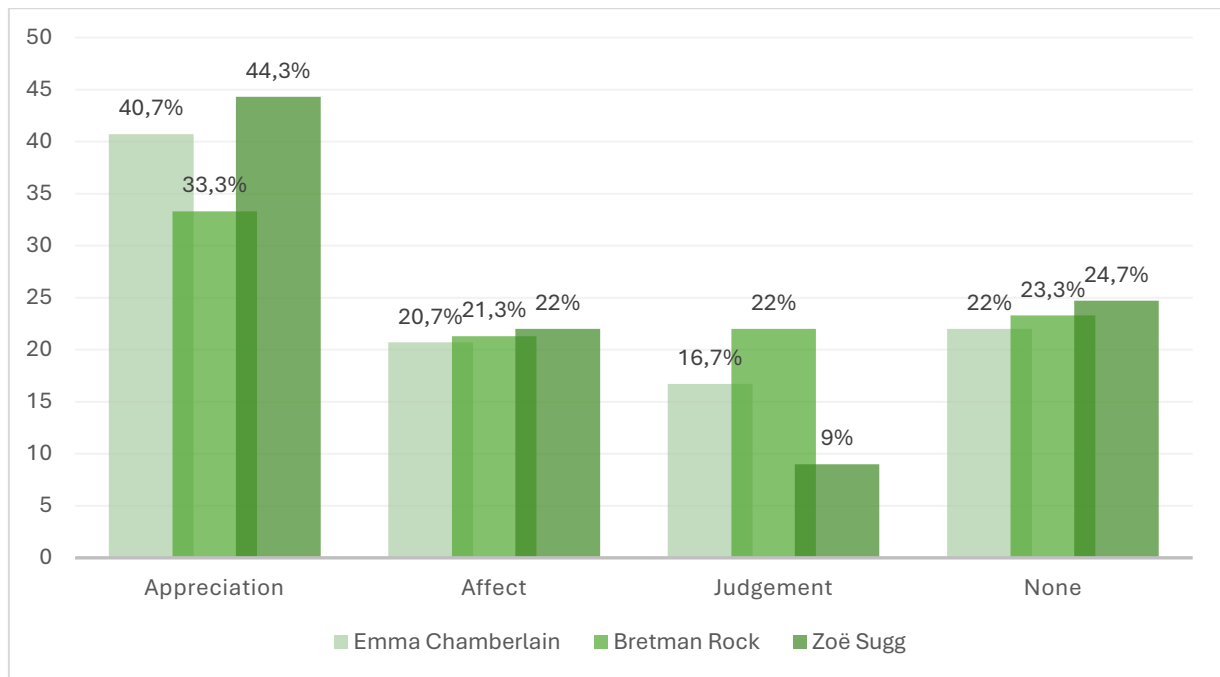


Figure 1. Comment attitude distribution across the three influencer datasets

The most dominant attitude type across all three datasets is *appreciation*, which stands for 40.7% (N=122 out of 300) of Emma Chamberlain's, 33.3% (N=100) of Bretman Rock's and 44.3% (N=133) of Zoë Sugg's comments. This indicates that the majority of the audience contributes to the influencers' representation by affirming visual appeal, aesthetic and enjoyment of the content. The proportion of *affect* is relatively similar across the three datasets, amounting to 20.7% (N=62) in Emma Chamberlain's, 21.3% (N=64) in Bretman Rock's and 22% (N=66) in Zoë Sugg's comments. This suggests that emotional involvement of the audience is apparent but not as strong as for the visuals or aesthetics. The category of *judgement* is most evident in Bretman Rock's dataset (22%, N=66) and least prominent in Zoë Sugg's (9%, N=27), while Emma Chamberlain's dataset accounts for 16.7% (N=50). This indicates that Bretman Rock's audience evaluates the influencer's persona more frequently, whereas the audience of Zoë Sugg is more focused on the attractiveness and enjoyment of the content. Thus, the attitude distribution shows that the audiences do not validate all of the influencers the same way: in Emma's and Zoë's datasets it is more aesthetic, while in Bretman's more persona focused.

Analysing the relation of the comments to the post helped to determine the audience's reaction to the post, whether the comments follow the meaning of the post, change it, resist it or ignore it by talking about something else. The tendencies of the analysed comments are presented in the chart below:

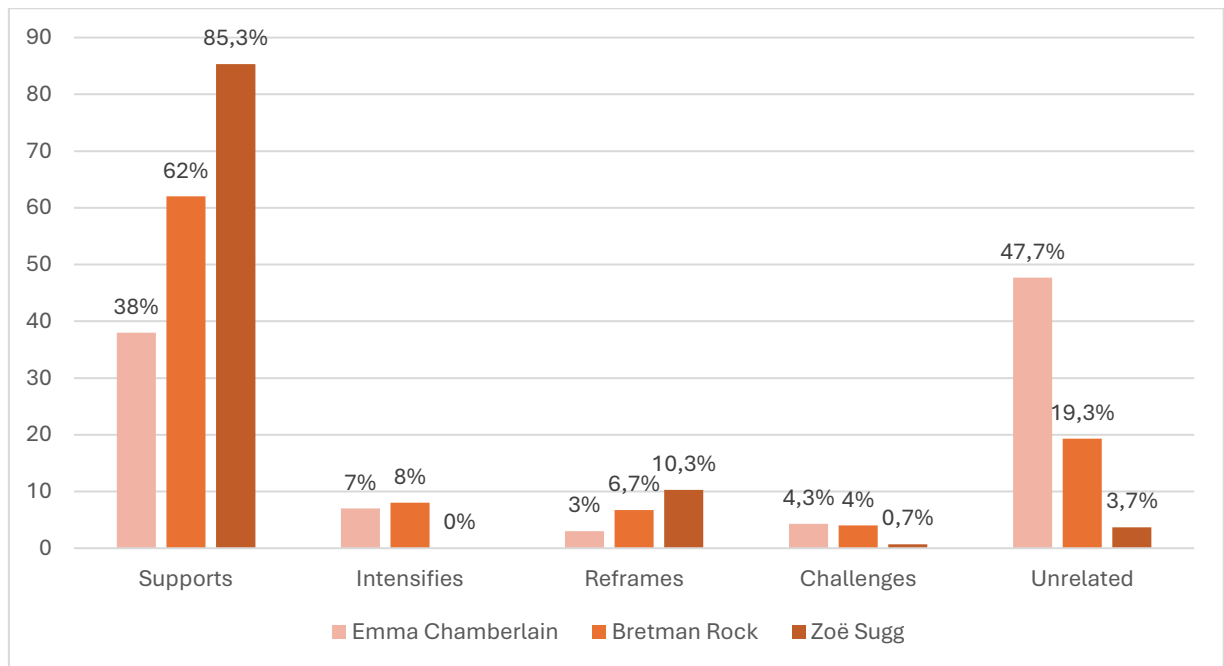


Figure 2. *Comment relation to the post across the three influencer datasets*

Figure 3 shows a clear difference between the three audiences. In Emma Chamberlain’s dataset, 47.7% (N=143 out of 300) of comments are not related to the immediate post, while 38% (N=114) express support. This implies that the audience of Emma Chamberlain often engages with her wider public persona rather than just the immediate content of the post. The most common type in Bretman Rock’s dataset is supportive comments comprising 62% (N=186) of his dataset, whereas unrelated comments make up 19.3% (N=58) and reframing comments 6.7% (N=20) of the dataset. This suggests that Bretman Rock’s audience usually follows the post level meaning; however, sometimes the audience extends or redirects it through the influencer’s broader persona. Zoë Sugg’s dataset displays the strongest alignment with post-level support: 85.3% (N=256) of comments are supportive and only 3.7% (N=11) are unrelated to the post. This indicates that Zoë Sugg’s audience remains closely aligned with the family, lifestyle and seasonal themes presented in her posts.

The distribution of ideation across all three influencers posts displays what part of the post the audience tends to respond to. The distribution in percentages is presented in Figure 4 below:

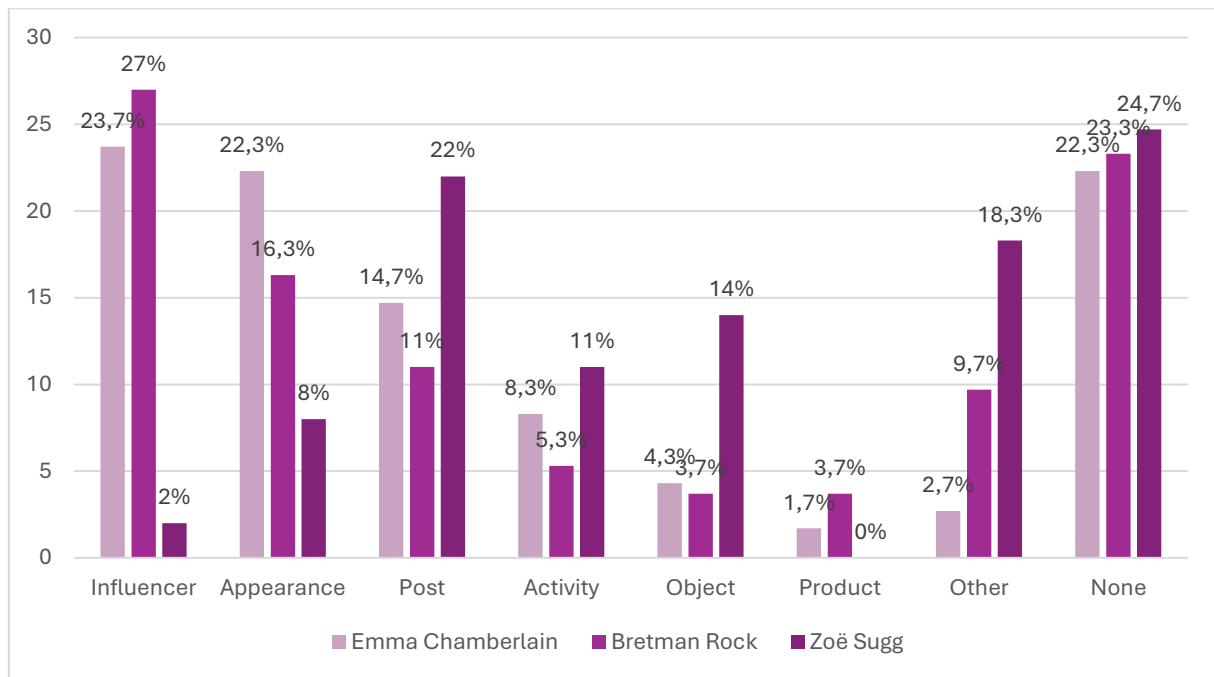


Figure 3. *Distribution of ideational focus across the three influencer datasets*

These differences are further supported by the ideational focus in Figure 4. Comments in Emma Chamberlain’s dataset are most often directed at the influencer herself taking up 23.7% (N=71 out of 300) and her appearance with 22.3% (N=67). A similar tendency can be observed in Bretman Rock’s dataset where the comments focused on the influencer amount to 27% (N=81) and 16.3% (N=49) on appearance. In contrast, Zoë Sugg’s comments tend to be more focused on the post (22%, N=66), objects (14%, N=42), activities (11%, N=33) and other content (18%, N=55), instead of being concerned with the influencer herself (2%, N=6). This indicates that Emma Chamberlain and Bretman Rock are more commonly perceived through their public personas, while Zoë Sugg’s audience is more oriented towards domestic and narrative aspects of the posts.

In this analysis, individual evaluation refers to comments that express personal appreciation, affect or judgement without explicitly inviting wider audience alignment, while explicit collective affiliation refers to comments that make evaluation socially shareable through convoking, finessing or promoting values (Zappavigna & Martin 2017: 5). The analysis of communing functions was used to examine whether audience support appeared as individual evaluation or as shared audience alignment. Figure 5 presents the distribution of these functions across the three datasets:

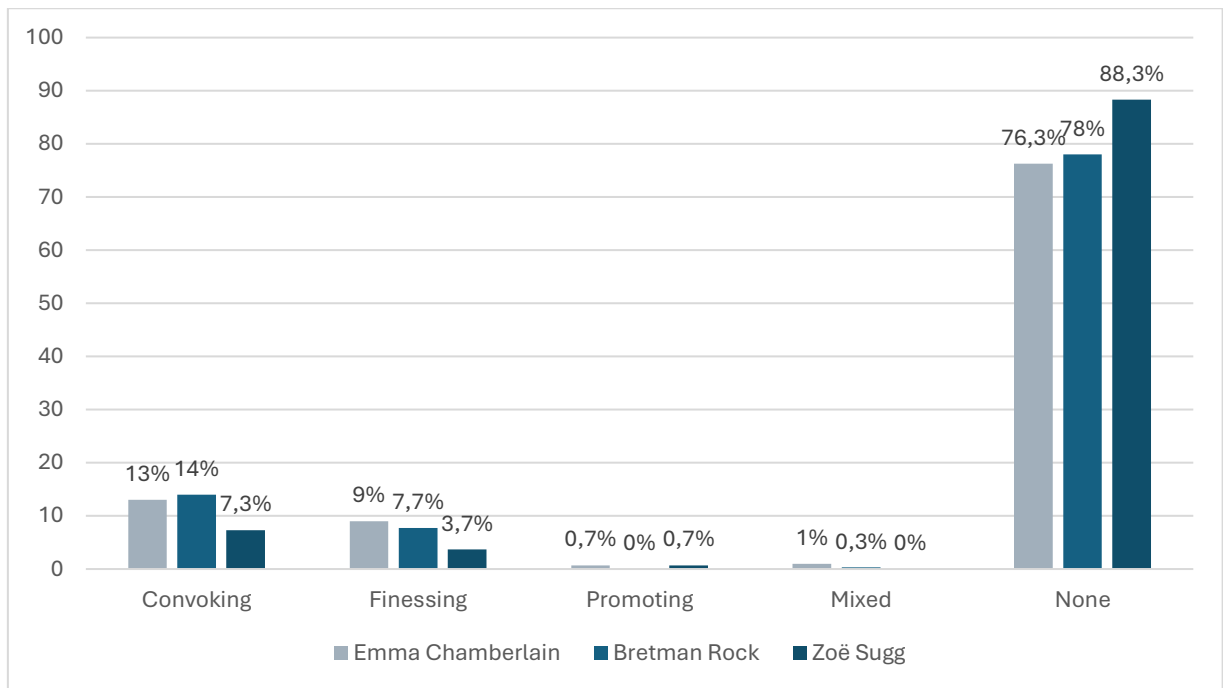


Figure 4. Main communing functions in comments across the three influencer datasets

Figure 5 shows that most comments lack an explicit communing function, with proportions of 76.3% (N=229 out of 300) in Emma Chamberlain's dataset, 78% (N=234) in Bretman Rock's and 88.3% (N=265) in Zoë Sugg's. This suggests that audience support tends to take the form of individual evaluation rather than collective affiliation. Nonetheless, both *convoking* and *finessing* remain visible in the data. Bretman Rock's dataset shows the highest percentage of convoking comments (14%, N=42), indicating stronger collective audience alignment, whereas Emma Chamberlain's dataset contains the highest share of *finessing* comments (9%, N=27), which suggests a more implicit affiliative alignment. In the case of Zoë Sugg, the audience remains supportive, though it is expressed as communal affiliation and more closely tied to the content of the post.

Overall, the comment analysis demonstrates that audience interaction plays an important role in influencer self-representation by validating, extending and stabilising the personas produced through images and captions. In the case of Emma Chamberlain, comments maintain the persona that is presented in the posts as well as extend it through broader familiarity with other contexts associated with the influencer. The commenters under Bretman Rock's posts help to reinforce a recognizable public persona through praise, humour admiration and audience alignment. Meanwhile, Zoë Sugg's audience appears to be more focused on the content she provides in her posts, which stabilises the self-representation centred on family, domestic lifestyle and continuous storytelling. Therefore, comments are not simply external reactions, they form part of the interactional process through which influencer identity is further negotiated and socially validated.

3.2.1 Supplementary corpus-assisted analysis of comments

The supplementary corpus-assisted analysis of comments was conducted to examine whether the qualitative patterns discovered in the comment analysis are also reflected in recurrent lexical evidence. Therefore, the findings in the corpus are treated as supporting material rather than as a separate level of analysis.

The concordance lines in Emma Chamberlain's dataset seem to be built around the pronoun "you", demonstrating that the audience tends to repeatedly address the influencer directly. The concordance lines also include evaluative forms such as "you seem really impressive" and "you look amazing", which supports earlier findings of the audience being oriented towards the influencer herself rather than the content in her posts. The n-grams also show recurring interpersonal and evaluative patterns, including "this shows...", "I love" and "you're". Meanwhile, the keyword analysis displays the recurring prominence of direct address, where "you" appears as the most prominent keyword, occurring 78 times. In general, the corpus patterns in Emma Chamberlain's dataset reinforce the interpretation of her audience interaction as persona-focused and affectively supportive.

In Bretman Rock's corpus, concordance lines and n-grams highlight recurring patterns of affect, admiration and praise. Concordance lines show recurring evaluative phrases such as "my inspiration", "Queen" and "this is perfect". The n-gram list includes repeated forms such as "I love", "you are" and "thank you". The repeated use of evaluative expressions positions the influencer as iconic, aspirational and widely publicly recognisable. Thus, the corpus-assisted analysis supports the qualitative finding that the audience of Bretman Rock not only offers positive responses, it also actively contributes to intensifying a highly performative public persona.

Zoë Sugg's corpus analysis reveals that concordance lines and keywords are oriented towards family, routines and lifestyle content. The concordance lines include repeated positive evaluations such as "looks lovely", "I really like the dress" and "I appreciate how sincere". The n-grams include such cases as "I love" and "the best". Direct address is also present but is often connected to family and domestic content through phrases such as "your lovely family" and "your posts". The keyword list includes 90 occurrences of "you", as well as instances of "love" and "beautiful". These patterns show that the comments under Zoë Sugg's posts are very positive, family-oriented and strongly linked to the posts, supporting the construction of her persona as domestic and narratively guided.

Across all three datasets, the corpus-assisted analysis provides further support for the qualitative findings by displaying how lexical evidence and phraseological patterns help affirm and sustain each influencer's self-representation in the discourse of the audience.

3.3 Multimodal interpretation

This section brings together the findings from the visual, caption and comment analyses in order to interpret how influencer self-representation is constructed across the full dataset of 90 Instagram posts, their captions and 900 audience comments. The multimodal interpretation is based on the patterns already identified in the separate analytical layers: visual staging, caption anchoring and audience response. DHA-informed categories are used here only as a supporting interpretive vocabulary for synthesising these patterns, not as a separate analysis of visual data or as separate DHA strategy-based results (Reisigl & Wodak 2016: 32–33). In this sense, the interpretation considers how influencer personas are foregrounded, evaluated, positioned and intensified across images, captions and comments, while keeping the primary analytical focus on the interaction between the three modes. Therefore, images, captions and comments contribute to constructing and sustaining self-representation.

In Emma Chamberlain's posts, self-representation is primarily established through the visual layer. The images are repeatedly centred on the influencer, with editorial, conceptually playful and fashion-oriented visual staging, which provides an impression of an aesthetic and curated persona. In Emma Chamberlain's dataset, the captions are usually absent or minimal, making the textual anchoring restrained and therefore putting the focus of the audience on the visuals with an open interpretation of a post level meaning. This can be seen in *editorial/fashion-event* posts where the caption mainly anchors the image through brand, magazine or collaborator references (e.g. E.4.1), in *everyday/creative* posts where the caption redirects the visual material towards wider platform content (e.g. E.9.1), and in *conceptual/theatrical* posts where short wording and emojis soften the promotional or staged visual concept (e.g. E.28.1). The comment section under this influencer's posts tends to express affection and admiration, as well as address the influencer directly by her name, which suggests that the audience validates the persona and participates in presenting her as creative, stylish and emotionally meaningful.

On the other hand, the self-representation in Bretman Rock's posts is expressed more evenly across the visuals and the text. The visual layer draws attention to beauty, glamour, travel and brand affiliations, while captions seem to anchor representation with the usage of humour, playful exaggerations, self as well as cultural references. Contrary to Emma Chamberlain's analysis, the captions of this influencer enact the influencer's public voice in a more active manner by adding humour, exaggeration, self-reference, promotional cues and affective framing. This can be seen in *editorial/fashion-event* based posts where the caption frames public appearance as performance (e.g. B.3.1), in *brand-based* posts where the promotional meaning is made playful (e.g. B.9.1), in *travel/place-based* posts where place is connected to personal or cultural attachment (e.g. B.24.1),

and in *family/lifestyle* posts where the relationship is explicitly framed through affection (e.g. B.23.1). In most cases, the comments not only respond to, but also extend this performativity with the recurring use of affectionate praising, teasing and parasocial familiarity.

Finally, the posts of Zoë Sugg reveal the most prominent case of self-representation that is organised in a narrative way. The visual layer here emphasises domestic family life, home and seasonal celebrations. In comparison to the previous two cases, Zoë Sugg's captions are way more detailed, providing weekly summaries and personal reflections which very clearly anchor the visuals in a continuous narrative. This can be seen in *family/lifestyle* posts where the caption connects the visual material to shared seasonal or domestic experience (e.g. Z.16.1), in *travel/place-based* posts where the caption expands outdoor or seasonal activities into a weekly family narrative (e.g. Z.22.1), and in *style/consumer-lifestyle* posts where the caption connects product-centred visuals to family, memories and affective meaning (e.g. Z.20.1). The comment section of this influencer provides strong validation to her persona through the expressions of approval, nostalgia and praise. Therefore, the self-representation that is seen here is constructed through repetition, recognition and emotional familiarity.

Overall, the results show that influencer self-representation on Instagram is produced through a cumulative multimodal process. The initial self-representation is established through visual choices, the interpretation of them is guided or softened by captions, and audience comments socially affirm the persona through repeated evaluation and affiliation. In this way, audience responses do not only reflect influencer identity but participate in reinforcing the version of the self that becomes recognisable, expected and socially validated across the platform.

4. Conclusions

The thesis focused on analysing how influencer self-representation is multimodally constructed in the public Instagram posts of Emma Chamberlain, Bretman Rock and Zoë Sugg. The research was conducted on three levels: visual design choices, caption features and audience interaction through comments. By analysing 90 Instagram posts with their captions and 900 selected audience comments, the study revealed that influencer self-representation does not emerge from one semiotic resource alone, but rather from the interplay of images, captions and audience interactions.

The first research question of the thesis was to examine the role of visual design choices in shaping the influencer persona. The results demonstrated that the visual layer provides the initial basis for self-representation, by foregrounding specific elements of setting, gaze, pose, composition, participants, product presence and interaction with objects. The findings also indicated that the first image in a carousel usually provides the dominant self-representational frame, whereas later images

extend, soften or adjust that first impression. The three influencers nevertheless differed in how these visual categories were distributed. Emma Chamberlain's dataset was most strongly represented by *editorial/fashion-event* posts, which accounted for 36.7% (N=11 out of 30) of her dataset, followed by *everyday/creative* and *conceptual/theatrical* representation, each accounting for 20% (N=6 each). This indicates that her persona combines editorial visual control, everyday relatability and staged visual experimentation. In Bretman Rock's posts the most common representation type was *travel/place-based* at 36.7% (N=11), while other recurring types included *brand-based* and *conceptual/theatrical* representation at 16.7% each (N=5 each), *family/lifestyle* and *everyday/creative* representation at 10% each (N=3 each). Zoë Sugg's dataset showed the clearest concentration, with *family/lifestyle* representation accounting for 56.7% of her posts (N=17), followed by *travel/place-based* representation at 20% (N=7) and *style/consumer lifestyle* representation at 16.7% (N=5). These findings show that Emma Chamberlain's persona is constructed through editorial and curated visuality, Bretman Rock's through travel, performance and branding, and Zoë Sugg's through domesticity, family life and narrative continuity.

The second research question was to explore how caption features contribute to influencer self-representation. The findings revealed that captions function not only as descriptions, but they actively guide the interpretation of images. However, captions performed different functions across the three case studies. In Emma Chamberlain's dataset, captions often functioned through *brand/event/collaborator affiliation*, which accounted for 46.7% (N=14) of captions, while 23.3% (N=7) contained no caption at all. This supports the interpretation that her self-representation is primarily visually led, with captions anchoring the image through references to brands, events, collaborators or content, without extending into detailed personal narration. Bretman Rock's captions were more evenly divided between *self-performance* and *place/travel framing*, each accounting for 33.3% (N=10). This indicates that his captions actively intensify the visual persona through humour, self-reference, affective positioning and promotional language. Captions in Zoë Sugg's dataset carried the strongest narrative function. In her dataset, *place/outings/seasonal framing* was the most frequent caption type at 46.7% (N=14), followed by *family/lifestyle framing* at 33.3% (N=10). This confirms that her captions organise individual images into a continuous diary-like routines, seasonal activities and everyday life. Accordingly, Emma Chamberlain's captions mostly anchor meaning, Bretman Rock's intensify and perform it, and Zoë Sugg's narrate and connect it.

The third research question was focused on how audience comments contribute to, validate or challenge influencer identity. The analysis showed that comments were largely *positive* in all three datasets: 69.3% (N=208 out of 300) in Emma Chamberlain's dataset, 71% (N=213) in Bretman Rock's dataset and 73.7% (N=221) in Zoë Sugg's. *Negative* comments were rare, accounting for only

2.3% (N=7) in Emma Chamberlain's dataset, 3.3% (N=10) in Bretman Rock's and 1% (N=3) in Zoë Sugg's. The most common attitude type was *appreciation*, which accounted for 40.7% (N=122) of Emma Chamberlain's comments, 33.3% (N=100) of Bretman Rock's and 44.3% (N=133) of Zoë Sugg's. This shows that audience validation is mostly realised through aesthetic approval, admiration and positive evaluation of the post or persona.

The comment analysis also showed that audiences validate the three influencers differently. In Emma Chamberlain's dataset, 47.7% (N=143) were *unrelated* to the immediate post, while 38% (N=114) were *supportive*, suggesting that her audience often responds to her wider public persona rather than only to the specific post. This was also supported by ideational focus: 23.7% (N=71) of comments focused on the *influencer* herself, while 22.3% (N=67) focused specifically on *appearance*, including clothing, styling or visual attractiveness. In Bretman Rock's dataset, *supportive* comments were the most frequent category at 62% (N=186), while 27% (N=81) of comments focused on the *influencer*. His audience therefore contributed to reinforcing a charismatic and performative persona through praise, humour, admiration and alignment. In Zoë Sugg's dataset, 85.3% (N=256) of comments were *supportive*, while only 3.7% (N=11) were *unrelated* to the post. Her comments were less focused on the *influencer* herself (2%, N=6) and more focused on the *post* (22%, N=66), *objects* (14%, N=42), *activities* (11%, N=33) and *other content* (18%, N=55), which confirms that her audience responds closely to the domestic, family-oriented and narrative themes foregrounded in her posts.

The analysis of communing functions further revealed that audience support was usually expressed as individual evaluation rather than explicit collective affiliation, meaning that most comments praised or evaluated the influencer personally without strongly constructing a shared audience position. Most comments did not contain an explicit communing function: 76.3% (N=229) in Emma Chamberlain's dataset, 78% (N=234) in Bretman Rock's and 88.3% (N=265) in Zoë Sugg's. However, collective alignment was still visible in specific cases. Bretman Rock's dataset contained the highest proportion of *convoking* comments at 14% (N=42), while Emma Chamberlain's dataset contained the highest proportion of *finessing* comments at 9% (N=27). These findings indicate that comments are not simply external reactions to influencer content. Instead, they participate in the interactional process through which influencer identity is further negotiated and socially validated.

As further support, the corpus-assisted findings showed that the identified patterns were also visible in repeated lexical tendencies in both captions and comments. In the caption subcorpora, Emma Chamberlain's captions showed recurring patterns of collaborator crediting, editorial or production-related language and formulaic content announcements, supporting the interpretation of her captions as minimal and professionally anchored. Bretman Rock's corpus demonstrated stronger patterns of self-reference, gratitude, emotional positioning and interpersonal evaluation, which supports the

interpretation of his captions as voiced, performative and affectively engaging. Zoë Sugg's caption corpus revealed recurring references to weekly routines, family moments and diary-like structures, reinforcing the finding that her captions organise posts into an ongoing narrative of domestic and seasonal life. The comment subcorpora provided further support for the audience analysis: Emma Chamberlain's comment corpus showed repeated direct address, with "you" appearing 78 times; Bretman Rock's comment corpus included repeated evaluative patterns such as "I love"; and Zoë Sugg's comment corpus included recurring lexical items such as "you" (N=90), "love" (N=35) and "beautiful" (N=23), together with phrases referring to family and domestic content. These corpus-assisted findings therefore provide further evidence that the manually coded patterns are also visible in broader lexical and phraseological regularities.

The comparison of the three case studies further demonstrated that influencer self-representation is dynamic and multimodal. The same influencer may shift between different forms of self-representation, including editorial, everyday, promotional, relational or narrative forms without creating contradiction. Instead, these recurring types of representation build a broader and recognisable influencer persona. Emma Chamberlain's persona emerges as visually curated but relatable, Bretman Rock's as glamorous, performative and affectively engaging and Zoë Sugg's as domestic, family-centred and organised through narrative continuity. The observed differences suggest that influencer identity is constructed through thematic arrangements of content and audience expectations.

More broadly, the findings indicate that audience comments function as a mechanism of through which influencer identity is stabilised. Direct address, praise and comments referring to the influencer's wider persona show that audiences do not only react to individual posts but also participate in maintaining a recognisable public image. In this sense, influencer self-representation is not produced by the influencer alone; it is c-constructed through platform-based interaction, where visual and textual self-representation is repeatedly validated, extended or redirected by followers. This contributes to broader repeated audience recognition.

The scope of the study was limited to three public-facing influencers and selected Instagram posts and comments; therefore, findings of the current study should not be generalised to all influencer practices on Instagram. The analysis of audience interaction was based on a selected number of comments instead of full comment sections; therefore, only dominant tendencies were captured rather than all possible forms of audience interaction. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates how visibility, relatability and audience interaction contribute to the negotiation of self-representation in digital space. Further research could expand the dataset by examining a wider range of influencers across different influencer niches, platforms and time periods, with particular attention to how audience

engagement such as, direct address, praise or reframing contribute to the long-term stabilisation of influencer personas.

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Summary

Self-representation on social media has become an important part of contemporary digital identity, especially in the case of influencers whose public image is continuously displayed, shaped and evaluated by users. This thesis analyses how influencers construct their public image on Instagram through the interaction of images, captions and user comments. The study is based on the view that this process is not shaped through a single semiotic resource but emerges multimodally through the interaction of visual choices, textual framing and user response.

The aim of the thesis is to examine how self-representation is constructed in the Instagram posts of three selected influencers: Emma Chamberlain, Bretman Rock and Zoë Sugg. The study investigates how visual choices shape the influencers' public images, how captions guide or expand the interpretation of images and how user comments validate, reinforce or redirect the public image created in the posts. The research material consists of 90 public Instagram posts published in 2025, with 30 posts selected from each influencer's account. For each post, the image, caption and 10 selected user comments were analysed.

The research was carried out using Multimodal Discourse Analysis to examine the visual, textual and user-interaction elements of Instagram posts. The Discourse-Historical Approach was applied as an interpretative framework for explaining how these representations are formed across different levels of analysis. The qualitative findings were further supported by a corpus-assisted linguistic analysis of recurring keywords, n-grams and concordance lines in captions and comments.

The findings show distinct but recurring tendencies in the ways influencers present themselves. Emma Chamberlain's posts construct a professionally curated and visually deliberate public image. Her captions are often minimal, absent or limited to references to collaborations, events or brands, suggesting that her public image is largely image-led. Bretman Rock's posts foreground expressive and emotionally engaging self-presentation. His images and captions construct a bold, expressive and emotionally engaging public image through humour, self-reference, evaluative language and promotional elements. Zoë Sugg's posts construct a public image centred on family, home and

lifestyle. Her captions have the strongest narrative function, as they connect individual posts into a continuous account of family life, everyday practices and seasonal experiences.

The analysis of user comments revealed that comments mostly reinforce rather than question the public image created in the posts. They positively evaluate appearance, lifestyle, emotional tone and personal appeal, therefore contributing to the stabilisation of influencers' public images. In Emma Chamberlain's case, comments often orient towards her broader public image. In Bretman Rock's case, they strengthen his bold and emotionally engaging self-representation. In Zoë Sugg's case, they confirm a representation based on family and lifestyle themes. The supplementary corpus-assisted linguistic analysis further confirmed these tendencies: recurring keywords, n-grams and concordance lines in captions and comments showed that the features identified in the qualitative analysis recur across the dataset.

The thesis concludes that influencer self-representation on Instagram is formed through the interaction of visual choices, caption framing and user comments. The study shows that influencers' public images are dynamic and may include aesthetically curated, casual, promotional, relational or narrative forms. These forms do not contradict one another; rather, together contribute to the construction of a recognisable public image. Given its focus on three selected influencers and a limited comment sample, the study could be extended through larger datasets, cross-platform comparison or longitudinal analysis of influencer self-representation.

Santrauka

Savirepresentacija socialiniuose tinkluose yra svarbi šiuolaikinės skaitmeninės tapatybės dalis, ypač kalbant apie nuomonės formuotojus, kurių viešasis įvaizdis yra nuolat matomas, kuriamas ir vertinamas vartotojų. Šiame baigiamajame darbe analizuojama, kaip nuomonės formuotojų savirepresentacija konstruojama „Instagram“ platformoje per vaizdą, įrašų aprašą ir vartotojų komentarų sąveiką. Darbo tikslas – ištirti, kaip trijų pasirinktų nuomonės formuotojų – Emmos Chamberlain, Bretmano Rocko ir Zoë Sugg – savirepresentacija konstruojama „Instagram“ įrašuose.

Tyrime analizuojama, kaip vaizdai, tekstinis įrėminimas ir vartotojų komentarai formuoja nuomonės formuotojo savirepresentaciją. Tyrimo medžiagą sudaro 90 viešų „Instagram“ įrašų, paskelbtų 2025 metais: po 30 įrašų iš kiekvieno nuomonės formuotojo paskyros. Kiekvieno įrašo analizė apima vaizdą, įrašo aprašą ir 10 atrinktų vartotojų komentarų.

Tyrimas atliktas taikant multimodalinę diskurso analizę, siekiant išnagrinėti vizualinius, tekstinius ir komentarų lygmens elementus „Instagram“ įrašuose. Diskurso istorinė prieiga taikyta kaip interpretacinis pagrindas, padedantis aiškinti, kaip savirepresentacija formuojama skirtinguose

lygmenyse. Kokybiniai rezultatai papildyti tekstynų lingvistikos analize, kurioje nagrinėti įrašų aprašuose ir komentaruose pasikartojantys reikšminiai žodžiai, n-gramos ir vartosenos pavyzdžiai.

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad nuomonės formuotojų savireprezentacija reiškiasi skirtingomis, tačiau pasikartojančiomis tendencijomis. Emmos Chamberlain įrašai kuria profesionaliai kuruojamą ir vizualiai apgalvotą viešąjį įvaizdį. Jos įrašų aprašai dažnai yra minimalūs, jų visai nėra arba juos sudaro bendradarbiavimo projektų, renginių ar prekių ženklų paminėjimai, todėl jos savireprezentacija grindžiama vaizdais. Bretmano Rocko įrašuose išryškėja ekspresyvus ir emociškai paveikus savęs pristatymas. Jo vaizdai ir įrašų aprašai kuria ryškų, išraiškingą ir emociškai įtraukiantį viešąjį įvaizdį, grindžiamą humoru, savirefleksija, vertinamuoju žodynu ir reklaminiais elementais. Zoë Sugg įrašuose kuriamas šeimos, namų ir gyvenimo būdo temomis paremtas viešasis įvaizdis. Jos įrašų aprašai atlieka stipriausią naratyvinę funkciją, nes atskirus įrašus susieja į tęstinį pasakojimą apie šeimos gyvenimą, kasdienybės praktikas, sezonines patirtis ir kasdienybės epizodus.

Vartotojų komentarų analizė parodė, kad komentarai dažniausiai palaiko, o ne kvestionuoja įrašuose kuriamą nuomonės formuotojų viešąjį įvaizdį. Juose teigiamai vertinama išvaizda, gyvenimo būdas, emocinis tonas ir asmeninis patrauklumas, todėl komentarai prisideda prie savireprezentacijos įtvirtinimo. Emmos Chamberlain atveju komentarai dažnai orientuoti į platesnį jos viešąjį įvaizdį, Bretmano Rocko atveju jie sustiprina ryškų ir emociškai įtraukiantį savęs pristatymą, o Zoë Sugg atveju patvirtina šeimos ir gyvenimo būdo temomis paremtą reprezentaciją. Papildoma tekstynų lingvistikos analizė patvirtino šias tendencijas: įrašų aprašuose ir komentaruose pasikartojantys reikšminiai žodžiai, n-gramos ir vartosenos pavyzdžiai parodė, kad kokybinėje analizėje nustatyti bruožai kartojasi visame duomenų rinkinyje.

Darbe daroma išvada, kad savireprezentacija „Instagram“ platformoje formuojasi per vaizdinių sprendimų, įrašų aprašų įrėminimo ir vartotojų komentarų sąveiką. Tyrimas parodė, kad nuomonės formuotojų savireprezentacija yra dinamiška ir gali apimti skirtingas savęs pristatymo formas: estetiškai kuruojamą, kasdienę, reklaminę, santykiniais grįstą ar naratyvinę. Šios formos viena kitai neprieštarauja, bet kartu prisideda prie atpažįstamo nuomonės formuotojų viešojo įvaizdžio kūrimo. Kadangi tyrimas apima tris pasirinktus nuomonės formuotojus ir ribotą vartotojų komentarų imtį, tolesni tyrimai galėtų būti plečiami didesniais duomenų rinkiniais, skirtingų platformų palyginimu arba ilgalaike nuomonės formuotojų savireprezentacijos analize.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Engagement rate calculation formulas

The engagement rate for a single post was calculated by dividing the total number of engagements (e.g., likes, shares, saves) by the total number of followers and multiplying the result by 100:

$$ER_{\text{post}} = \frac{\text{Total engagements on a post}}{\text{Total number of followers}} \times 100$$

For the calculation of the average engagement rate across multiple posts of one influencer, the engagement rates of individual posts were summed and divided by the total number of posts:

$$\text{Average } ER_{\text{post}} = \frac{\text{Total } ER_{\text{post}}}{\text{Number of posts}}$$

Applying the formulas provided by Newberry (2025) enables consistent comparison of the audience interaction across posts and influencers.

Appendix 2A. Operational definitions of selected visual indicators

Visual indicator	Operational meaning in the study	Classification/distinction
Controlled pose	A body position that appears deliberately arranged for the image.	Common in editorial, fashion-event and brand-based posts.
Polished composition	A visually controlled arrangement of the image, created through careful framing, lighting, background or arrangement.	Broader than “glamorous styling”, as it refers to the structure and presentation of the image as a whole.
Glamorous styling	Fashion-oriented appearance created through clothing, makeup, hair, accessories or pose.	Refers to the influencer’s styled appearance.
Direct public-facing gaze	The influencer looks directly at the camera in a way that creates public address or confident self-presentation.	Used when direct gaze supports a staged, editorial, promotional or public-facing persona.
Private gaze	The influencer or participant is shown looking gently at another person, object or away from the camera, creating a private or domestic atmosphere.	Used when gaze contributes to intimacy, care or everyday relationality rather than public address.
Participant interaction	Two or more participants are visually connected through gaze, touch, shared activity, body orientation or physical closeness.	The image shows interaction, but emotional meaning is not necessarily clear.
Caring interaction	A participant is visually shown caring for, helping, supporting or	The image itself suggests care, protection or attentiveness.

	gently attending to another participant or pet.	
Affectionate caption framing	The caption explicitly frames the relationship as affectionate or emotionally close.	The caption names or describes the relation through love, gratitude, pride, closeness or family attachment.
Campaign-like/product-centred composition	The image resembles promotional or campaign material through product salience, brand cues, stylised setting or commercial framing.	The image's main focus is promotion or brand product.
Playful product display	A product is visually foregrounded, but the commercial message is softened through humour, colour, pose, exaggeration or playful styling.	Used when the product is promoted, but the tone of the image remains casual or visually playful.
Deliberate object arrangement	Objects are intentionally positioned to create aesthetic, personal or lifestyle meaning.	The meaning comes from the arrangement of the objects, not only from the presence of a product.
Affective memory framing	Objects, products or settings are connected to memory, nostalgia, family photographs or emotional meaning.	Used when the visual or caption context presents the object as emotionally meaningful rather than only from the presence of a product.
Everyday context	A setting or activity that appears ordinary, domestic, casual or routine-based.	Post presents the influencer through ordinariness, routine, accessibility or casual daily life.
Place-based context	A location is central to the post's meaning, such as a travel destination, outdoor setting, city, beach, garden or culturally marked place.	Used when the setting is not only a background but an important part of how the influencer is represented.

Appendix 2B. *Visual self-representation coding across the 90-post dataset*

Visual self-representation type	Emma Chamberlain	Bretman Rock	Zoë Sugg	Total posts
Editorial/fashion-event	E.3.1, E.4.1, E.5.1, E.6.1, E.8.1, E.11.1, E.12.1, E.18.1, E.21.1, E.26.1	B.3.1	-	12
Everyday/creative	E.7.1, E.9.1, E.14.1, E.16.1, E.19.1, E.29.1	B.16.1, B.22.1, B.29.1	Z.5.1	10
Conceptual/theatrical	E.1.1, E.2.1, E.10.1, E.13.1, E.23.1, E.28.1	B.2.1, B.6.1, B.17.1, B.19.1, B.20.1	-	11

Brand-based	-	B.7.1, B.9.1, B.10.1, B.11.1, B.21.1	-	5
Travel/place-based	E.15.1, E.25.1, E.27.1	B.4.1, B.5.1, B.8.1, B.13.1, B.14.1, B.15.1, B.24.1, B.25.1, B.26.1, B.28.1, B.30.1	Z.13.1, Z.14.1, Z.22.1, Z.18.1, Z.27.1, Z.28.1, Z.30.1	21
Family/lifestyle	-	B.12.1, B.23.1, B.27.1	Z.1.1, Z.2.1, Z.4.1, Z.6.1, Z.8.1, Z.9.1, Z.10.1, Z.12.1, Z.15.1, Z.16.1, Z.19.1, Z.21.1, Z.23.1, Z.24.1, Z.25.1, Z.26.1, Z.29.1	20
Style/consumer-lifestyle	E.17.1, E.22.1, E.24.1, E.30.1	B.1.1, B.18.1	Z.3.1, Z.7.1, Z.11.1, Z.17.1, Z.20.1	11

Appendix 3. Operationalisation of DHA-informed coding categories

DHA-informed category	Operational meaning in this study	What counted as evidence in images	What counted as evidence in captions	What counted as evidence in comments
Nomination/foregrounding	Identifies who or what is made central in the post. Refers not only to verbal naming but also to visual foregrounding.	The influencer placed centrally, depiction of family members, children, products, brands, locations, events or objects.	Naming or referring to the influencer, family members, brands, collaborators, places, events or activities.	Direct address to the influencer, references to the influencer by name, references to influencers' family members, appearance, product, place or post content.

Predication/evaluation	Identifies qualities, values or meanings attached to the influencer.	Visual construction of qualities such as stylishness, glamour, creativity, domesticity, playfulness, professionalism or everyday relatability through pose, clothing, setting and composition.	Evaluate or descriptive phrasing that frames the persona as grateful, humorous, reflective, professional, family-oriented, stylish or relatable.	Praise admiration, emotional approval or judgement of the influencer, such as evaluating appearance, authenticity, creativity, warmth or style.
Representational logic/reduced argumentation	Refers to the broader logic through which the persona is made meaningful or legitimate. This is adapted from DHA argumentation but not treated as a full topoi-based argumentation analysis.	Repeated visual patterns that support a recognisable persona, such as editorial fashion staging, family life, brand/product presence, travel lifestyle or everyday creativity.	Captions that anchor the post through professional affiliation, family life, personal routine, brand collaboration, travel experience or self-branding.	Audience responses that reinforce why this person matters, such as validating the influencer as fashionable, relatable, aspirational, entertaining, maternal or professionally credible.
Perspectivisation/stance	Identifies the point of view or position from which the persona is presented.	Direct gaze, indirect gaze, editorial distance, intimate observation, diary-like framing, staged performance or audience-facing composition.	First-person speaker, direct address to followers, humour, gratitude, announcements, reflective narration.	Comments that align with the presented stance, such as parasocial familiarity, teasing, affectionate direct addressing or shared emotional positioning.

Intensification/ mitigation	Identifies how representation is strengthened or softened.	Intensification through polished composition, high salience, direct gaze, dramatic styling or visual exaggeration, mitigation through casual framing, minimal staging, soft domesticity or everyday naturalness.	Intensification through emphatic wording, capitalisation, exaggeration, humour, repeated punctuation or strong affect, mitigation through minimal captions, hedging, gratitude or casual tone.	Intensification through strong praise, repeated punctuation, emojis, emotional expressions, softened criticism, gentle disagreement or affectionate qualification.
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