NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT ENFORCING EMOTIONAL LABOR IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND FOLLOWERS

University of Jyväskylä
School of Business and Economics

Master's Thesis

2021

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

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ABSTRACT

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Title	
Negative engagement enforcing emotional labor in parasocial relationships between social media influencers and followers	

Discipline	Level
Corporate Communication	Master's thesis

Date	Number of pages
9th of May 2021	94 + 5

Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand the role of negative engagement in parasocial relationships between influencers and followers. The objective was to discover triggers of negative engagement, make observations about the impact that negative experiences have on the influencer-follower relationship and comprehend how emotional labor required in these relationships is managed by influencers. Previous research on parasocial relationships has focused mostly on studying them from the followers' perspective, while negative engagement research has concentrated on the perspectives of brands or organizations. Thus, the interest in this study has been directed on the influencers' experiences.

This qualitative and multi-method study consisted of two separate studies with different sets of data. In the preliminary study, 82 opening posts published on the anonymous social media platform Jodel were collected and analyzed with a content driven approach, using the methods of qualitative content analysis. In the main study, eight semi-structured thematic interviews with Finnish social media influencers were conducted, in which the critical incident technique was applied to. The analysis approach in the main study was theory-guided.

The preliminary study found seven triggers of negative engagement in anonymous social media discussions: dissemination of misinformation or disinformation, quality of content, conflict between words and actions, violation of social norms, relationships, paid collaborations, and physical appearance and mannerisms. From within these categories, three encompassing themes were identified: responsibility and ethical conduct, private life and content production. In the findings of the main study, the influencers' negative experiences were often connected to the audiences' negative reaction to their behavior or content. In addition, ethical and value related issues were prominent.

This study serves as a starting point for understanding negative engagement triggers and how audiences shape parasocial relationships through negative engagement. Future research should focus on confirming the existence and prevalence of the negative engagement triggers found in this study with a quantitative approach. Moreover, quantitative research should be conducted to assess the classification made in this study based on Hochschild's (2012) attitudes.

Keywords	
negative engagement, parasocial interaction, parasocial relationships, social media influencers, emotional labor, influencer marketing, Jodel	

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijät	
Taru Kalvi & Iina Knuutinen	
Työn nimi	
Negatiivinen sitoutuminen vahvistamassa emotionaalisen työn tarvetta parasosiaalisissa suhteissa sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien ja seuraajien välillä	
Oppiaine	**Työn laji**
Viestinnän johtaminen	Pro gradu
Päivämäärä	**Sivumäärä**
9.5.2021	94 + 5

Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli pyrkiä ymmärtämään negatiivisen sitoutumisen roolia parasosiaalisissa suhteissa sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien ja seuraajien välisissä suhteissa. Tavoitteena oli löytää negatiivista sitoutumista aiheuttavia tekijöitä eli triggereitä, tehdä huomioita negatiivisten kokemusten merkityksestä vaikuttaja-seuraajasuhteisiin ja ymmärtää, kuinka vaikuttajat suoriutuvat näissä suhteissa vaaditusta emotionaalisesta työstä. Aiempi tutkimus parasosiaalisista suhteista on keskittynyt tarkastelemaan näitä suhteita seuraajien näkökulmasta, samalla kun tutkimus negatiivisesta sitoutumisesta on keskittynyt brändien ja organisaatioiden perspektiiviin. Näin ollen tässä tutkimuksessa kiinnostus on suunnattu vaikuttajien kokemuksiin.

Tämä laadullinen monimenetelmätutkimus koostuu kahdesta erillisestä tutkimuksesta, joissa käytettiin kahta eri aineistoa. Esitutkimuksessa kerättiin ja käsiteltiin 82 aloituspostausta, jotka oli julkaistu anonyymissä sosiaalisen median alusta Jodelissa. Esitutkimuksen aineisto analysoitiin aineistolähtöisesti laadullisen sisällönanalyysin metodeja käyttäen. Päätutkimusta varten toteutettiin kahdeksan puolistrukturoitua teemahaastattelua, joissa haastateltavina olivat suomalaiset sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat. Tutkimushaastatteluihin sovellettiin kriittisten tapahtumien menetelmää. Päätutkimuksen analyysi oli luonteltaan teoriaohjautuvaa.

Esitutkimuksen tuloksissa tunnistettiin seitsemän negatiivista sitoutumista aiheuttavaa triggeriä: mis- tai disinformaation levittäminen, sisältöjen laatu, sanojen ja tekojen välinen ristiriita, normien vastainen toiminta, ihmissuhteet, kaupalliset yhteistyöt sekä ulkonäkö ja maneerit. Näistä kategorioista tunnistettiin kolme kattavampaa teemaa: vastuullisuus ja eettinen menettely, yksityiselämä sekä sisällöntuotanto. Päätutkimuksen tuloksissa vaikuttajien negatiiviset kokemukset liittyivät usein yleisön negatiivisiin reaktioihin, joita olivat synnyttäneet vaikuttajien käytös tai sisältö. Lisäksi eettiset ja arvoihin liittyvät syyt nousivat selkeästi esiin.

Tämä tutkimus toimii lähtökohtana laajemmalle ymmärrykselle negatiivista sitoutumista aiheuttavista tekijöistä ja siitä, kuinka yleisöt voivat vaikuttaa parasosiaalisiin suhteisiin negatiivisuuden kautta. Jatkotutkimusta kannustetaan keskittymään tässä tutkimuksessa löydettyjen negatiivista sitoutumista aiheuttavien tekijöiden olemassaolon ja yleisyyden vahvistamiseen määrällisin menetelmin. Lisäksi määrällisellä tutkimuksella voitaisiin arvioida Hochschildin (2012) asenteiden pohjalta tehtyä jaottelua.

Asiasanat

negatiivinen sitoutuminen, parasosiaalinen vuorovaikutus, parasosiaaliset suhteet, vaikuttajamarkkinointi, emotionaalinen työ, Jodel, sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat

Säilytyspaikka

Jyväskylän yliopiston kirjasto

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1   INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers are individuals who have the ability to affect, inspire or steer the interests of others. They are "*trusted tastemakers in one or several niches*" who have large followings (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2016, p. 1) and are considered opinion leaders who can impact the way other people perceive and understand the world and make decisions (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). As the nature of being a social media influencer has continuously become more professional, influencers are also facing more criticism, hate and negativity from audiences – especially in anonymous online discussions (Heinonen-Tricarico, 2020; Kantola, 2018; Nurmi, 2020).

An annual influencer barometer published by the Finnish communication agency Manifesto, discovered that almost a third (32 %) of the social media influencers who participated in the survey had considered quitting and closing their accounts in the last year (Manifesto, 2019). The reasons behind these thoughts included the exhaustive feeling caused by having a constant presence in social media, lack of time, challenges with making a living as an influencer, and the pressure of needing to provide quality content for followers (Manifesto, 2019). These challenges have also been identified by other commercial operators, who have begun to offer various services as solutions for influencer career development (Fament, n.d.) and handling harassment on social media as an influencer (Someturva, n.d.).

For many social media users, influencers are like their friends. This connection closely mirrors the idea of parasocial experiences introduced in mass communication research (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction are powerful forces that can affect the audience's identity, lifestyle and behaviour. The existence of new computer mediated channels like social media have given a platform for even more interactive parasocial relationships, but the phenomenon has existed for far longer than the internet. Social media influencers are only one group of 'public performers' whose audiences become attached to them through the screen. This deep connection gives influencers the power to even influence their audience's purchasing decisions (Lee & Watkins, 2016; More & Lingam, 2019). This is an aspect that brands have taken an interest in and have begun to use influencer marketing for their own commercial goals to an increasing extent (Ki, Cuevas, Chong & Lim, 2020; Linqia, 2019).

The interest surrounding this phenomenon has also risen in recent public discussions, as even popular social media influencers themselves have begun to recognize the role of parasocial relationships in their work (Kaseva, 2021; Koivuranta, 2021). However, parasocial relationships aren't always entirely positive (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tian & Hoffner, 2010) and therefore they can also exhibit different manifestations of negativity.

Negative engagement is a phenomenon that exists in both online and offline environments and has been studied more rigorously in recent years (Lievonen, Luoma-aho & Bowden, 2018; Naumann, Bowden & Gabbott, 2020). Defining negative engagement has, however, posed a challenge to research since there has been a lack of consistency on what is meant by engagement. Concepts such as negative engagement dimensions (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014) and categories (Lievonen et al., 2018) have aimed to build a better understanding of the phenomenon. In this study, negative engagement refers to the negatively charged behavior targeted at influencers.

It has been argued that *"the more public the negative engagement is, the more harmful its outcomes for brands and organizations are"* (Lievonen et al., 2018, p. 541). Considering social media influencers as human brands in this study, the outcomes of negative engagement can be seen as harmful for them. Furthermore, as influencers are required to operate in the public sphere, experiencing negative engagement is nearly unavoidable. Facing negative engagement in parasocial relationships may require its targets, in this case influencers, to perform emotional labor.

The management of one's emotions for the benefit of others, conceptualized as emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), has been studied extensively in established service professions. Only recently has research begun to identify its mechanisms also in less traditional jobs – such as the work of social media influencers (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Mardona, Molesworth & Grigore, 2018). In this study, emotional labor is used as part of the theoretical framework to understand the potential strain that negative engagement can place on parasocial relationships.

The focus of this study is on understanding the significance of negative engagement on parasocial relationships. This topic will be explored from both the point of view of social media influencers, as well as their audiences. Previous research has fallen short in understanding the influencers' experiences, as it has mostly focused on studying parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships from the followers' perspective. Although, it should be noted that generally studying parasocial relationships is considered logical from the followers' perspective as the experience of this bond is understood to arise in their end. In addition to looking into the significance, this study also aims to identify triggers and causes of negative engagement in influencer-follower relationships. Gaining insight on how influencers experience negative engagement and handle its consequences helps to enlighten a less explored area of parasocial relationships.

The research questions can be specified as:

RQ1: What triggers negative engagement towards social media influencers in anonymous social media discussions?

RQ2: What is the significance of negative engagement on the relationships between social media influencers and their followers?

RQ3: How do social media influencers manage emotional labor when experiencing negative engagement?

This qualitative, multi-method study consists of two parts: the preliminary study and the main study. In the preliminary study, the phenomenon is examined from the audience's point of view to get a better understanding of the behavior and reasons that trigger negative engagement towards social media influencers. This is achieved by analyzing comments on the anonymous social media platform, Jodel. In the main study, the same phenomenon is examined from the point of view of social media influencers through the use of semi-structured interviews.

2 INFLUENCERS AND PARASOCIAL EXPERIENCES

This chapter will begin by exploring definitions of social media influencers and introducing their characteristics in light of previous research literature. Following that, the concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships will be defined and discussed. The chapter will be concluded by examining parasocial relationships specifically with a focus on social media and influencers.

2.1 Social media influencers

As the popularity and prevalence of using influencers in strategic marketing communication has increased (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Gräve, 2019) and their role has become more professional than before (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020), studying social media influencers in an academic context has become an even more intriguing topic for research. One of the earliest and most often cited definitions for social media influencers describes them essentially as a *"new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media applications"* (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011, pp. 90-91). This definition suggests that social media influencers have the ability to initiate and create interest, for example, in a product, event or a cause by using their platform to publish content about it. They are often described through the platforms, mediums or channels that they use to publish their content: blogger, vlogger, Youtuber, podcaster. In this study, the terms 'social media influencer' and 'influencer' will be used interchangeably to refer specifically to social media influencers.

Earlier research highlights the nature of influencers as commercial endorsers (Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Huang, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2020) who impact people's purchase decisions by influencing their opinions through social networking platforms, for example by publishing product reviews or other posts about new products (More & Lingam, 2019). Social media influencers narrate their everyday lives through textual and visual content and present advertisements in the form of editorial opinions (Abidin, 2016). It is even considered that getting paid or otherwise compensated by brands to promote products or services to their followers as a requirement to be considered as a social media influencer (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Other qualities considered as important for one to be defined as a social media influencer are the ability to build interactive relationships with their followers (Enke & Borchers, 2019) and the ability to attract large audiences (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Furthermore, the international online advertising industry organization Interactive Advertising Bureau (2018) also defines social media influencers as persons who *"have the*

potential to create engagement, drive conversation, and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience".

According to the annual influencer barometer report by the Finnish communication agency Manifesto (2019), social media influencers see conveying their own experiences and feelings to others as the most important aspect of their work. Even though working as a commercial endorser for brands and products offers influencers a possibility to monetize their popularity and earn compensation for their online content production, it has been found that building communities of people around their lives and interests, advocating causes close to their hearts and offering support to their followers through their own experiences are significant motivations besides the monetary motivation (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). In addition, an increasing number of social media influencers see themselves as experts or specialists, and feel that a big part of the profession is the role of serving as conversation initiators and tuners who shape public or online discussions (Manifesto, 2019). Many social media influencers also identify with being entertainers, role models, modern day journalists and public figures or celebrities (Manifesto, 2019). Research literature has also described them as digital age role models, who communicate personally with their followers (Pick, 2020).

As the power and followings of social media influencers have increased, the most popular influencers are in some cases considered also as celebrities and have been able to extend their reach from social media to more traditional mass media channels, such as television, radio and magazines. In their study, Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019) have even introduced the term 'instafamous' (referring to the popular social media platform Instagram) to describe individuals who have become celebrities and acquired fame through their social media presence, *as opposed to traditional celebrities who are famous from film, music and TV shows"* (Jin et al., 2019, p. 568). It has been discovered that these new types of celebrities are also regarded as more authentic, credible and relatable by audiences, which might mean that people form stronger and deeper connections with them as opposed to traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019).

Previous research has largely focused on examining how social media influencers can help brands to enhance consumers' trust (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-aho, 2020), purchase intentions (Lee & Watkins, 2016) and other positive outcomes from the brand's point of view. One aspect that has been studied extensively as a phenomenon which brands could leverage for their marketing purposes are the strong parasocial relationships that influencers create with their audience. Less attention has been paid to the negative side and impact of this phenomenon, especially from the influencers' point of view.

2.2   Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships

The concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships were first introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956. According to them, television, movies and radio – which at the time were considered new mass media platforms – had given audiences an illusion of a real relationship with the people they heard and saw performing on these media platforms (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This illusion causes audiences to feel as if they are familiar with the performers and that through observing their way of speaking, moving and acting in different situations, they feel like they can know the performer or their character as intimately as one would know a close friend. In other words, the audience develops a connection or a bond through mediated encounters with performers that they see and follow through mass media. However, Horton & Wohl (1956) note that this interaction is usually only one-sided, controlled solely by the performer and does not allow room for development from both the spectator and the performer. The audience has virtually no or a relatively low opportunity to affect the terms, values or ways of the relationship other than to withdraw completely from the relationship and the interaction. (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

These performers, or personas as Horton & Wohl (1956) describe them, have a way of forming exceptionally deep, close and meaningful relationships with even vast crowds of strangers through their presence. This presence can make audiences feel that they are engaging in an exchange that is almost like a face-to-face conversation rather than them passively observing the performer. If these interactions with the performer and their audience become a continuous and regular event, the spectators develop a feeling of sharing the performer's life with them, sharing their experiences, having history with them and ultimately becoming loyal fans who understand them on a deeper level than others. (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

There is a clear distinction between the two terms – parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship – even though they are sometimes used almost interchangeably. Parasocial interaction occurs when the spectator is actively and currently engaged in watching or hearing the persona perform. It is the phenomenon that takes place during the consumption of content. In turn, a parasocial relationship exists also outside the interaction event when the spectator can recall their feelings toward the persona, for example when talking about them with others.

To influence and strengthen the forming of the relationship and familiarity between the audience and themself, the performer can attempt to imitate the customs and manners of an informal face-to-face interaction. These ways include, for example, casualness in the conversion style, gestures and way of addressing the audience as if they were your friends enjoying a get-together with you. The performer can also make the audience feel as if they were in the same space with them by visually taking the audience with them by using

different camera angles, point of views and showing the audience what they themself are seeing. To quote Horton & Wohl (1956, p. 218), by using these methods the performer *"erases for the moment the line which separates persona and spectator"*.

Since Horton and Wohl, who were researchers in the field of sociology and human relations, the concepts of both parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships have been studied extensively in a variety of fields, including business and economics (Eighmey & McCord, 1998), marketing (Gong & Li 2017; Labrecque 2014; Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen & Luoma-aho, 2019), media and entertainment (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner, 1996), communication (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), psychology (Young, Gabriel & Hollar, 2013) and sociology (Cohen, 2004; Gibson, 2016).

The contexts in which parasocial interaction and relationships have been studied in include e.g. how children and adolescents learn and adapt gender-roles through media figures (Hoffner, 1996), how superhero characters can cause body image issues (Young et al., 2013), how identifying with certain types of fictional characters reveals characteristics about the audience member's own nature (Eyal & Rubin, 2003), how website's personality can affect its visitation rates through audience forming a relationship with it (Eighmey & McCord, 1998), how celebrities can affect consumers' impulse buying behavior (Gong & Li, 2017), and how brands can affect the loyalty level of consumers by fostering close relationships with them (Labrecque, 2014).

Many studies since Horton and Wohl have added to their definition by expanding the understanding of the mechanisms and effects of parasocial relationships. For example, studies have shown that audiences create opinions and beliefs of the media personality as they are exposed to them over a period of time, which resembles the way social relationships work (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). These opinions audiences have of media personalities often extend their influence to future interactions with that personality and then strengthen the parasocial relationship in the long term (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). According to Perse and Rubin (1989), parasocial relationships imitate interpersonal relationships in three ways: they are voluntary, they provide companionship and they have a tendency of being formed based on social attraction. Furthermore, earlier research points out that the nature of a parasocial relationship does not have to be solely or thoroughly positive, but that a parasocial relationship can also be entirely based on feelings of dislike or hate that an audience member feels towards a media personality (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Interestingly, it has also been discovered that audiences can even experience what is called a parasocial breakup, for example when a television series ends (Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Studies show that becoming attached to a persona through parasocial interaction is more than only an illusory diversion from reality and support the notion that mediated relationships are part of the audience's broader social life (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

2.3   Parasocial interaction in social media

The previously described characteristics of parasocial interaction and the formation of parasocial relationships can also be identified when examining social media and the ways in which influencers interact with their audiences online.

In recent years, parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction have been studied extensively in the context of social media (Daniel, Jackson & Westerman, 2018; Labrecque, 2014; Munnukka et al., 2019). However, most of the research has understandably focused on the spectators, audiences and followers rather than on the personas, performers and influencers, as the phenomenon is created by the audience through their devotion and fascination with the influencer. In previous studies, parasocial relationships have for the larger part been examined in terms of the audience's reaction to media personalities. Due to this, the aim of this thesis is to shed more light on the ways in which negativity manifests itself in parasocial relationships and how influencers perceive these negative experiences.

The ways in which traditional mass media performers on television and movies have used camera angles, point of views and eye contact to make their audiences feel like they are in on the action, social media influencers use these same methods to make the audience feel as if they are both physically and mentally closer to the influencer (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme & LaGroue, 2018). Filming a 'my day' type of video blog and showing themselves walking down the streets, visiting a shop or stopping at a café, the influencer gives their audience a feeling of being there with them. Another way in which social media influencers intensify their relationship with their audience is the familiar and casual way in which they address them on videos or captions by speaking directly to them like they were sitting across the table: e.g. "Good morning to you", "I hope you have a great day", "I'm back with yet again another video for you guys". This conversational and friendly way of addressing their followers can help social media influencers in forming connections with their audience (Tolson, 2010). These types of interactions with an audience have also been referred to as breaking the imagined 'fourth wall', which is a theatrical practice where a performer makes the audience feel like they are part of the events seen and acted out on stage, instead of merely viewers witnessing them (Ferchaud et al., 2017). Breaking this fourth wall has been shown to result in a stronger sense of parasocial interaction (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000).

Social media influencers can also ask and encourage the audience to leave comments and share their opinions or thoughts. Interactivity with followers and addressing the audience members directly have been discovered to strengthen the forming of parasocial relationships on social media platforms (Labrecque, 2014). Furthermore, even merely witnessing a social media influencer addressing their followers by username strengthens the experience of

parasocial interaction for other followers observing the occurrence (Frederick, Choong, Clavio & Walsh, 2012).

It can be argued that social media offers an additional dimension to the parasocial relationship between the influencer (persona) and the audience (spectator). Compared to traditional mass media platforms, social media provides people with the chance for more interactive and two-sided communication and conversations (Berthon, Pitt & Campbell, 2008; French & Bazarova, 2017). Moreover, compared to the one-sided communication of traditional media and how the power to develop the parasocial relationship rests solely in the hands of the performer, on social media these terms are no longer in place. Therefore it can be argued that online based communication technologies have altered parasocial interaction to resemble more closely the ways and rules of social interaction (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). Nowadays, the audience has a greater ability to control and steer the interaction between the influencer and themself and are no longer tied to only having the option to withdraw completely from the relationship should it not satisfy them. The feeling of having a parasocial relationship with a person like a social media influencer, celebrity or a brand representative has been shown to increase engagement and draw audiences back to content created by this person (Reinikainen, 2019).

Previous studies on social media influencers have indicated that the more influencers share about themselves and their lives to their followers, the more authentic their audiences view them as (Ferchaud et al., 2018). Moreover, it also has been shown that when audiences estimate how much they trust information provided by a social media influencer, for example in terms of their purchasing decisions, the level of social self-disclosure from the influencer's side plays an important role (Huang, 2015). Telling their audience more about themselves and the values they have evokes a greater sense of emotional attachment and familiarity between the influencer and their followers. Heightened trust towards an influencer makes followers more likely to share their own thoughts and feelings to the influencer, which results in likes, comments and other interactions (Huang, 2015).

However, even though influencers' self-disclosure and openness encourages their followers to interact with them, oftentimes audience members engage in conversations about them also outside the influencers' own platforms, such as internet forums (Reinikainen, Laaksonen & Porttikivi, 2019). Furthermore, as the influencers' platforms are often moderated and influencers' have the power to manage negative discussions about themselves on their own channels, negative conversations can move to anonymous social media platforms, where the negative commentary can become very harsh and unempathetic. Thus, self-disclosure in these parasocial relationships can expose influencers to ruthless negative commenting and criticism (Reinikainen et al., 2019).

3   PERSPECTIVES ON NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT

In this chapter, negative engagement will be introduced and based on a classification introduced in *The Handbook of Communication Engagement* (Johnston & Taylor, 2018), categories and dimensions of negative engagement will be discussed. Furthermore, the concept of negativity bias will be presented with a focus on influencers and their audiences.

3.1   Negative engagement

In public discussion and corporate jargon, the term 'engagement' has been utilized as a buzzword when discussing social media landscape, advertising, as well as influencer marketing. It has been applied to a variety of contexts, as some studies discuss it from the perspective of customer engagement or brand engagement, whereas others focus on community engagement (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). However, most variations represent the same or a very similar idea of what is understood by engagement. At a fundamental level, engagement requires strong and passionate feelings from the audience's side that make them inclined to devote their time to interact with an entity, such as a brand (Kang, 2014). On a more practical level, engagement is often examined through measurable observation methods such as likes or shares (Anderson, Swenson & Gilkerson, 2016). When discussing engagement, the common connotation of the word is positive, therefore by default negative engagement may seem like the opposite of engagement.

Negative engagement exists in both online and offline contexts where its outcomes can be either positive or negative (Lievonen et al., 2018). The majority of existing research on negative engagement has been conducted from the perspective of organizations and brands, which poses a challenge when introducing negative engagement in the context of social media influencers. However, it can be argued that influencers create their own brands through their content and presence on social media and can therefore be viewed as human brands.

A brand is the set of features, values and symbols that consumers associate with the products and services of a seller and what differentiates them from competitors in the consumers' minds (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Traditionally, the term 'brand' has been reserved for discussions about corporations and other organizations, but nowadays the term 'human brands' describe "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts" (Thomson 2006, p. 104). Moreover, the term refers to a *"persona, well-known or emerging, who are the subject of marketing, interpersonal, or inter-organizational communications"* (Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2011, p. 923). It describes brands that are centered around one distinctive, famous persona such as an actor, a

musician, an athlete (Thomson, 2006) or social media influencers (Ki et al., 2020). In addition, the idea of social media influencers becoming 'micro-celebrities' through successful self-branding has been proposed (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). It has been suggested that when social media influencers are to *"satisfy their followers needs for ideality, relatedness, and competence, the more they perceive influencers as human brands who have strong emotional bonds with their followers"* (Ki et al., 2020, p. 9), this resembles the nature of parasocial relationships.

To social media influencers, their followers and audiences are what customers or stakeholders are to brands. Therefore, it can be seen that influencers as human brands are equally prone to encountering negative engagement as traditional brands. However, the parasocial relationships shared between influencers and their followers might bring more complexity to the dynamics of negative engagement they face, as opposed to traditional celebrities.

From the perspective of marketing and business studies, the value in understanding negative engagement lingers in minimizing possible harm to both the brand as well as to its customers. As there is a desire from a brand to re-establish positive engagement, identifying negative emotions, thoughts and behaviors is valued (Naumann et al., 2020). Furthermore, as positive engagement derives from favorable *"affirmative, cognitive, emotional and behavioral brand-related consumer dynamics"* (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014, p. 69), negative engagement requires unfavored relationships to occur towards the brand on both emotional and behavioral levels (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). These dimensions are addressed more in-depth in the next chapter.

Negative engagement in online environments has been described as *"an experience-based series of participative actions in online environments where negative issues concerning an organisation or brand are publicly discussed"*, adding that only actions in public spaces should be considered as negative engagement due to the danger of possible damage (Lievonen & Luoma-aho, 2015, p. 288). Therefore, negative engagement cannot exist in a void: an individual needs to make an action. This action could be led by emotions or a thought process strong enough to push an individual to perform a negatively charged interaction. It could be argued that there is no negative engagement without a target (Lievonen et al, 2018).

Word-of-mouth is considered a form of negative engagement (Lievonen et al., 2018). Electronic word-of-mouth refers to word-of-mouth occurring in an online environment. Traditionally, negative word-of-mouth refers to *"behaviors such as product denigration, relating unpleasant experiences, rumor, and private complaining"* (Anderson, 1998, p. 6). Negative word-of-mouth spreads easily, having the potential to cause a long lasting effect where the possible damage can go beyond close stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 304). Furthermore, the desire for revenge may motivate individuals to engage in negative word-of-mouth, yet the same individual may have a desire to help another organization by engaging in positive word-of-mouth (Sweeney, Soutar &

Mazzarol, 2012). Similarly, followers may choose to engage in negative engagement behavior with one social media influencer and then engage in a positive way with another social media influencer. It has also been suggested that individuals may participate in positive and negative word-of-mouth to enhance (De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker & Costabile, 2012) or reassert themselves, unfolding a plausible motive towards this form of negative engagement.

Another phenomenon closely related to negative engagement is disengagement. Despite sharing some similar characteristics, disengagement and negative engagement are not analogous concepts. Unlike negative engagement, disengagement refers to a situation where *"a person who stops being involved or interested in the community, or is restrained by something"* (Dutot & Mosconi, 2016, p. 226). Compared to negative engagement, disengagement is defined by a low level of activity. Another similar concept to disengagement is social media fatigue. It refers to a situation in which users decide to leave or detach from social media platforms (Seo, Primovic & Jin, 2019) due to concerns over privacy as well as boredom (Bright, Kleiser & Grau, 2015), information overload, emotional exhaustion or message irrelevance and inexplicability (Seo et al., 2019). In light of parasocial relationships between social media influencers and followers, similar reasons could lead to their audience being less engaged.

Although disengagement may have an impact on the behavior of audience members (Dutot & Mosconi, 2016) and potentially turning it to negative engagement in the future, investigating links between the two is not possible within the methods of this study. As this study focuses on understanding, identifying and uncovering influencers' negative experiences and their ways of processing negative engagement, experiences related to disengaging behaviour are dismissed.

3.2   Dimensions and categories of negative engagement

Negative engagement is not a one-dimensional or simplistic concept. One approach to understanding negative engagement are its three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioural, presented by Hollebeek and Chen (2014). Although these dimensions occur in both positively and negatively charged engagement, in negative engagement it *"is exhibited through consumers' unfavorable brand-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during brand interactions"* (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014, p. 62).

To illustrate, the cognitive aspect refers to negative thoughts, whereas the emotional aspect addresses the negative sentiments experienced. Negative eWOM is mentioned as an example of the behavioral aspect (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). Supporting views regarding cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement have been introduced, in which cognitive engagement is noted as *"an individual's investment in attention and processing to develop understanding or*

knowledge about a topic or an idea", whereas affective mirrors the ideas of belonging and behavioral represents *"concepts of participation, collaboration, action, and involvement"* (Johnston, 2018, p. 22).

Although this approach is often used in the negative engagement literature, other views have also been introduced. For instance, three overlapping levels – emotions, messengers and acts – display another approach to understanding negative engagement where *"emotions refer to individual emotions that are visible"*, messengers specify the actors, and acts to the behavioral element (Lievonen et al., 2018, p. 533) which can be compared to the behavioural dimension introduced above.

Besides dimensions, negative engagement has been categorised into more detailed categories. These categories have been specified as inactive, active and malicious negative engagement, where the connectivity is either low or high (Lievonen et al., 2018), connectivity referring to the level of audiences negatively engaged.

Table 1. The categories of negative engagement in the context of brands (Lievonen et al., 2018).

	Private low connectivity (limited audiences)	*Public high connectivity (unlimited audiences)*
Inactive (weak negative emotions)	Level 1: Passive discontented stakeholder	Level 2: Dormant resentful stakeholder
Active (moderate negative emotions)	Level 3: Irate stakeholder	Level 4: Justice-seeking stakeholder (hateholder)
Malicious (extremely strong negative emotions)	Level 5: Revenge-seeking stakeholder	Level 6: Troll stakeholder

The development of these categories has been based on an organizational framework, referring to different factors that negatively engaged stakeholders could present towards an organization rather than another human. Since influencers experience negative engagement on social media, the negative engagement experienced by them falls under the categories that can have an effect due to their publicity. An example of a non-public act of negative engagement towards a social media influencer could be a direct message on a social media platform, yet the potential of this private message becoming public is plausible.

3.3   Negativity bias

Negativity bias has frequently been used as a term in conversational language, referring to any situation or behavior in which people tend to lean on negative thoughts or outcome of occurrence. Although correct, the term has a more extensive meaning in academic settings, as it has been studied in psychology (Baumeister, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001; Taylor, 1991), marketing (Chen & Lurie, 2013), as well as media and communication studies (Kätsyri, Kinnunen, Kusumoto, Oittinen & Ravaja, 2006; Soroka, Daku, Hiaeshutter-Rice, Guggenheim & Pasek, 2018).

Traditionally, negative biases have been studied with the aim to understand negative events, which are defined as events having *"the potential or actual ability to create adverse outcomes for the individual"* (Taylor, 1991, p. 67). These events tend to be more salient, effective and dominant compared to positive (Rozin & Royzman, 2001) or neutral events as they have a straining effect on individuals' resources (Taylor, 1991). It has been suggested that compared to positive information, negative information provides a stronger stimulus, whereas positive information is less powerful (Chen & Lurie, 2013). Particularly in interpersonal relationships *"negative evaluators are perceived as more intelligent but less kind than positive evaluators"*, noting that observers of such behavior may not recognize it (Amabile, 1983, p. 152). Furthermore, it has been stated as a principle of psychological phenomena, that bad is stronger than good when both exist in similar quantities (Baumeister et al., 2001; Wu, 2013). However it is not certain that negative events have a higher physiological impact (Taylor, 1991).

In light of negative bias literature, it can be suggested that experiences of negative engagement may have more value when compared to experiences of positive engagement. However, although people tend to focus on negative experiences, the *"threatening stimuli may be more time-sensitive than attainment of appetitive stimuli"* (Kaushcke, Bahn, Vesker & Schwarzer, 2019, p. 2), in other words referring to negativity bias having an effect on recalling in the distant past.

Attempts to answer how followers may perceive negativity bias have been made in media studies. As an example, research regarding the social media platform Twitter illustrates how negative tweets were not only identified more easily when compared to positive ones, but also looked at for a longer period of time (Kätsyri et al., 2016). However, it has also been argued that when compared to traditional media, social media platforms such as Twitter would not present a negativity bias (Soroka et al., 2017). Despite contradicting perspectives, it can be proposed that negative situations or posts on social media platforms may gain more weight due to negativity bias being an underlying hindrance. Furthermore, since influencers might have a negativity bias towards focusing more on negative experiences rather than positive ones, this may cause them emotional strain.

4 INFLUENCER MARKETING AS EMOTIONAL LABOR

The following chapter will focus on understanding influencer marketing and different aspects of influencers work, specifically from the point of view of paid collaborations with a focus on relationships with audiences. Furthermore, the theoretical concept of emotional labor will be discussed from the influencers' point of view.

4.1 Influencer marketing

Brands are increasingly turning to influencers as a new marketing method to gain ways to reach consumers and connect with them. For many brands, influencer marketing has become an integral part of their digital marketing strategies (Ki et al., 2020). Industry reports indicate that marketers plan to increase their influencer marketing budgets (Linqia, 2019; Mediakix, n.d. a) and that many are shifting from a one-off kind of tactical use of influencer marketing to a more always-on type of strategy, where they activate influencers throughout the year (Linqia, 2019). The reports show that brands feel optimistic about influencer marketing as a tool: 80 % of marketers find influencer marketing effective and almost 90 % feel that the return on investment of influencer marketing is better or comparable to other marketing methods (Mediakix, n.d. a). The biggest goals and targets that brands have for using influencer marketing in their strategies are increasing brand awareness, reaching new audiences and generating sales or conversions (Mediakix, n.d. a).

The global influencer marketing industry value and spending on influencer marketing advertising has been estimated to reach between $5 billion and $10 billion by the end of 2020 (Mediakix, n.d. b). By 2022, the industry has been projected to reach a value of up to $15 billion (Schomer, 2019). Therefore, influencer marketing should be considered as a notable industry and a prolific business that is rapidly growing in significance to brands and marketers.

Influencer marketing refers to the processes in which influencers post or create content that is paid by brands (Kim & Kim, 2020) or that they are in some other way compensated to create by the brands. In other words, it is a practice of compensating influencers for posting about a brand, its products or services on social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and an attempt to promote products or services to increase brand awareness by using content shared by influential social media users (Carter, 2016).

However, influencer marketing often goes beyond just simple marketing messages distributed by influencers on social media (Sigala & Gretzel, 2018). It can also include "*co-creating content, marketers featuring influencers in their branded*

posts, influencers being invited to host contests or giveaways, as well as having influencers take over the brand's social media channels" (Sigala & Gretzel, 2018, p. 5). In addition, brands can engage influencers in on-going brand ambassadorship or other collaborations, invite them to do product reviews or to participate in events hosted by them (Krasniak, 2016). Nowadays, using social media influencers in marketing and cooperating with them often involves also working with an influencer agency that serves as a manager or a representative between the influencer and the brand (Sigala & Gretzel, 2018). These agencies, for example, negotiate deals, assist in planning influencer marketing campaigns and help in determining who are the most fitting influencers to cooperate with a specific brand.

In some studies, influencer marketing has been defined as being a new form of native advertising, in which brands pay a magazine, a newspaper or in this case an influencer to create and publish sponsored content in their channels that looks similar to the organic and non-sponsored content of that channel (Kim & Kim, 2020). Ferrer Conill (2016, p. 905) defines native advertising as *"a form of paid content marketing, where the commercial content is delivered adopting the form and function of editorial content"* that attempts to blur the line between consuming editorial content instead of sponsored content. Due to this, consumers may not always recognize the content's nature as commercial and easily separate it from the influencer's original and non-sponsored content (Kim & Kim, 2020). However, research suggests that if the influencer and the brand they are collaborating with feel like a 'natural match' to the audience, and the influencer can justify how the endorsed brand, product or service fits their identity, then the audience is more likely to accept the commercial content as an extension of the influencer's organic content. This is why paying close attention to the match and congruence between the influencer and the promoted brand, product or service is a crucial part in promoting the success and persuasion effectiveness of the marketing message in influencer marketing. (Kim & Kim, 2020).

To ensure that advertising on social media through the use of influencers is not misleading to consumers, many countries have introduced laws and regulations that require social media influencers to disclose clearly in their posts if they have received money or other form of compensation from brands to endorse their products or services. In Finland, violations of good marketing practices are assessed on a case-by-case basis and influencer marketing is controlled by the Consumer Ombudsman and The Council of Ethics in Advertising (Mainonnan eettinen neuvosto MEN), which operates as a self-regulatory body and monitors compliance with the marketing guidelines of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) (KKV, 2019; PING Helsinki, 2019). In the case that MEN states that an ethical violation has been committed, their statement is not only directed at the brand but also at the influencer involved in the paid collaboration.

Earlier research indicates that a successful match between the influencer and the brand can bring other benefits in addition to money to both parties involved

(Reinikainen et al., 2020). One of these non-monetary rewards is a stronger relationship between the influencer and their audience. For brands, influencer marketing can result in heightened brand attitude (Munnukka et al., 2019) and purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Studies suggest that a well-matched influencer can enhance product attitude and even deliver a marketing endorsement message that to the audience feels like a personal suggestion from the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2020).

Influencer marketing can create stronger connections with consumers compared to traditional advertising, and the social capital – a shared sense of identity, values and impact acquired through networks – of influencers makes them effective brand endorsers (Chu & Kamal, 2008). Brands are relying more and more on influencers to capture the attention and the trust of the consumers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Using influencers as a trusted source to deliver their marketing messages, brands can reach their targeted consumers more effectively (Brown & Hayes, 2007). The messages communicated by influencers are gaining a higher level of responsiveness from audiences compared to typical marketing messages from brands and organizations (Kim & Kim, 2020).

Experiencing a strong connection similar to a parasocial relationship with an influencer can lead to audience members trusting a brand that the influencer has recommended more, and feeling less uncertainty towards that brand (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This uncertainty can be reduced even further when audience members read comments written by other audience members. However, this pattern of trust can be disrupted if there is a reason for the audience to question or doubt the credibility and reliability of the influencer. (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This lack of trust rarely transfers to distrust towards the endorsed brand. Therefore, even though brands benefit from the trust that audiences have towards an influencer, in the case that an influencer is perceived as inauthentic or not trustworthy, the endorsed brand might not suffer negative consequences. (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

In such situations, the negative aftermath and criticism regarding paid content from the audience is often directed at the influencer (Luoma-aho, Pirttimäki, Maity, Munnukka & Reinikainen, 2019). The influencer is therefore the one who has to receive the negativity that the audience voices if they perceive content as inauthentic (Luoma-aho et al., 2019). It has even been found that some followers view any paid content as inherently disgusting and deceitful, almost like a violation of the authentic and uncommercial relationship that they share with the influencer (Coco & Eckert, 2020). Thus, influencer marketing and paid collaborations can pose a higher risk to the influencers than to the brands and force them to perform emotional labor to minimize potential damages to the parasocial relationship.

4.2 Emotional labor

Emotional labor was first introduced as a theoretical framework in 1983 by Arlie R. Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. She conceptualized emotional labor as *"the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display"* (Hochschild, 2012, p. 29). It is the unconscious process in which we manage our own emotions, and sense the emotions of others around us to gain knowledge, that we then use to control our actions when doing our job (Mastracci, Newman & Guy, 2010). Using this knowledge, we display appropriate feelings or suppress inappropriate ones from within ourselves to generate desired feelings and actions in other people – for example to make a customer feel a certain way or make a certain choice (Mastracci, Guy & Newman, 2012). As emotional labor can bring more value and therefore more money to corporations, it has exchange value and employees sell it to their employers in exchange for a salary (Hochschild, 2012). It has been estimated that emotional labor is an essential skill and an inseparable part of approximately one-third of all occupations (Guy, Newman & Mastracci, 2008; Hochschild, 2012).

Hochschild (2012) defines feeling and emotion as a sense, much like our sense of hearing or sight. We experience emotion *"when bodily sensations are joined with what we see or imagine"* (Hochschild, 2012, p. 26) and it communicates information to us in the same way as hearing and seeing do. According to Hochschild (2012), feeling helps us in discovering our view and perspective on the world itself. She argues that we don't store feelings inside us and that they are not separable or independent of our actions to try and manage them: *"in managing feeling, we contribute to the creation of it"* (2012, p. 26). According to Hochschild, this means that what we view as a natural feeling or emotion may actually have always been determined by collective social norms. She introduces the idea of feeling rules as *"standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling"* (2012, p. 27). We use these feeling rules to determine our role in each relation and situation we are in and to tell us how we should act in order to appear sincere and civil. Violation of work-related feeling rules leads to sanctions and thus makes emotional labor a system of social control within the workplace (Louwanda, 2013).

When we're performing emotional labor, we're doing emotion work where we manipulate our personal feelings for the comfort of others (Hochschild, 2012). This requires coordination between mind and feeling and a high level of emotional intelligence (Mastracci et al., 2010). Nowadays, most jobs require a capacity to handle people rather than to handle things, as the share of service sector jobs are increasing and interpersonal skills are more important (Hochschild, 2012). For example, a flight attendant must smile and give the impression to customers all the time that they are enjoying their job. The smile is a part of their work that they must coordinate in themself and in their feelings

to make the work seem effortless. Furthermore, the flight attendant must also disguise any feelings of fatigue or irritation to ensure the customers contentment in the service and the flying experience – or else they are doing their job poorly. (Hochschild, 2012).

Despite the fact that Hochschild and many others after her have studied emotional labor specifically in the context of flight attendants, the phenomenon is present in other occupations, fields and industries as well. In her book, Hochschild lists as other examples of emotional labor in the workplace a secretary responsible for creating a positive atmosphere at the office, a waiter maintaining a pleasant dining experience, a hotel receptionist making the guests feel welcome or a social worker who makes the client feel understood and cared for (Hochschild, 2012). Following Hochschild's research, emotional labor has been studied, for example, in the contexts of both public and private sector employees: crisis response workers (Mastracci et al., 2012), kindergarten teachers (Qi, Ji, Zhang, Lu, Sluiter & Deng, 2017), sales clerks (Tsai, 2001), waitresses (de Volo, 2003) and the police (Martin, 1999). In marketing, communication and media studies, the phenomenon has been discussed through the work of public relations professionals (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020; Yeomans, 2007), journalists (Miller & Lewis, 2020) and social media influencers (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Mardona et al., 2018). Emotional labor has been identified as an issue stemming from organizational communication (Sass, 2000; Eschenfelder, 2012) and leadership (Humphrey, Pollack & Hawver, 2008).

Emotional labor is the "*unpaid aspect of work*" that "*remains largely invisible until performed unsatisfactorily*" (Louwanda, 2013, p. 2). We are required to use our emotions as a form of exchange and sell our emotions to corporate purposes (Hochschild, 2012). Therefore, these feeling rules and our display of emotions become established by commercial standards and corporate requirements. There is also a cost to emotional labor, as "*it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel*" (Hochschild, 2012, p. 28). The unpredictability and fast-paced nature of our current social world also makes us increasingly question things such as who we are and what we should be feeling. We value what are seen as natural or spontaneous feelings and treat them as something precious that should be saved from corporate interest – we do not want to become just parts of a larger socio-economic machine. (Hochschild, 2012).

In her book Hochschild introduces three different attitudes toward work. The first one is an employee who fully and truly identifies with their work and risks having a burnout (Hochschild, 2012). The second employee sees a clear distinction between themself and their work – they are less likely to have a burnout, but may blame themself for making this distinction and not fully dedicating themself to their employer and work. The third employee sees a clear distinction, does not blame themself for it and has a positive stance towards seeing their work as acting out or performing a certain persona. (Hochschild, 2012). Hochschild argues that all three attitudes have potential risks but that they could be reduced if all these employees felt "*a greater sense of*

control over the conditions of their work lives" (Hochschild, 2012, p. 126). Emotional labor makes employees vulnerable to burnout and prolonged emotional stress, which can result in lower effectiveness on the job (Mastracci et al., 2012). Emotional numbness may reduce stress, but it does that by reducing our access to our feelings. When we lose access to our feelings, we at the same time lose a way to interpret the world. (Hochschild, 2012).

The toll and price of emotional work becomes even more heavier when there is a dissonance or a contradiction between what we actually feel and what we are expected to display in our work (Hochschild, 2012). We can do this for a while, but if this dissonance between what we truly feel and what we display continues, we will either start to fail in displaying the required emotions or start to perform our feelings and work like a robot, feeling a distance from our true self and our work-persona. In order to survive their jobs, employees must mentally detach themselves from their own feelings. (Hochschild, 2012). According to research literature, employers and organizations rarely recognize the emotional demands of a job or evaluate and compensate for them (Mastracci et al., 2012). Emotional labor can also have positive effects when it, for example, brings higher job satisfaction through good work-performance and personal efficacy (Mastracci et al., 2012).

It is also important to note that emotional labor does not affect all groups of society in the same capacity (Hochschild, 2012). For example, gender, social class and race are factors that have been recognized in research literature as factors creating inequality between employees (Hochschild, 2012; Kang, 2003; Louwanda, 2013). Racial minorities, women and people belonging to lower economic classes often must pay more attention to managing their emotions, as other people monitor their behavior more closely and are quicker to condemn them for failing to manage their emotions. These groups also often must continuously prove themselves to be qualified and adept professionals, whereas others are only judged if they do their work poorly and are proven explicitly to be unprofessional. (Louwanda, 2013).

Hochschild (2012) argues that we are increasingly more interested in authenticity and natural feelings. We value authenticity and a true self unmanaged by corporate interests all the more when we feel that corporate interests try to control us (Hochschild, 2012). Previous studies have shown that the problem or the reason for employees losing touch with their authentic emotions is not the fact that they are emotional or have feelings, but rather that they have to regulate or hide their true emotions to please others (Mastracci et al., 2012). Corporate restrictions, instructions and work-related feeling rules prevent and prohibit employees from displaying what is felt on the inside to be displayed on the outside (Louwanda, 2013).

4.3   Emotional labor and influencers

On the outside, the life of social media influencers can look amazing and give out the impression that their job is perfect: they get to combine their passions and creativity to a work that they get paid for. However, both public discussion and research literature surrounding influencers has begun to focus more and more on the downsides of their role – such as the stress of uncertain incomes, loss of self-expression and creativity, competition, follower and marketer demands as well as vulnerability to public criticism (Blum, 2019; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Majority of the existing research literature on emotional labor has focused on people working in established organizations, such as companies or corporations. Less emphasis has been placed on people working as entrepreneurs or to those, who have created a livelihood around themselves and their own persona. Immaterial labor in the online environment has been examined more in depth in the context of cognitive or intellectual labor (e.g. Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), but there are also studies that look into the emotional or affective labor performed by users on social media platforms (e.g. Coté & Pybus, 2007). Many of these studies have focused on the content created on online platforms by general users, often referred to as user-generated content. Social media users enjoy what they are doing when creating content online and are ready to devote a lot of their time to it for no pay (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). However, corporations might profit from it, for example, by collecting valuable marketing data about consumers or utilising user-generated content as a channel for advertising (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Furthermore, social media has created an attention economy where the algorithms steer the production and circulation of content, incorporating it to existing capitalist and sociocultural structures that the content creators become subordinates to (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

According to Lazzarato (2001, as cited in Coté & Pybus, 2007) who first introduced the term immaterial labor in 1996, the social relationship and cooperation with consumers materializes itself through the process of communication. Communication gives a form to the needs and tastes of the consumers, and the existence of these products and services then produces more needs and refine the tastes of the consumers (Lazzarato 2001, as cited in Coté & Pybus, 2007). When applied to the context of social media influencers, this creates an ideological cultural environment for the consumers and a commercial relationship between the influencer and their audience, where the influencer creates further needs that audience members then want to consume.

In order to become effective endorsers, earlier research points out that influencers must *"have the courage to open up their lives and build trusting relationships with their followers"* (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 292). However, as parasocial relationships and interaction with audiences is not always entirely positive but can also be negative in nature (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tian &

Hoffner, 2010), it puts the influencer in a risky situation and may make them vulnerable to the manifestations of negative engagement (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Emotionally intense work has also been pointed out to be very energy-consuming work in itself (Mastracci, Guy & Newman, 2012). This further highlights the nature of working as an influencer falling into the domain of emotional labor, as *"continuous self-presentation on social media is a stressful job and interaction with followers takes a lot of time"* (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 292), but is also essential for becoming and remaining as a successful influencer. High emotional intensity in work can result in great rewards or results, but these might come at a cost (Mastracci et al., 2011).

In a study by van Driel and Dumitrica (2020), influencers mentioned no longer being willing to work long hours and without adequate compensation. Furthermore, influencers in the study stated that they felt like audiences and marketers do not always understand all the work that goes into producing a single post on Instagram: how behind that single post is hours of planning, both copy and photo editing as well as engaging with followers in the comments after the post is published. The influencers interviewed for the study also mentioned the algorithms that Instagram and other social media platforms use to determine what content to show to users, and how trying to continuously keep up with them to stay relevant induces fatigue, pressure and stress. (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Some influencers have described that social media platforms like Instagram have changed from what was originally a creative platform with artistic freedom to a more commercialized platform revolving around advertisements and sponsored content (Blum, 2019). In academic studies, influencers have also expressed a loss of self-expression and creativity as a result of the professionalization of social media content (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Instead of previous rewards that derived from self-expression, their value was now *"externalized and derived from revenue generation"* (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p. 15). For example, influencers who produced content about their travels reported that what had previously been enjoyable to them had now become a stressful experience, because they were focusing and devoting more time to publishing content than on enjoying their holiday (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Those getting their livelihood from their work as influencers can also feel that their followers are their bosses and that they must cater to their needs and demands (Blum, 2019). Followers want influencers to be authentic and can criticize them for appearing too calculative or not exposing enough about their personal lives.

When influencers use their personality, interests and passions to endorse brands, they are allowing those brands to profit from their emotional labor (Bridgen, 2014) and are compensated for that affective work by the brands. Mardon, Molesworth and Grigore (2018) suggest that the work of influencers is a form of tribal entrepreneurship. Compared to conventional entrepreneurship, tribal entrepreneurship changes the power dynamics between consumers and brands when the community members take part in co-production and dictating

practices (Goulding, Shankar & Canniford, 2013). It involves commercializing and managing emotional bonds that exist between the different community members: the influencer and their audience (Mardon et al., 2018). Acknowledging that consumers want to belong to groups revolving around products and services is not a new phenomenon and has not only been studied in the context of tribal entrepreneurship, but also through terms such as brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008) and consumer tribes (Canniford, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013).

Influencers are required to engage in emotional labor to manage their follower's emotional responses to commercial endorsements and sponsored content (Mardon et al., 2018). Failing to balance the relationship between commercial interests and authenticity can be damaging to influencers' future and career, as they can be perceived to have betrayed their community. Influencers do not work in organizations with established feeling rules that they would need to follow (Mardon et al., 2018). Instead, the feeling rules that command their moral and emotional responses are created by and within their tribe, which is the community that they have developed around themselves. Therefore, influencers must manage both their own feelings and the way they display them, as well as the feelings of their followers (Mardon et al., 2018). Surprisingly, the audience members also engage in emotional labor when they show compassion towards the influencer, for example, by defending them from other people's condemning emotions or critique towards the influencer (Mardon et al., 2018).

The power of influencers comes from the fact that their content is based on their personal lives, which makes them relatable (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Therefore, they have to carefully manage their online persona and selectively share personal and intimate parts of their lives (Duffy & Hund, 2015). They can also use their personal experiences to endorse products and services by using emotional stories. These emotional bonds produce exchange value as influencers are able to endorse products or services to their audience and gain profits for themself and for the brands that they are endorsing (Mardon et al., 2018). Thus, emotional labor plays a significant role in maintaining the value of the influencer marketing industry.

This can create a paradox where their *"authenticity becomes carefully choreographed"* (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p. 4). When influencers repeatedly negotiate their relationship with their followers and balance between their demands and the demands of commercial interest, they professionalize their content production and internalize the market logic. Managing their audience and maintaining their strategic authenticity is crucial to influencers, as their large and engaged following is what makes them appealing to brands and marketers. (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Maintaining this balance requires continuous work from the influencer, which often is mostly invisible to the audience and the marketers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020), as emotional labor often is. This work is usually considered as an investment by the influencer to their future success, but this investment might not be worthwhile or profitable to everyone in the long run (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

5   METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will outline the research methodology used in this study. As the study consisted of two parts, the methods will be discussed separately both from the point of view of the preliminary study and the main study. In the preliminary study, comments in which social media influencers are discussed in a negative manner posted on the social media platform Jodel were collected and examined. In the main study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Finnish social media influencers, in which critical incident technique was applied to. Furthermore, the research philosophies guiding this study will be discussed in this chapter, as well as the ethical aspects related to data collection.

5.1   Preliminary study

To gain insight on the audience's perspective, a preliminary study was conducted examining discussions posted on the anonymous social media platform Jodel. The preliminary study was executed to gain understanding of the manifestations of negative engagement and comments that influencers face in an anonymous, digital environment. Furthermore, it was carried out to help determine and specify the focus of the main study.

5.1.1 Jodel

Jodel is a mobile communication application that was developed in Germany and published in October 2014 for Android and iOS devices. The application gives users the ability to send messages ('jodels') anonymously to other users whose physical location is close to theirs, e.g. who are located in the same city as they are. Users can then rate these messages posted on the application either negatively or positively, thus giving the individual jodels votes or points. If the score of a jodel is too low, it will be automatically hidden.

Jodel was originally developed and marketed towards university students and used slogans such as *"The Buzz on Your Campus"* and *"Everything students at your Uni are talking about right now"* (Ihalainen, 2019). Nowadays the scope of the application has widened to include all young adults. Jodel does not require registration or charge fees from its users, as the app is financed by advertisements that are shown to the users (Jodel, 2018; Jodel, 2019).

The company behind the application, The Jodel Venture GmbH, has stated that with the app they want to promote and protect positivity, friendliness, helpfulness, supportiveness, diversity, originality, creativity, respect and having fun (Jodel, 2017). On their website, the company specifies that their values

prohibit the following behavior in the application: *"disclosure of personal information, harassment and discrimination, spam & spoilers, unnecessary behavior, hashtag abuse, intrusive sexual and bad behavior, illegal behavior, sexual content, pictures of other people, violent content"* (Jodel, n.d.).

During its existence, the application has faced both positive feedback and negative criticism. Jodel's anonymous nature has raised discussion about whether giving a platform for people to talk about anything without having to identify themselves is something to encourage or even allow. In the most extreme cases, the application has been linked to situations where the life and well-being of others has been threatened, e.g. with fake bomb threats (Kemppi, 2018; Osborne, 2015; Stromme, 2015). There are also cases where business secrets and other sensitive information regarding companies has been discussed on Jodel (STT, 2018). However, most of the criticism directed towards Jodel has revolved around how the application offers a platform for online bullying, racism, sexism and how its vulgar discussions make it the 'toilet wall of the internet' (Määttänen, 2018; Rimpiläinen, 2017; Shapira, 2020). Jodel's values and rules prohibit harassment and bad behavior and thanks to moderation, it could be assumed that cases where malicious content has been shared about private persons are dealt more swiftly and removed.

The issue becomes even more complex when negative discussions on the online platform concern celebrities or other public figures like social media influencers, who have willingly shared their lives with the world. Discussions about them on Jodel generate more interest and attract more users to share their thoughts. Moreover, talking about public figures and their personal lives that have, for example, already been reported in the tabloids is more permissible than the personal life of private persons. This places influencers in a difficult and unpleasant situation, where their lives and decisions are criticized even ruthlessly by anonymous users on a platform that anyone can access.

Influencers and other celebrities have been sharing their experiences on encountering negative and ill-natured comments about themselves on Jodel on their blogs, social media channels and interviews. Influencers have described that reading about people commenting about their lives, close ones, decisions, appearances and even completely made-up rumours on Jodel anonymously has hurt their feelings, made them question being an influencer and sharing their lives, made them sad, tired and angry, caused them to cry and made them discuss these feelings with other people to relieve anxiety (Kivi, 2019; Lintunen, 2018; Määttä, 2018; Pastak, 2019; Rotonen, 2020; Salmela, 2018).

On 10th of November 2020, Jodel released a statement saying that the company has closed several extremely popular channels known and referred to as 'gossip channels' (Körkkö & Räsänen, 2020). The closed down channels included Finnish channels such as @blogijuorut (blog gossip), @vlogijuorut (vlog gossip) and @julkkisjuorut (celeb gossip) that each had followings consisting of thousands or even tens of thousands of users. According to Jodel, the company closed down all channels that included the word 'gossip' in their name in any

language. The discussions on these previously mentioned channels had included characteristics of cyber bullying, harassment and judging people's bodies and appearances. (Körkkö & Räsänen, 2020).

In their announcement, Jodel described that the decision to ban these channels was made *"following a long consultation with users, influencers, researchers and journalists"* (Jodel, 2020). They also revealed having received multiple requests for rectification from celebrities, public figures and journalists. The company states that in the future, they will continue to allow 'healthy' discussions about celebrities and public figures, but will not allow comments or discussions that concern other people's private lives in an unkind, degrading or untruthful way. (Körkkö & Räsänen, 2020). However, Jodel also acknowledged that with all the negative consequences and effects of these channels, discussions regarding influencers and celebrities also have benefits such as *"uncovering scammy influencers, breaking down the barrier for people to confess personal experiences, and holding influencers accountable for their words and actions"* (Jodel, 2020). According to the company's statement, toxic gossip is a societal phenomenon that reaches far wider than just Jodel and exposing influencers' lives and intimate secrets can cause people to take advantage of their weaknesses for their own entertainment (Jodel, 2020). Following Jodel's announcement, many social media influencers shared their positive thoughts and relief regarding the company's decision. However, soon after the decision to ban these channels was announced and the 'gossip' channels removed from the platform, similar new channels with less evident names turned up, where negative comments started to emerge again. Thus, negative discussions about influencers were still available and discoverable.

5.1.2 Preliminary study data collection

The data for the preliminary study was collected from four different discussion channels: @blogijutut (blog stuff), @blogit (blogs), @julkkisjutut (celebrity stuff) and @vlogijutut (vlog stuff). These particular channels were chosen due to their identified nature as active places of discussion on themes and issues regarding influencers and celebrities as well as publicly addressed criticism towards these channels from influencers.

The data was collected during a period of one week, starting from Monday 30th of November 2020 and ending on Sunday 6th of December 2020. Due to the nature of Jodel as a location-based social media platform where users only see the posts that have been published near their physical location, the posts collected were from the areas the researchers were staying at during the time of data collection. These locations were the Helsinki metropolitan area and Jyväskylä in Central Finland.

The discussions on the platform are separated into conversation threads, where one user publishes an opening post and other users publish their comments

under it. Every published opening post visible during the time of data collection on any of the four channels was included. The data was captured by taking screenshots of the opening posts. Comments that had been written as a reply to the opening posts in the thread were also included and captured as screenshots. All the screenshots were then uploaded to a folder on a cloud service platform that was only accessible by the researchers. The screenshots were divided into separate folders based on the channel they were collected from as well as the date they were collected on. In total, the data included screenshots of 82 opening posts.

5.1.3   Preliminary study data analysis

The analysis method used for the preliminary study was qualitative content analysis executed in a data-driven approach. Traditionally, inductive reasoning and data-driven content analysis are linked together. Inductive reasoning refers to the process where researchers focus on specific observations to generalisations (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). Since the observations should be done without presuppositions or definitions, it is valuable to limit the amount of data (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). Although the idea of inductive reasoning is appealing, its limitations are acknowledged. The main challenge in inductive reasoning is that pure inductive reasoning is in practice impossible. Novel theories rarely stem purely from observations as *"definitions, research frame and methods utilized are set by the researcher thus having an effect on the results"* (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, p. 149). Researchers' previous experiences always have an impact on the findings, therefore making it essential for researchers to address and acknowledge existing presuppositions (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). Due to the problematics that inductive reasoning poses, abductive reasoning was found to be more describing in regards to the preliminary study. Abductive reasoning is supported by theoretical frame or leading principle (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002), yet it shuns away from strict deductive thinking common in natural science.

In the first stage of analysis, all the collected screenshots from Jodel were read through, paying particular attention to two things: (1) if the opening post was negative in its tone and (2) if it evidently concerned social media influencers (as opposed to e.g. traditional celebrities). The review of the data was divided between the two researchers so that one of the researchers examined the screenshots collected from channels @blogijutut and @julkkisjutut, whereas the other researcher examined screenshots from channels @blogit and @vlogijutut. All the opening posts that did not meet these two criteria were discarded from further analysis. In the cases when either of the researchers were uncertain about whether to discard or include a certain opening post in the analysis, it was discussed about and determined together.

After eliminating the opening posts that did not fit the criteria, the remaining screenshots were then converted into written text by transcribing them. Both of the researchers agreed that instead of transcribing the screenshots directly into text word-for-word, the content and relevant characteristics of the opening posts were described instead. This information included the topic of the post, how negative its tone was and what type of comments (negative, positive or neutral) it had received from other users. As the individual influencers mentioned in the Jodel posts or their identities were not the interest of this study, their names or any other identifiable features were not included, but instead were removed from the data in this transcribing stage. All the transcribed data was collected into one shared document that was available to both of the researchers. In this document, the opening posts were divided into separate columns based on the discussion channel that they were collected from.

Next, two copies of the previously described document were printed. Both of the researchers read through all the transcripts and tentative codes were negotiated. In the first stage of coding, the researchers looked for the following five codes: paid collaborations, conflict between words and actions, appearances or manners of speaking, sharing misinformation and relationships. These codes were arrived at, as these themes had emerged from the data already during the data collection stage and again when conducting a preliminary review of the data.

Both of the researchers first examined all the data independently on their own and color-coded the data with highlighters. It was agreed that it was possible for a single opening post to belong to several different coding classes. If either of the researchers felt that despite the initial elimination of opening posts there were any posts that still did not meet the required criteria (e.g. were not actually negative in nature), they were striked-through and excluded from further analysis. Furthermore, if there was uncertainty about what codes would fit a certain opening post, these posts were marked with a question mark in the printed document.

In the next stage of analysis, the researchers compared how they had coded the data. Any discrepancies were discussed about and then through negotiation, the most appropriate and fitting codes were agreed upon. In addition, the opening posts that had been marked with question marks were discussed together to determine how they should be coded. After this the researchers agreed that there was a need for additional codes besides the five initial ones. As a result, the following three codes were added: content, behavior that goes against the norms and malevolence. Therefore, the previous analysis stage was repeated and the researchers first went through the data independently, identified the occurrence of these codes in the data and discussed coding decisions together to find a consensus.

Finally, the coded data was converted back from paper to a digital format into a document on a cloud service platform. In this format, all the separate opening

posts were divided into groups based on the codes attached to them. If an opening post had more than one code applied to it, it was included in all of those coding classes.

Table 2. Coding classes and number of opening posts.

Coding classes	Number of opening posts
Paid collaborations	22
Conflict between words and actions	10
Appearances or manners of speaking	11
Behavior that goes against the norms	14
Sharing misinformation	15
Relationships	15
Malevolence	14
Content	7

5.2 Main study

The main study was conducted following the preliminary study. In this part of the study, social media influencers were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured thematic interviews in which the critical incident technique was applied to. Semi-structured thematic interviews are introduced more in-depth in Chapter 5.2.1 and the critical incident technique in Chapter 5.2.2.

This combination of methods was chosen because on their own the methods were considered inadequate and limited to meet the purpose of the main study, which was to reach a greater understanding of the social media influencers' experiences regarding parasocial relationships, negative engagement and challenges related to managing emotional strain in their work.

5.2.1 Semi-structured thematic interviews

Semi-structured interviews are an established and common method used for qualitative research. When conducting such interviews, the researcher asks the interviewees a set of questions that are exactly or nearly the same and presents them to each interviewee in the same order (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006b), adding to the fact that semi-structured interviews fit when information regarding specific topics is being aimed for.

In thematic interviews, certain themes specific for the phenomenon researched are chosen. Based on theoretical framework and previous research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), themes are decided before conducting the interviews, however the method allows interviewers to ask specifying questions in the light of the answers. Compared to semi-structured interviews, the order of themes as well as how extensively each theme is discussed may vary (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006c) although some definitions consider thematic interviews and semi-structured interviews as the same method (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), adding that the requirement for consistency within interviews varies depending on the research. For the most part, thematic interviews and semi-structured interviews are discussed interchangeably in academic literature.

Although thematic interviews are quite flexible, they cannot be conducted without planning and preparation. Not only do the thematic interviews require researchers to look into each theme but they also require careful planning in choosing interviewees most fit to the theme (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006c). Yet when conducting thematic interviews, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee should be close to a natural discussion (Alasuutari, 2012), where the interviewer makes also sure to leave room for free discussion the interviewee (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006a).

As discussed above, these methods have their own advantages and disadvantages. Semi-structured interviews allow some modifications while helping the interviewer to stay focused on key themes and topics. Yet its structure may limit the interviewee to express unexpected, yet valuable information towards the research. Thematic interviews are a step towards more open discussion, but its challenges linger in mutual understanding. When utilizing thematic interviewing, it is expected that both the interviewer and the interviewee understand the themes in a similar manner (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

In order to minimize the disadvantages of both methods, critical incident technique was utilized as a tool to build the interview frame. The technique requires interviewee to recall a significant incident or situation the interviewee has experienced. As interviewees have space for describing the situation in their own words, it fits to the nature of thematic analysis where interpretations and sensemaking are at the core of the methodology of thematic interviews

(Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006b; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Three themes – interaction with followers and audiences, paid collaborations and emotional strain and work-related stress – were discussed by utilizing the critical incident technique. Compared to traditional thematic interviews, critical incident technique forces the interviewee to focus on real and impactful experiences they have had. Furthermore, the method acts as a guideline for the researcher, since it is easy to note when the discussion shifts away from the incident, thus forming a malleable interview frame. A more comprehensive explanation of critical incident technique is introduced in the next section.

5.2.2   Critical incident technique

Critical incidents are understood as moments or interactions that the interviewees remember as particularly negative or positive when asked about them (Flanagan, 1954). The interviewees then recall them and are asked to describe them. When exploring critical incidents, the data collection can be done in a multitude of ways, including personal interviews, focus group interviews or diaries (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). By using personal interviews, the researcher is able to ask further questions in order to understand the nature of the critical incidents reported (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). Traditionally, a critical incident has been defined as *"any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act"* (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327).

As a method, the critical incident technique does not have fixed rules or strict procedures for collecting data, but instead it is described as *"a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand"* (Flanagan, 1954, p. 335). Fundamentally, it is a way of making observations and gathering information about people's behavior in certain, clearly defined situations. Since the interviewees are to define what is pertinent to the incident (Gremler, 2004), the researcher does not limit the interviewee during the interview on what is critical. Furthermore, critical incident technique allows the *"data to emerge according to the values of the respondent"* (Chell & Pittaway, 1998, p. 26), generating comprehensive data (Gremler, 2004). All things considered, critical incident technique *"facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes or issues) identified by the respondent"*, allowing researchers to see how these occurrences are handled and how respondents address perceived consequences (Chell & Pittaway, 1998, p. 25) of occurrences described by them.

Due to its flexible nature, critical incident technique has been used in research in various fields and ways. The method has been utilized e.g. in corporate communication (Dasgupta, Suar & Singh, 2014), public relations (Zwijze-Koning, De Jong & Van Vuuren, 2015) and marketing studies (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012), although some differences exist in how critical incidents were

evaluated and processed. In these examples, categories or codes of critical incidents were either done by planning the codes before looking into data (Zwijze-Koning et al., 2015) or by a posteriori approach (Bianchi & Drennan, 2012; Dasgupta et al., 2014). The universality of the method can be seen in the variety of research it is used, such as education (Schwartz & Holloway, 2014; Voss, 2009), banking (Trönnberg & Hemlin, 2014) and health care (Clark, Lewis, Bradshaw & Bradbury-Jones, 2018; Mallak, Lyth, Olson, Ulshafer & Sardone, 2003). In practice, most studies utilizing critical incident technique have executed it through interviews, which is a common way to apply the technique (Gremler, 2004).

A prime example of this is a recent study regarding the reasons behind positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth, where an individual had posted something negative or positive about an organization after an interaction with them (Whiting, Williams & Hair, 2019). Respondents were chosen by criterion-based convenience sampling among university students. According to the study, the respondents were asked the following regarding negative experiences: *"Think of a recent time when you, as a customer, had a BAD (dissatisfying) experience with an organization and then POSTED a negative comment or picture about the organization on social media. Describe the situation and exactly what happened"* (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 142). After this, additional questions were asked depending on the critical incident described.

Although applicable in various ways, the flexibility of critical incident technique may also create challenges for the research and the researchers. Compared to positive incidents, not only may negative incidents be more challenging to recall, but the respondent may also belittle the impact of negative incidents if the critical incident took place a long time ago (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). Unless researchers pay attention to this and encourage the participant to repeat the memory, the participant may not be able to describe negative incidents as detailed as required. The risk can be minimized by giving participants enough time to answer (Edvardson & Roos, 2001). Additionally, supportive questions as well as a comfortable setting may help participants to recall old memories. Furthermore, researchers have to *"have a sound understanding of the theoretical issues involved"* in order to be able to modify the questionnaire (Chell & Pittaway, 1998, p. 25) since critical incident technique does not provide any structured framework for conducting interviews.

What is valuable to note is that the critical incident technique as a method puts a strong emphasis on trust between the researcher and the respondent. The method *"relies on events being remembered by respondents and requires the accurate and truthful reporting of them"* (Gremler, 2004, p. 66). Not only does the respondent have to report truthfully, but they should also be willing to share an understandable critical incident to the researcher (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). Thus, the respondent's reluctant behavior towards sharing the full story may portray an incoherent incident, which could lead to incorrect interpretations during the analysis phase. All things considered, since the analysis is based on the responses, incorrect or incomplete information has an effect on the results.

As time and human memory play an important role in the use of critical incident technique, Flanagan (1954) has argued that if respondents know beforehand that they will be asked about their most memorable, significant and unusual experiences, they can plan their response in advance. Edvardsson & Roos (2001, p. 254) describe this as *"a trade-off between remembering real incidents which are kept in mind because of their exclusiveness, and remembering many incidents of which possibly not all are really important to the respondent and consequently for the study"*. Due to the nature of this method, researchers should be careful of not letting the respondents know the agenda of the interview in great detail in advance.

Variants of the traditional critical incident technique (CIT) have been developed and applied to studies throughout the years in a variety of fields. These variants include, for example, the sequential incident technique (SIT), switching path analysis technique (SPAT) and criticality critical incident technique (CCIT) (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). In this study, the technique used in the interviews is a mix of CCIT and SPAT. These variants of the technique were chosen due to the fact that both are suitable specifically for observing and understanding negative critical incidents, as opposed to positive ones. Furthermore, both of these variants focus on people's behavior – whether intended or actual. A decision to combine characteristics from the two variants was made based on the fact that the study was interested in capturing and understanding both the relationships between the influencers and their audiences (CCIT), as well as the switching paths or switching behavior that influencers engaged in when changing their behavior or attitudes as a result of these critical incidents (SPAT) (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001).

Compared to the other critical incident technique variants, SPAT allows to capture and understand the dynamism behind the consequences of incidents that interviewees determine to have been critical for them (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). Whether they have changed their behavior as a result of one critical incident or multiple similar events or if their switching behavior has been influenced by a combination of factors, their behavior likely would not have changed if these critical events had not been judged as important enough by the interviewees. Therefore, as a technique, SPAT allows for the consideration of triggers, processes and consequences. (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). However, it should be noted that *"all variants of CIT [...] are based on the customer's ability to remember and make judgements based on remembered, perceived incidents"* (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001, p. 252).

5.2.3   Recruiting social media influencers for interviews

To help reach and find potential interviewees, a Finnish influencer marketing company PING Helsinki was contacted. The company describes itself as an *"independent and open to all operator that has aggregated together the entire field of*

influencer marketing" (PING Helsinki, n.d.). One influencer whose contact information was received from PING Helsinki agreed to be interviewed.

Two of the interviewees recruited for the study were acquaintances of one or both of the researchers and familiar with them prior to the study. Their interest in participating in the study was inquired by sending them direct messages on social media.

The other influencers interviewed for the main study were found by exploring Instagram and identifying Finnish influencers. The search began by going through the Instagram profile of PING Helsinki and finding influencers that were tagged in their posts and pictures. The Instagram accounts of these influencers were then examined to determine if they had a substantial following and published content confirming they had done paid collaborations with brands on any of the social media platforms they had a presence on. These influencers were then contacted either by email or by sending them a private message on Instagram. Furthermore, other influencers who met the previously mentioned criteria and were tagged in the posts or had left comments on the posts of these previously identified influencers were also contacted. Five of the interviewees for this study were found and recruited using this method.

During this process, two influencers expressed that they wished to see the interview questions in advance before the interview. They were then explained how this was not possible due to the research method used in the study and how it could negatively affect the comparability and validity of the data. This resulted in one of these influencers declining and the other agreeing to be interviewed.

Eight influencers were successfully recruited for the interviews. In total, 46 influencers were contacted, including the ones that agreed to be interviewed. Due to the sample size and the way in which the interviewees were recruited from the influencers that were easy to reach, the sample cannot be applied to represent the whole population or used to draw generalizations. Therefore, the nature of the sample gathered for this study is a convenience sample.

The average age of the interviewees was 28 years, ranging from 20 years to 40 years. They had been working as social media influencers on average for 4,5 years, durations ranging from 1 year to 9 years. All the interviewees published content on Instagram. Other platforms or channels used by them included YouTube, TikTok, podcasts and blogs. All the interviewees published content about their lives, values and personalities. For all of them, their personal lifestyles were at the core of their content. The size of the interviewees' combined followings across all platforms that they published content on ranged from approximately 7000 to approximately 700 000, averaging at 195 000 followers.

5.2.4 Data collection

In the main study, eight (n = 8) semi-structured interviews were conducted. All the interviews took place in February 2021 and were conducted as online video interviews through the video conferencing software Zoom. Both researchers took part in all of the interviews. The average duration of the interviews was 55 minutes. The interviewees were instructed not to prepare for the interview beforehand. All of the interviews were conducted in Finnish. Background questions were asked to gain information to establish a brief profile of each influencer to help guide the interviews.

The interviews were structured based on three themes: (1) interaction and engagement with followers (2) paid collaborations and partnerships with brands or other organizations and (3) emotions, emotional labor and work-related stress. Edvardsson (1992, p. 19) has suggested a simple model to use as a guide when interviewing about critical incidents: cause, course and result. The model was applied to this study by first asking the participants to recall and describe one incident or situation. Then questions were asked about how the situation was prompted, how it unfolded and evolved. This was followed by asking what kind of feelings or thoughts the situation evoked. Before asking the interviewees to recall another critical incident related to another theme, the interviewees were asked how this situation and their experiences had affected or changed their behavior or perceptions as well as some theme-based questions not related to the critical incident directly. For the complete interview frame, see Appendix 1.
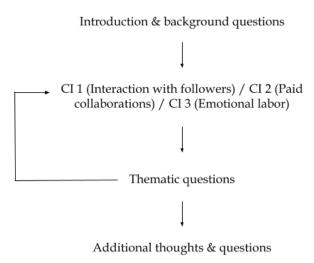

Figure 1. Stages of conducting semi-structured interviews.

The nature of the critical incidents described by the interviewees affected which of the more specific questions listed in the interview frame were asked. In cases

where the initial description of the critical incident already contained an answer to some of the questions, these questions were omitted. In addition, questions were disregarded if they were determined irrelevant to the critical incident at hand.

5.2.5   Data analysis

The nature of the main study data analysis was phenomenographic, as it sought to investigate the influencers' experiences of the phenomenon under study. Phenomenographic analysis has been described as a way of identifying and addressing questions related particularly to understanding and raising newfound awareness of the phenomenon in the interviewees (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). The analysis was carried out as a theory-guided, qualitative content analysis. Typology was used to determine how the incidents that were reported by the interviewees, and how the causes and impacts of those incidents could be grouped based on common features (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008).

First, the interview audio recordings were transcribed into a text format. Both of the researchers agreed on the appropriate transcription accuracy, which was done on the level of concepts, as opposed to word choices or expressions. The decision to omit detailed elements such as repetitions, false starts or hesitations was done as the study was not interested in analyzing conversation or language (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006c). The eight interviews were divided equally between the two researchers, meaning that both transcribed four interviews. The transcript files were anonymized and then uploaded to a password protected cloud service platform folder that was only accessible to the researchers.

Next, the researchers discussed the interviews and their observations about them together. As both researchers had attended all eight interviews, they were familiar with also those interviews they had not transcribed by themselves. Together the researchers read through the interview data. Descriptions of negative engagement in the relationships between followers and influencers were coded by highlighting, as well as commenting these parts of the interviewees answers. The objective was to identify recurring themes, mentions and factors describing the ways in which negative engagement manifests itself in and affects influencers in these relationships. Then, the transcribed interviews were systematically looked through and coded, looking for mentions of the causes of critical incidents, the feelings those critical incident experiences had evoked in the interviewees and the impacts that these experiences had had.

After this initial analysis process, the researchers made an interesting observation that especially with regard to the emotional labor theme, the interviews revealed intriguing connections to the three attitudes toward work

described by Hochschild (2012), which were introduced in Chapter 4.2. Thus, the interview data was reviewed once more with a new focus on looking for features in which the interviewees described their attitudes and perceptions of their work, themselves as influencers in relation to their followers as well as their obligations to their audiences. The characteristics of their attitudes were described and then similarities and differences to Hochschild's (2012) three attitudes were looked for, specifically in the context of social media influencers.
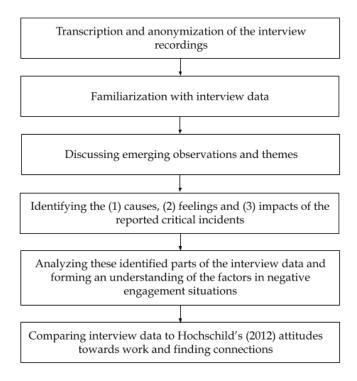
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Transcription and anonymization of the interview│
│                    recordings                     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        │
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│           Familiarization with interview data     │
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                        │
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│         Discussing emerging observations and themes│
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                        │
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│  Identifying the (1) causes, (2) feelings and (3) impacts of the│
│            reported critical incidents            │
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│  Analyzing these identified parts of the interview data and│
│    forming an understanding of the factors in negative│
│                engagement situations              │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Comparing interview data to Hochschild's (2012) attitudes│
│          towards work and finding connections     │
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Figure 2. Stages of main study analysis process.

5.3   Research philosophies

The philosophical research paradigms of this study are visualized in the research onion (Figure 3, p. 44). This research framework guides the scientific process and describes how assumptions are made and framed in the context of this study. The research onion is a visual model developed by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), created specifically for business research but used extensively also in other fields, such as social sciences (Melnikovas, 2018). It is a way to present philosophical questions related to research ethics and showcase the execution process. However, it is important to note that there are multiple other ways to model similar research philosophies as the ones used in this study.
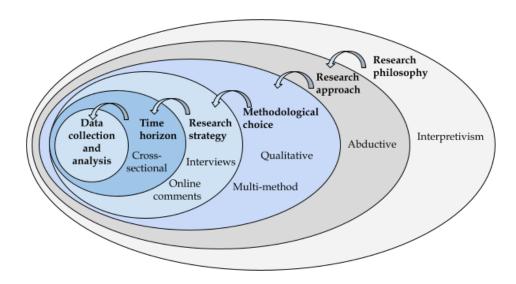
Figure 3. Philosophical foundation of the study based on Saunders' research onion (Saunders et al., 2019).

The outer layers of the research onion consist of research philosophy and research approach. All research is based on certain ontological and epistemological assumptions that guide how the researcher understands the world and what they consider can be known or considered as facts (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Although research philosophies and chosen approaches may not be apparent when executing the inner layers of the research onion, they guide the way of thinking throughout the research process, therefore having an impact on the results and conclusions of the research.

In this study, the research philosophy is grounded in interpretivism, which has been constructed to challenge positivism. Humans as meaning-makers are at the core of interpretivist philosophy, which notes that cultural backgrounds in a given situation and time produce different meanings (Saunders et al., 2019). When applied to this study, it should be noted that the influencers participating in the interviews create meanings through the lenses of their own ethnical and national identities. For instance, if this study had been conducted in another geographical location such as Asia or North America, it might have had an effect on how the interviewees produce meanings.

To quote Saunders et al. (2019, p. 149), "*the purpose of interpretivist research is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts*". Interpretivism consists of different strands that are phenomenology and hermeneutics. A simplified definition of following strands addresses phenomenology as a branch interested in lived experiences whereas hermeneutics are keen on studying cultural artefacts (Saunders, 2019, p. 149). Based on this concept, the preliminary study represents hermeneutics as social media posts were examined, whereas the main study mirrors the idea of phenomenological approach as the interviews described experiences perceived by influencers. However, when inspecting both hermeneutics and
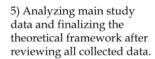
phenomenology more closely, it becomes evident that there are differences between them, yet at the same time hermeneutics and phenomenology overlap to some extent.

The basis of hermeneutics is in human sciences to an extent that the goal of it has been in setting human sciences apart from natural sciences (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). Originating all the way back to biblical studies and ancient cultures, making hermeneutics one of the most multi-faceted research philosophies. Expanding from its origins, which are texts and tangible subjects, verbal and non-verbal actions turned into an area to research (Barrett, Powley & Pierce, 2011). Since a certain lack of cohesiveness in practices has been mentioned as an issue related to hermeneutics (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002), creating a clear picture of hermeneutics remains a challenge.
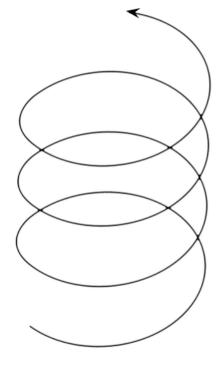
Edmund Husserl is considered as the father and founder of phenomenology. Phenomenology aims to answer the question *"how do we know what we know?"*, therefore making it an epistemological issue (Laverty, 2003, p. 32). Continuing on the idea of studying experiences, the idea of phenomenology is to research *"how things become things from within the horizons in which they are given life"* (Holt & Sandberg, 2011, p. 218), therefore the experience is defined according to the meanings individuals place (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002) in their conscious minds. The broader objective of phenomenology has been in aiming towards comprehending individuals without preconceptions (Holt & Sandberg, 2011), although in practice, this is likely to be inaccessible. At the core of phenomenological understanding is the idea that humans act with an intent and that humans are inherently social beings (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is understood as a part of hermeneutics (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002), where especially Heidegger's perception on phenomenology has had a substantial impact on hermeneutic phenomenology. The concept of pre-understanding suggests that interpretation goes beyond meanings (Barrett et al., 2011), thus *"pre-understanding is not something a person can step outside of or put aside, as it is understood as already being with us in the world"* (Laverty, 2003, p. 24), which refer, for instance, to incidents occurred in the past having an effect on how pre-understanding is formed.

Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2002) explain this from another perspective, stating that in hermeneutic phenomenology there are two levels of understanding. Besides pre-understanding which refers to how the object of interpretation is understood beforehand – that is *"what makes knowing possible"* (Barrett et al., 2011, p. 187) – there is also the movement of understanding in the form of a circle. Although having differences, both phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology aim for understanding and interpreting experiences (Laverty, 2003) and therefore all three philosophies accept their subjective and interpretive nature.

5) Analyzing main study data and finalizing the theoretical framework after reviewing all collected data.

6) Comparing preliminary and main study results both to each other and previous research, forming conclusions and implications.

3) Deciding to expand the theoretical framework based on observations made after preliminary study data collection. Adding existing research literature on emotional labor and human brands to the theoretical framework.

4) Forming the interview frame for the main study based on theoretical framework and tentative results from the preliminary study. Conducting interviews.

1) Familiarizing with existing research literature on influencers, parasocial relationships and negative engagement.

2) Collecting data (Jodel comments) for the preliminary study.

Figure 4. Applying the hermeneutic helix to the study.

The hermeneutic research process of this study is visualized above in Figure 4 in the form of a hermeneutic helix. The hermeneutic helix is a variation of the more commonly used hermeneutic circle (Gummesson, 2005). Both the hermeneutic circle and the hermeneutic helix illustrate the processes and philosophies behind the larger hermeneutic understanding as an ongoing, continuous process (Gummesson, 2005). As shown in the helix above, the researchers have moved back and forth between different stages of the research process instead of, for example, finishing the theoretical framework completely and then moving permanently on to another section. This means that previous sections have been revisited if there has been a reason to add new, relevant discussion to support interpretations made at later stages.

Before continuing further on the research approach in this study, the positioning of researchers should be briefly discussed. Since interpretivism leans to subjectivism, the researchers should acknowledge how their subjective interpretations, which cannot be separated from their values, define the research process (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, besides addressing that cultural and national identity not only has an effect on the participants, but also on the researchers, it should be disclosed that researchers were aware of the interviewed influencers and their presence on social media beforehand. Moreover, two of the participants were known by the researchers via personal relationships prior to the study, hence there might have been a subconscious frame when interpreting the responses of those influencers. However, by being

aware of such possibility the researchers were aiming to minimize such interpretations.

Traditionally, the inductive approach has been linked to interpretivism since it is typical to begin the research process from collecting data towards generating new theory (Saunders et al., 2019). As noted before, in inductive reasoning the idea is to move from detailed observations towards generalizations (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998; Saunders et al., 2019; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). However, since it is challenging to be completely inductive in practice (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002), abductive reasoning can be seen as a more reasonable and fruitful approach. Considering that in abductive reasoning data is often used to "*identify themes and patterns, [also to] locate these in a conceptual framework*" while "*incorporating existing theory where appropriate*" (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 153), an abductive research approach mirrors the utilization of the theoretical framework in this study. Moreover, the flexible nature of abductive reasoning allows for it to be utilized in many research philosophies (Saunders et al., 2019).

The inner layers of the research onion include the methodological choice, research strategy and time horizon. The methodological choice of this study was qualitative multi-method, as two different strategies and sets of data were utilized. In the preliminary study, the chosen research strategy was online comments and in the main study it was interviews, in which the critical incident technique was applied to.

The time horizon of this study was cross-sectional. This approach means that the phenomenon of interest was examined at a given, specific point in time – as opposed to longitudinal studies in which subjects are observed over an extended period of time (Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan & Moorman, 2008). Cross-sectional studies allow for comparisons to be made between different groups of study subjects, whereas longitudinal studies allows the comparison of same subjects at different stages, or before and after a change in their behavior (Rindfleisch et al., 2008).

As qualitative research is subjective by nature, the interpretations made in this study are made based on the researchers' subjective understanding. Moreover, there is an idea described as 'double hermeneutic' interpretation (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010) present in both the analysis of the preliminary study data, as well as the main study data. In the preliminary study, the researchers have attempted to interpret the thoughts and reasoning behind the interpretations of the audience members writing comments on Jodel. Similarly, in the main study, the interviewees have described their interpretations of the world and their experiences, and in turn the researchers have attempted to interpret them.

This study has attempted to achieve triangulation by combining multiple sets of data, having two researchers studying the same phenomenon in the same study and having several different theories that are approached in the theoretical framework and applied throughout the study (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). In addition to the benefits of a multi-method approach – such as how it helps in

creating a richer understanding of the studied phenomenon and thus establishing a less unilateral interpretation (Davis, Golicic & Boerstler, 2011) –, it also poses its own challenges. These challenges include, for example, the possibility that in a situation where data triangulation is achieved but the results are very different from each other, it can be challenging to achieve a coherent picture of the phenomenon under study (Graham, 1999). Furthemore, the multi-method approach presents a potential additional challenge in terms of replicability and reproducibility, as researchers are required to manage multiple research methods (Graham, 1999).

5.4   Data protection

The fundamental nature of Jodel as an anonymous platform where no personal information about the users is shared, there were no issues regarding possible need for protecting the identity of individual Jodel users. However, the names of the influencers mentioned in the opening posts and in the comments, was personal data. To ensure the ethicality of the research, the names of any social media influencers mentioned in the Jodel comments were removed at the transcription stage, when the collected screenshots were transcribed to text format.

The original preliminary study data that consisted of the screenshots taken from Jodel was no longer stored once the discussions had been transcribed into descriptive text format. After this stage, all the screenshots were deleted. This anonymization measure was taken to protect influencers from being identified and to ensure that any disrespectful, insulting or hurtful language towards them would not be repeated in the study that could result in further emotional strain. In this study, it was irrelevant which individual influencer was mentioned in the comments and instead significance was on the fact that the discussions concerned influencers in general. To clarify even further, in the preliminary study the individual influencers mentioned in the discussions were not the study interest, but rather the content posted on Jodel and furthermore, the users writing those comments. Moreover, information about the influencers who were the targets of discussion in the collected Jodel comments were not linked or incorporated with any external data from any other sources.

The interviews conducted in the main study were recorded as audio files on a dictation machine, as well as using the integrated recording feature in Zoom. The recordings on the dictaphone were not transferred to another device when transcribing them and therefore were not stored on any cloud service platform at any stage. Similarly, the Zoom recordings were only stored on computers that did not automatically move files to a cloud service. This ensured that the interview recordings were not accessible through any network connection at any stage. All the interviewees were informed about the fact that the interviews

would be recorded when they were first contacted and their consent was confirmed again in the beginning of each interview.

After the interviews were transcribed into text format, they were uploaded to a folder on a cloud service platform that was only accessible by the password protected accounts of the researchers. The transcribed interviews were anonymized and any personal information the interviewees had told during the interviews that could be used to easily identify them was replaced with a more general description.

6   RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of data analysis will be introduced. The chapter will begin by presenting the results of the preliminary study on Jodel comments and what triggers of negative engagement were found. Following that, the results of the main study will be presented and the causes of negative engagement and their impacts found in the interviews with influencers will be introduced.

The research questions introduced in the beginning of the study were:

RQ1: What triggers negative engagement towards social media influencers in anonymous social media discussions?

RQ2: What is the significance of negative engagement on the relationships between social media influencers and their followers?

RQ3: How do social media influencers manage emotional labor when experiencing negative engagement?

6.1   Negative engagement triggers in anonymous social media discussions

The objective of the preliminary study was to identify reasons or triggers for negative engagement behavior towards social media influencers in anonymous social media discussions. By analyzing the data, seven different distinguishable categories of triggers were found:

1. Dissemination of misinformation or disinformation
2. Quality of content
3. Conflict between words and actions
4. Violation of social norms
5. Relationships
6. Paid collaborations
7. Physical appearance and mannerisms

Selected examples of comments from all the categories can be found in Table 3 (p. 52).

Dissemination of misinformation or disinformation included posts in which the influencer was accused of sharing information that was considered as questionable or misleading. In addition, the category included cases where the influencer was accused of encouraging followers to 'critical thinking' when undermining official government recommendations or guidelines. This notion and the prevalence of discussions belonging to this trigger category is most likely at least partly a result of the fact that the data was gathered during the coronavirus pandemic. This might mean that audiences have observed the

behavior and statements of influencers even more closely than usual. Misinformation and disinformation were kept as two separate concepts in this category due to the fact that it was not considered possible to know the underlying motives the influencers had for sharing misleading information, to determine whether it was deliberate or unintentional.

Discussions in which the topics, practices or other ways in which the influencer produced their content were criticized, were placed under the quality of content category. In these posts the commenters felt that the audio, video or written quality of the influencers' content was poor or did not meet their expectations. In some cases, the influencers were criticized for failures regarding partiality when discussing controversial topics.

Conflict between words and actions was the trigger for negative discussion in cases where followers accused the influencer of double standards. These discussions revolved around the commenters being annoyed because the influencer had said one thing or expressed a value they claimed to hold, but then acted completely opposite to that. The commenters weren't necessarily triggered by the behavior of the influencer in itself, but by the fact that they experienced a dissonance between what the influencer said and how they behaved.

Violation of social norms included discussions where the commenters disapproved of the behavior or decisions of the influencer and reproached them for it. This category contains both posts in which the behavior that triggered negative engagement was either unambiguously illegal or merely unapproved based on the culturally relative social standards.

The category of relationships consists of posts in which either the relationships between one or more influencers, or the private relationships of influencers were discussed, such as their romantic partners.

Paid collaborations included posts where any form of collaboration with a brand or an organization was mentioned in a negative manner. The next category, physical appearance and mannerisms addressed posts related to outer appearance or manners of an influencer.

In all of the categories described above, the negative engagement behavior stems from the perceived actions of the influencer. However, in addition to these categories, another phenomenon emerged from the data that was classified as malevolence. This included discussions that were unreasonably mean or hurtful towards the influencer for no apparent reason or which could be considered bullying. Unlike the other seven categories found, this trigger for negative engagement does not stem directly from the perceived behavior or actions of the influencer but rather from the audience members' emotions. These individuals mirror the patterns of actions typical to either revenge-seeking stakeholders or even trolls. Although it is not addressed as a trigger category, it should not be disregarded as a less significant trigger for negative engagement in anonymous social media discussions.

Table 3. Examples of preliminary study data from Jodel.

Category	Example of a comment
Dissemination of misinformation or disinformation	"Has [influencer A] taken any stance on [a vaccine]? I am annoyed by the fact that they shared information about it being harmful and now that [influencer B] and [authorities] have taken a stand noting that [misleading information has been shared about it], I think it would be important for them to apologize to their followers. It is crucial that only real facts regarding this vaccine are shared instead of scaring others off. I do not follow [influencer A] anymore, this was the last straw for me😅"
Conflict between words and actions	"I have been guffawing over influencer's paid collaborations. They often showcase clothes and explain about responsibility/ethicality etc. In my opinion these two things do not go hand in hand. Do they really keep all the clothes they receive?"
Relationships	"What is the situation between [influencer] and [influencer's boyfriend, also an influencer]? Both of them seem to have changed, wondering whether some mental health issues are acting up 😬"
Physical appearance and mannerisms	"That [influencer's] IG post [about body positivity] is ridiculous. Of course when they turn their body enough, the skin will fold a bit. There is no fat to be seen. This only reinforces that a woman should be really skinny."
Quality of content	"Observation: [two influencers] only boast about money in their content and still people are following them?? All their videos are like "we bought stuff with [hundreds of euros], check what happened". How is this entertaining"
Violation of social norms	"[Influencer] is not going to take a corona test, because it is difficult to get to the testing station. [Influencer] is planning to stay at home for two days, although this would not be enough in case the test result was positive"
Paid collaborations	"I had to stop following [influencer]. I can't stand those paid collaborations. I think paid collaborations are ok, but it is too much and I do not want to spend my time only following advertisements😔"

In many of the negative discussions included in the data, actions of compassion such as defending the influencer who was the target of the conversation were identified. This observation is in line with previous research on influencers and their follower communities in which audience members have been found to defend influencers from people's condemning emotions or critique (Mardon et al. 2018). The commenters defended the decisions of the influencers and called out other commenters whose intentions could be described as malicious. The topics of discussion where defending and other compassionate behavior could most often be found often dealt with mental health or physical appearances.

From within these seven categories, three encompassing themes were identified. These themes were labeled as (1) responsibility and ethical conduct, (2) private life and (3) content production.

Table 4. Themes of negative engagement triggers.

Theme	Relevant categories
Responsibility and ethical conduct	Dissemination of misinformation or disinformation Conflict between words and actions Violation of social norms
Private life	Relationships Appearance and mannerisms
Content production	Quality of content Paid collaborations

For the purpose of clarification and dividing categories into certain connective themes, a somewhat artificial grouping of categories was executed. It is, however, valuable to address that categories in themes such as private life and content production may be and often are inseparable. This is due to the fact that a significant part of an influencer's job is their personality, as well as sharing their daily life and experiences to followers. To clarify, topics such as dating could also be related to topics linked to quality of content.
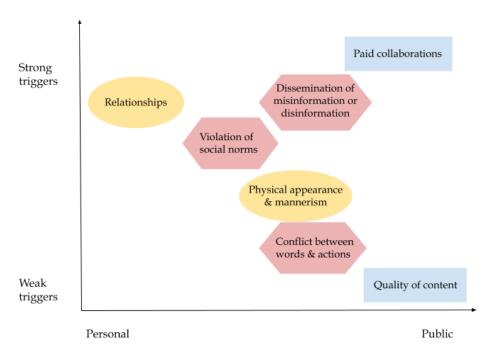

Figure 5. Categories according to the level of publicity (personal - public) and strength of the trigger (weak - strong). Categories in the same color and shape represent each theme (blue rectangle = content production, yellow ellipse = private life, red hexagon = responsibility and ethical conduct).

The categories were formed based solely on opening posts rather than addressing both the opening post as well as the commentary to it. The division to weak and strong triggers was done based on the incidence of the opening posts included in the data identified and coded in certain categories (see Table 2, p. 35). Categories addressed as strong triggers were often also categories that created more discussion, as well as interaction between individuals participating in it. For instance, opening posts in the category of dissemination of misinformation or disinformation sparked discussions among participants, whereas discussions regarding quality of content or physical appearance and mannerisms often received only few comments.

As introduced in Chapter 3.2, one of the categories of negative engagement includes irate stakeholders. These stakeholders have negative emotions but for some reason are not able to publicly express it, thus they lack an audience (Lievonen et al., 2018). However, depending on the nature of the social media platform, the platform could be seen as an enabler of a transformation process from an irate stakeholder towards a more public and active participant of negative engagement behavior.

6.2   Overview of the causes, feelings and impacts of negative experiences

In the interviews, the social media influencers were asked to recall and report incidents they had experienced that they considered negative or unpleasant. Situations were asked to be recalled from the perspective of three different themes, which were (1) interaction with followers and audiences (2) paid collaborations and (3) emotional labor and work-related stress. The reasons that interviewees described to have been the triggering causes for the incidents, the feelings these incidents evoked in them as well as the impact these incidents had on the behavior or decisions of the interviewees are presented by theme in Figure 6 (p. 56).

The causes behind the critical incidents reported by the interviewees were manifold and varying from each other, but there were also some similarities between them. In the incidents described by the influencers in the first theme (interaction with followers and audiences), the reason for the negative experience often stemmed from the audience's negative reaction to the influencers' behavior or content. Moreover, in many cases, the root of the incident was in unwelcomed queries or speculations about the interviewees private matters or personal relationships.

In the second theme (paid collaborations), ethical and value related issues were more prominent. Oftentimes the audience had questioned the ethicality of products or brands which they had collaborated with. Whether the influencers agreed or disagreed with the audience's views varied from case to case. In addition, the issue of brands attempting to subject influencers under strict

guidelines or put words in their mouths was perceived negatively by the interviewees.

Compared to the two previous themes, in the third theme (emotional labor and work-related stress) the incidents were more often caused by reasons and thoughts that were rooted in factors arising from the interviewees themselves, rather than external factors. These reasons were related to, for example, self-inflicted pressure to continuously publish new content, trying to find a balance between publicity and privacy in the sense of how private things to publish or concerns about income and livelihood.

When looking at the feelings the interviewees reported experiencing as a result of the critical incidents, there are some differences in how the influencers anxiety and stress transpired between the three themes. In the first theme, feelings of annoyance and offendedness were highlighted. The influencers were often confused and disappointed about the negative interactions, comments and messages they received from their followers rather than ashamed or sad. Compared to the other themes, they often – but not always – felt that the negative behavior from their audience's part was unjustified or that followers had acted wrongly against them.

In the second theme, the interviewees often reported feeling ashamed and frustrated. These feelings usually stemmed from either reasons related to having poor experiences about negotiations or discussions with brands, or on the other hand, shame from getting involved in a collaboration that wasn't aligned with the values they wanted to convey.

Finally, in the third theme the interviewees were often the most unkind and harshest towards themselves. Their negative feelings often stemmed from feelings of inadequacy or poor conscience that had left them feeling tired, overwhelmed and numb.

The impacts of the critical incidents were often both negative and positive in nature. As a negative impact, in many cases, the negative experience had led to the influencer deciding to reduce the amount of direct interaction they engaged in with their followers, as a way to protect themselves from negativity, e.g. answering comments or direct messages. The interviewees also reported having started to avoid addressing certain topics in their content that they had identified as having a higher probability of triggering negative engagement behavior. In the most extreme cases, the interviewees described having decided to block and report followers or to delete negative comments.

As for the positive impacts, the interviewees reported, for example, gaining more confidence in their own abilities and seeing the value in the work they did. The influencers described how they now had the courage to be more assertive when negotiating with brands, having a stronger sense of their professional self-image and raising the prices they charged from doing paid collaborations with brands. Therefore, it can be interpreted that negative

experiences and incidents can also sometimes lead to positive outcomes in the long run.
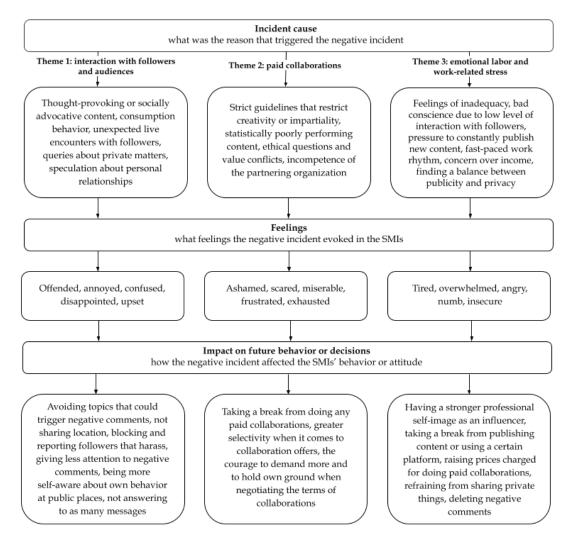

Figure 6. The causes, feelings and impacts of critical incidents reported by the interviewees.

6.2.1 Navigating follower expectations and demands

Followers' expectations and demands towards influencers were often found difficult to fulfill. One recurring dichotomy came up in several interviews with the influencers. On the other hand, audiences demanded influencers to use their power and publicity to address socially meaningful issues to advocate for change and condemn injustices. However, the interviewees reported that their experiences of publishing exactly this type of content was often the cause behind their negative critical incidents in interactions with followers. Several interviewees talked about how, for example, they had decided to publish

content about feminism and issues related to gender equality, because the topic was close to their hearts. The negative reactions and responses they received from the audience on this content had shocked, surprised and saddened them.

> *I did this video that received a lot of sexist comments. I was shocked. The video still to this day receives really awful hate comments. It made me realize that if you bring up your values or anything related to politics at all in your videos, it's really not worth it because you have to be really strong to do it.* (Interviewee 4)

> *I did a video that evoked a horrible rage on social media. Some people did not agree with me and it even went as far that I would consider it harassment. It was pretty distressing and I felt really powerless, like I could not control the situation at all. It definitely made me consider if I wanted to continue and it was kind of a turning point for me.* (Interviewee 8)

To protect themselves from negativity and further emotional strain, most of the interviewees reported that they had decided not to address these types of social issues on their channels in the future. Therefore, in these cases, the negative engagement affected the dynamics of the parasocial relationship and gave the audience the power to dictate what topics the influencer avoided in their content.

Another frequent cause behind negative critical incidents related to interactions with followers were unexpected or unwanted live encounters. The interviewees reported being unprepared to interact with people as influencers when these encounters occurred. Oftentimes, these situations happened when the interviewee had been in an everyday situation, for example, in the supermarket or using public transportation. In the most extreme cases, interviewees reported situations where followers had looked for their address and came knocking on their door or stalked them.

> *The only few times when I've been really annoyed are when I've been with my [family] and someone has come up to us with a camera in hand. I have talked a lot about how I don't mind people approaching me to say hello or to take pictures of me in public places when I'm alone. But if I'm with other people, just don't do it.* (Interviewee 5)

> *I had a stalker that lived somewhere pretty close to me. He followed me on social media and that was ok, but then he started messaging me a lot and telling me where he had seen me. He reported when he had seen me on the street or at the store. The messages were always like "I saw you yesterday at the bus stop and you looked sad, I would have wanted to come hug and comfort you". It caused me a lot of anxiety because I did not know anything about this person but he was following my life so closely and then even reporting about it.* (Interviewee 1)

Followers' way of inquiring or speculating about the influencers private matters

and relationships was also a common cause for negativity associated with interactions between the interviewees and their audience. The interviewees reported feeling offended or annoyed about situations where followers had been overly curious about things that they considered to be outside of the demands of their public profile. The incidents were triggered when interviewees felt that audience members had crossed the line that the influencers had set in their minds.

> *I still find it unpleasant that people keep fishing for [very personal] information like that. I was fucking annoyed and felt that the person [asking a question] had invaded my private territory. I felt that they were intruding.* (Interviewee 3)

> *It's difficult when people make conclusions about things that don't mean anything. Often you say one sentence and people draw far-fetched conclusions from it. It happened especially when I was with other people in my videos. People had a lot of opinions about relationships in general.* (Interviewee 7)

On the other hand, one influencer discussed a critical incident where they had later felt that they had shared too much about their personal life and been too open in the content that they had published. This had sparked feelings of shame and embarrassment, as they felt that now everyone in the world knew every single humiliating detail about them.

> *At that moment I didn't think much about it, but afterwards I was like oh no. Like why did I share all of this. I wasn't ashamed about talking about [certain topics], but instead really anxious about the fact that everyone knew everything. That thought began to haunt me. It disrupted the dynamics in my interactions with new people, because they already knew every single thing about me and I knew absolutely nothing about them.* (Interviewee 2)

The interviewees often had very negative perceptions about the motives behind followers' negative engagement behavior. They felt that the aims of those audience members who engaged in criticism and negativity towards them were e.g. to try to silence them to stop talking about a certain topic or to ridicule or bully them purposefully. In one case, where a single follower criticized the consuming behavior of an influencer that the follower considered to be unethical, the interviewee saw their motive as trying to prove that the follower was fundamentally a 'better person' than the influencer.

> *[Their objective] was to silence me! For sure. [The comments] attacked me personally and were really provocative, but also threatening.* (Interviewee 8)

> *I felt that their aim was to prove they're a better person than me. Because our conversation ended in them listing all the things they're doing right and why I could also be doing things their way.* (Interviewee 2)

If you're just bashing and mocking someone, then I consider it as you merely being fucking nasty. I think it's the embodiment of people's hate and hate is even shown to be one of the most common feelings on the internet. It is a way for people to unpack their negative emotions and the burdens they are suffering from. That's why it doesn't feel personal because I feel that those people are not doing well and just come to unleash it on me. It's not right, but it does not get under my skin in the same way. (Interviewee 1)

However, sometimes the interviewees were more understanding about the motives for negative or uninvited behavior from their followers. In such cases, they interpreted the reasons for audience members' negative behavior to stem from excitement, adoration or innocent curiosity. One interviewee even expressed the view that people who have decided to pursue a career as social media influencers must also accept the negativity and criticism as part of the job. They felt that unless a person is ready to 'pay that price', they are not ready to work in the field.

This is a controversial opinion in this field, but I think that when you're working as a social media influencer you have to have good self-esteem and thick skin to withstand [the negativity], so that it doesn't get to you. When people are acting like idiots, they are idiots. The most important thing is not to get offended because of it. Also, when someone puts themselves on a pedestal – like I perhaps do as an influencer – then of course you have to assume that a lot of people are gonna be resentful and bitter about it. (Interviewee 5)

6.2.2 Role of paid collaborations in the dynamics of influencer-follower relationships

Paid collaborations and co-working with brands are often considered to be at the core of what being an influencer is (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Thus, it is valuable to address paid collaborations in the context of parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers. Although followers are in a parasocial relationship as a result of their own will and personal interest, they also have to face and to some extent accept commercial content. In situations where the follower is not able to accept the dynamics on how an influencer operates, a value conflict may occur.

When discussing negative experiences in regards to paid collaborations, value conflicts between the influencer and their followers were recognized as one of the causes for negative interaction. Since interviewees recognized the demand for more ethical behavior stemming from their followers, they were aware of the pressure towards them. Being aware of this demand within the relationship made influencers more selective towards paid collaboration offers. In practice,

the selectiveness occurred by doing research on the brands and making thorough evaluations before choosing to collaborate with a brand.

Influencers were selective towards paid collaborations in order to avoid publishing paid content that could harm their relationship with their followers or conflict with their own values. Although the influencers described doing research on the brands, products and services before execution, interviewees mentioned that they had still experienced a value conflict as a result of their audience's reaction to the paid content. This had led to the influencers finding themselves in situations where the followers were criticizing their judgement and ethics.

> *I started receiving messages from my followers saying how irresponsible it was to advertise stuff that supports patriarchal beauty standards. And that is the total opposite of what my agenda is.* (Interviewee 6)

> *I did not think anything about it, I thought it was a neutral campaign. The response to it or the message in the comments was that the organization was not as neutral as one would think. There had also been a lot of [negative discussion] regarding that organization within the year. The comments were completely different compared to what I had thought. I agreed with the comments, or I'd say they opened up a whole different view to it for me.* (Interviewee 8)

Demanding behavior towards influencers in regards to values affirms that influencers have to be conscious not only when executing paid collaborations, but also when publishing non-commercial content, since they are under constant monitoring by the followers. In other words, any value discrepancy between paid and non-paid content could cause a conflict within the parasocial relationship.

Due to the effort influencers had put into being conscious when executing a paid collaboration, a value conflict was unexpected, causing mixed emotions in them. Furthermore, based on interviewees' descriptions, the target of criticism in these cases varied. Some followers put an emphasis on addressing the issues of the company or organization, whereas others focused on how they could not expect the given influencer to endorse a certain brand or organization. Even in cases where the criticism was targeted more towards the brand and its products or services, influencers had to face negative interaction in their own social media channels.

> *[The criticism was] a bit towarded at both [me and the brand]. But mostly [the criticism] was targeted at me, it was like 'you should know better' and 'out of all people I thought that you would understand'. It was clear that they were disappointed in me.* (Interviewee 6)

I think that the criticism was targeted at me, that I should not be a sell-up. It felt like I was selling my soul over [a product as a promotional gift from the brand]. The criticism was targeted towards me. (Interviewee 1)

Yes, [followers] were somewhat accusing me about it, saying that '[this company] does not support this kind of agenda', 'they do this and that' and 'I suggest you to do research on the background regarding brands [that you are] collaborating with'. (Interviewee 5)

In some situations where criticism – such as the type described above – occurred, the brand with whom the influencer was in cooperation with took action in a reactive manner after the influencer had contacted and discussed the situation with the brand. The measures were either public, e.g. the brand resolved the situation with followers, or private, e.g. the brand explained the accusations or reasons of critique to the influencer. When reactive measures were taken by the brand, influencers described a sense of relief or happiness.

Overall it went well. I sent an email to the brand's representative telling them that I had received [negative] comments like this. They answered to the critical comments from their brand account and it ended the squabble. It made me feel good too, that I was not just selling some shit. (Interviewee 5)

The brand had had some human rights issues on the management level of the corporation. So I asked them about it and they gave me a good response and it made me really happy. It was the only time I've had to reach for the brand regarding negative feedback I have received. (Interviewee 7)

Overall, interviewees acknowledged the value of parasocial relationships as the core of them being able to be an influencer. However, influencers are inclined to do paid collaborations, which pressures them to create content that complies with the requirements set by the brand. Although interviewees mentioned that brands are less strict and controlling regarding the execution of the content, they still felt that guidelines were limiting their creativity.

Besides being concerned over the limitations given by the brand from the perspective of creativity, interviewees also mentioned their worry towards their followers. In situations where influencers had to follow guidelines, they were aware and concerned that their followers would not enjoy the content created in collaboration with a brand. This worry could stem from the fear of not being perceived authentic within the relationship. In general, strict guidelines were disliked.

One thing that pisses me off is that the brands require you to send the content sometimes a week before the designated publication day. [...] I also feel that people will sense it if the content is very pre-planned. (Interviewee 3)

After that incident, I've had more backbone when it comes to paid collaborations. If a PR agency or a brand sends me an offer and they have a very strict guideline on how they want it to be executed, I've learned to say back. Because I know that it will not work in my channel or on TikTok in general. Since I've learned to say back, paid collaborations have worked much better because I trust I know best how things should be done. (Interviewee 4)

Overall, the interviewees considered paid collaborations as something they put a lot of effort into, in order to make them appear as authentic and enjoyable content to their followers as their non-paid content. Despite efforts influencers put towards making appealing paid content, some interviewees mentioned that followers still often disengaged from paid content or, if found necessary, initiated negative interaction because of it. Therefore, followers appear to present a negativity bias towards paid collaborations.

[The followers] just do not react to it [paid content] at all. No one is telling me that "how dare you do paid collaborations". If they did, I would get more engagement. But they just don't react to it at all. (Interviewee 3)

To sum up, although paid collaborations play only a part in how parasocial relationships function, they have an indispensable role in the dynamics of the relationship. Within this dynamic, followers are not only supportive but also monitor the actions and decisions made by the influencer. Consequently, the impact of this is that influencers have to be aware of values expected by their followers, yet balance and comply with the guidelines set by the brands.

6.2.3   Attitudes toward work guiding emotional strain

In Chapter 4.2, Hochschild's (2012) three attitudes toward work in relation to performing emotional labor were introduced. When applied to the interviews with the influencers, they offer an interesting viewpoint to the ways in which emotional labor affects the negatively charged parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers. The attitude types are labeled in this study as inseparable, divided and separated, and their differences are further highlighted in Table 5 (p. 64).

In the first attitude type, influencers wholeheartedly identified with their work. Their perceptions of their private-self and work-self were intertwined and they did not see a distinction between the two. The interviewees in this group experienced the most severe emotional strain and thus, had the highest risk of having a burnout or reported having already experienced one. The influencers in this group had all resorted to some type of professional counseling as a coping mechanism to ease and manage their work-related stress. They were

also identified as having an elevated sense of duty and responsibility for the well-being of their followers, which was similar to that of traditional social relationships between friends.

> *I felt a really strong sense of responsibility for a long time and carried a terrible guilt about the emotional ill-being of my followers. I was also somehow actively expected to always be available to my followers. In a way I felt that every time I got a direct message, I had to answer it, even if the topic of it was negatively triggering for my mental health. For some reason, I was obliged to answer and was guilt-ridden if I didn't.* (Interviewee 6)

Instead, the interviewees who demonstrated the characteristics of the second attitude type saw a clear distinction between their private-self and their work-self. As a result, their risk for experiencing a work-related burnout was lower, but not non-existent. The influencers in this group felt that constant interaction with their followers was burdensome and sustaining their relationship with the audience required a lot of work. On the other hand, they also reported that these relationships and conversations with their followers were the most rewarding and meaningful aspect of their work. This dichotomy evoked feelings of guilt in the influencers.

> *If I'm doing, for example, a live[stream] then it's a situation where I know that I'm going to be talking with my followers and I'm prepared to do it. But then again, if someone comes up to me on the street it can catch me really off-guard. One time I was having a really bad day, had my headphones on and was crying – it was a really, really crappy day. I was listening to some sad music and then out of the corner of my eye I saw [people] staring at me and waving. I was like oh no, this is such a bad moment. Maybe in those kinds of situations the difference is that you're not prepared that even at a bad moment people will notice you and want to chat.* (Interviewee 4)

Compared to the second attitude type, the influencers in the third group also saw a distinct difference between their private-self and work-self. However, they did not blame themselves for making this distinction, but rather had a positive and straightforward stance, seeing their work as performing and having a public persona on social media that was different from their 'true self'. They reported that the emotional labor they had to engage in as a result of negative engagement was minimal and manageable.

In comparison to the two other groups, it was easier for the influencers with the third attitude type to recover from negative engagement and the emotional strain it caused. These interviewees often did not see being an influencer as an inseparable part of their personality. They regarded it as a job and occupation among others and had sometimes even unproblematically considered changing

careers and doing something else to earn their livelihood.

> *I hear this a lot from my friends, especially those who have known me for years. They always tell me that they would not recognize me from my videos that I post. I think it's pretty funny. I don't know if it's a desire to perform and act or is it more of an attempt to protect my inner self. I probably wouldn't even like if I had to make content without having some kind of a role on. For example, I don't think that the person you see on my social media is the same me who is sitting at home in my underwear on a Sunday. [...] It's like in a sense having a mask half-on all the time: you want to show things, but you don't want to show too much.* (Interviewee 5)

To the influencers belonging to the attitude type 1 (inseparable), the distinction between their private-self and work-self is weak. Overcoming negative engagement they're subjected to is hard for them and their risk of experiencing a burnout is high. To the influencers belonging to the attitude type 2 (divided), seeing a distinction between their private-self and work-self is moderate to strong. For them, overcoming negative engagement behavior is moderate to hard, and their risk of having a burnout is lower compared to those in type 1. Finally, to the influencers with attitude type 3 (separated), the distinction between their private-self and work-self is strong. Overcoming negative engagement is easy and their risk of experiencing burnout is low.

Table 5. Characteristics of three attitudes toward work found in influencers based on the interview data.

Attitude type	Inseparable (type 1)	Divided (type 2)	Separated (type 3)
Distinction between private-self and work-self	Weak	Moderate to strong	Strong
Overcoming negative engagement	Hard	Moderate to hard	Easy
Risk of having a burnout	High	Moderate	Low

Across all the groups, the influencers expressed a strong demand for more established practises and policies for the influencer marketing field in Finland. The paucity or complete lack of these established rules was a recurring theme in the critical incidents reported by the interviewees. It was also a significant cause for work-related emotional strain for the influencers. Many of the interviewees were private, solo entrepreneurs who did not have a workplace community and colleagues around them to offer support.

The influencers hoped for more professional association, unionization, support and training for their industry. They craved a connection with other influencers who could offer peer support to better handle the negative engagement received from their followers.

> *I do feel that this field needs a lot more cooperation between influencers. I don't necessarily mean doing campaigns together, but more like having a conversation together about the emotional well-being of everyone. We aren't organized at all and don't have any associations behind us, any support activities or training. [...] As someone who works alone, I don't have any kind of collegial network. I know other influencers, yes, but I don't really have anything to do with them. So you feel really alone and crave for someone who would understand the work you do.* (Interviewee 2)

Another observation from the interviews that extended across all the different attitude groups was the desire to be more interactive with their audience on social media. More specifically, to answer and comment back more to the messages sent to them by their followers. Oftentimes, the interviewees reported having been more interactive in the beginning of their influencer career, but then usually due to lack of time and how much effort it took to answer personally to everything, they had to make decisions to reduce how many comments and messages they answered. One interviewee had even considered hiring someone else to answer comments on their behalf.

> *I got anxious about all the messages I received from my followers. [...] I had to plan and calendar everything so that I had time just to answer people and talk to them. I still get stressed if I know that I have nice private messages from my followers waiting on Instagram that I would want to answer.* (Interviewee 1)

> *I don't really answer any messages anywhere, because there are too many of them nowadays I used to answer and back in the days I had a habit of answering every single private message I got on Instagram. But it got to the point where I had to use four hours a day just to answer all the messages and it wasn't realistic anymore.* (Interviewee 5)

7   DISCUSSION

This final chapter will discuss the results of both the preliminary study and the main study, also combining the results of the two studies in terms of negative engagement triggers and causes. Moreover, the findings will be linked to earlier research on negative engagement, emotional labor and parasocial relationships. Following the conclusions and academic implications, managerial implications will be introduced. Lastly, the limitations of the study will be discussed together with suggestions for future research.

7.1   Conclusions and academic implications

This study focused on exploring the parasocial relationships between social media influencers and their followers, and understanding the significance of negative engagement behavior on these relationships. In the preliminary study, the triggers of negative engagement were identified from the audience's point of view by studying anonymous Jodel comments, whereas the main study focused on producing a deeper understanding of the same phenomenon from the influencers' point of view through in-depth interviews.

The objective was to discover what triggers negative engagement, understand the significance of negative engagement on the influencer-follower relationship and comprehend how emotional labor is managed by influencers. The theoretical framework was constructed by combining existing academic literature on parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction, negative engagement and emotional labor. A multi-method approach was chosen in order to gather data from both the followers' and the influencers' perspectives. A qualitative approach was found more suitable compared to quantitative, since the focus was on understanding experiences, emotions and their interpretations.

Previous research has focused on studying the impact of paid collaborations and parasocial relationships from the perspectives of organizational goals and strategic objectives. The focus of this study was on the significance and potential risks of doing paid collaborations on influencers' relationships with their followers. Although paid collaborations can produce benefits for brands and organizations, at the same time they can cause inconvenience for influencers through negative engagement.

The results of the preliminary study and the main study support each other and offer similar findings. The negative experiences were often related to the audience's negative reactions to influencers' content or behavior. Moreover, ethical and value-related issues were prominent in both parts of the study. Another apparent similarity were the expectations set by the followers.

Although a follower chooses to be in a parasocial relationship with an influencer by their own choice, that follower sets certain expectations towards the relationship. In cases where an influencer did not meet these expectations, these followers were to take part in negative engagement behavior. For instance, when an influencer had done paid collaboration that was seen as problematic, it was a violation of social norms that they had envisioned to be in common with them and the influencer.

This idea comes close to the academic literature regarding image gaps where brand identity represents the company-originated actions and are sent outwards, whereas brand image is how consumers perceive the brand (de Chernatony, 1999). Furthermore, in case "*a brand's identity and its perception by channel members and consumers are mismatched, then its success will be limited or its chance of failure will be high*" (Roy & Banerjee, 2014, p. 208). In light of this study, brand identity would represent the values influencer displays to followers, whereas brand image would refer to the perception of the followers towards the influencer. However, it must be noted that image gaps have been studied mainly in the context of brands and organizations. Therefore, it cannot be affiliated with the parasocial relationships within influencers and followers directly, since these relationships are human-human relationships rather than human-brand relationships.

Another phenomenon closely related to the idea of image gaps in this context is hyperpersonal communication, which is understood as personal interaction with strangers in a computer-mediated setting (Chandler & Munday, 2016). Since computer-mediated communication lacks the possibility of detecting e.g. non-verbal cues (Rains, Akers, Pavlich, Tsetsi & Appelbaum, 2019), the recipient of the message forms an idealized perception of the sender (Walther 1996, as cited in Henderson & Gilding, 2004). In influencer-follower relationships, followers may have an idealized, unrealistic perception of influencers. Situations in which the perception that the follower has and the reality of what the influencer is, does or values is contradictory, makes the influencer vulnerable.

Conclusions and implications on negative engagement

In the theoretical framework, six categories of various types of stakeholders participating in negative engagement behavior were introduced. Building on the observation made in the results, the platform may act as an enabler to the transformation process from one negative engagement category to another. That is to say, Jodel can be considered as a transformative platform. Considering an anonymous platform as an enabler for releasing negative emotions, the direction of the transformation process may be expected to lean towards transition from inactive (referring to weak negative emotions) to active (moderate negative emotions) or even to malicious, referring to extremely strong negative emotions. For instance, an audience member belonging to Level 1 (inactive with limited audiences) could transform to seek justice (Level 4),

revenge (Level 5) or even trolling (Level 6) by spending time on a transformative platform.

Consequently, a platform enabling negative discussion regarding influencers could a) increase the volume of it and b) transform it into more malicious by nature. Although Jodel took measures towards rooting out negative engagement behavior towards influencers, these measures were insufficient. This could imply that the existing negative engagement behavior in said platform makes such behavior visible to others, reinforcing and supporting passive bystanders to shift towards being an active individual of negative engagement behavior. From the perspective of influencers, a transformative platform enhancing negative commentary may increase the need for emotional labor.

When forming negative engagement triggers based on posts in an anonymous social media platform, a data-driven approach was chosen in forming categories of triggers rather than utilizing existing framework on categories of negative engagement. The reason is that in practice, it is challenging to interpret whether an individual posting to an anonymous platform is either looking for justice or is motivated by revenge without asking the audience members participating in negative engagement directly. Furthermore, as noted by earlier research, differentiating trolls from other stakeholders is presented as a challenge of this concept (Lievonen et al., 2018). Since various underlying dimensions of negative engagement may partake in negative engagement behavior and the nature of negative engagement is multidimensional (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014), interpretations regarding negative social media discussion face certain limitations. Overall, it would appear that existing categories can be considered as a theoretical model for understanding the phenomenon of negative engagement rather than an applicable tool for distinguishing types of negative engagement occurring in social media platforms.

Inter alia, what is fascinating is that the platform utilized in the preliminary study was mentioned often already before the researchers asked questions related to the platform. Therefore, influencers recognized Jodel as a platform where negative engagement related to them or other influencers occurs. Furthermore, the triggers of negative engagement that stemmed from the Jodel discussion were somewhat present as the causes of critical incidents described by influencers, which also gives support to the triggers found in the preliminary study.

The analysis on the Jodel posts generated seven triggers of negative engagement, presented in Figure 5 (p. 53) according to the strength of the trigger as well as the level of publicity. Some of the strongest triggers included paid collaborations, dissemination of misinformation or disinformation and relationships, which were also recognized as causes of negative engagement in the critical incidents in theme one (interaction with followers and audiences) and two (paid collaborations). For instance, thought-provoking or socially

advocative content presented in Figure 6 (p. 56) as a cause for influencers to experience negative engagement mirrors violation of social norms, which is a negative engagement trigger for audiences.

Similarly, relationships are presented as a trigger for followers to participate in negative engagement, while queries about private matters were found as one of the causes of negative engagement from the perspective of influencers. In addition to similarities between triggers and causes, identifying negative emotions, thoughts and behaviors is linked to existing literature. Since brands desire to strengthen positive engagement in order to reduce the damage caused by negative engagement (Naumann et al., 2020), acknowledging the fact that paid collaborations are a strong trigger for negative engagement is meaningful.

As the study was focused on negative engagement in parasocial relationships between followers and influencers, paid collaborations had a substantial weight in the interview frame, which could somewhat be challenged. However, paid collaborations were found as a strong trigger of negative engagement in the preliminary study, hence the emphasis on paid collaborations during the interviews as an aspect to negative engagement. Since paid collaborations caused audiences to be triggered, there was value in looking into how paid collaborations influenced the dynamics of the parasocial relationship between influencers and their followers.

Paid collaborations and other paid partnerships are a risk for parasocial relationships that influencers are willing to take if they want to monetize their fame. Although an influencer may choose to limit and be selective with their collaborations, each paid collaboration holds the potential risk of creating a gap in their parasocial relationship, triggering negative engagement behavior. Influencers have to do emotional labor when engaging in paid collaborations towards both the brand they are working with, as well as towards their followers. Furthermore, the interviews show that influencers have to face negative engagement in their own social media channels and perform emotional labor on behalf of the brands even in cases where the criticism is targeted at the brand. However, as pointed out in the results of the main study, the consequences of negative experiences are not always solely negative. Instead, the negative experiences can lead to positive outcomes for the influencers in the form of e.g. confidence and professional self-esteem.

Conclusions and implications on emotional labor

The results of the main study show that influencers approach their work differently and therefore also have different ways to view the negativity they face**.** This leads to them having a varying level of readiness to overcome negative engagement they're subjected to.

Building on Hochschild's research, emotional labor has traditionally been studied in the context of corporate life, where employees are to sell emotions to corporate purposes (Hochschild, 2012). However, as noted in the theoretical framework of this study, emotional labor is done similarly in non-traditional

jobs. Influencers are required to perform emotional labor in parasocial relationships with their followers as these relationships are an important part of their work. Thus, this study supports other recent studies by regarding emotional labor as being evidently present also in other professions besides traditional service occupations (e.g. Mardona et al., 2018; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020).

For social media influencers, their fame and conspicuousness is always personal. Unlike traditional celebrities like actors, musicians or athletes, influencers are well known because of their personality, not because of their merits. They have harnessed their own personalities to earn visibility on social media. Compared to celebrities to whom social media is merely one way to support their career that takes place on screen or on the field, social media influencers are more dependent on maintaining interaction and discussion between themself and their followers. Strong parasocial relationships are a prerequisite for them to continue being influential personas.

Although challenging to confirm with the methodological setting of this study, those who exhibited the inseparable attitude type (type one) and did not have a specific work-role, did not describe unexpected interactions with followers as negative, tiring or stress-inducing during the interviews. Thus, unlike influencers in attitude type one, influencers with divided (type two) and separated (type three) attitude types may require more tools for coping in such situations. Yet, influencers with the inseparable attitude type are in the risk of having a burnout in other ways. Even though influencers that showcased the characteristics of the divided attitude type are least likely to experience burnout, their low level of engagement towards their work might pose a challenge to their relationships with their followers. Furthermore, their sense of playing out a somewhat factitious persona on social media might make them appear as less authentic and sincere to their audience in the long run. This is an issue, as earlier research highlights the notion that the popularity of influencers is founded on the fact that they appear as authentic and relatable personas (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019).

However, it is important to note that influencers exhibiting the inseparable attitude type are not immune to 'sabotaging' the relationship with their followers either, despite their devotedness and authenticity. A risk for them lies in the potential scenario in which their intense and passionate stance leads to them experiencing a burnout and having to discontinue working for periods of time. Moreover, if they continuously share highly personal and vulnerable details about their lives, they might become more susceptible to malevolent engagement behavior as audience members have more information about them to grasp on.

The observations regarding influencers' desire for more established practices and professional organization are also in line with Hochschild's (2012) research, where it was pointed out that the potential risks for all the three attitude types could be reduced if the employees had a real sense of control of their work-life

conditions. This could be solved by creating stronger, official and more established professional networks and associations for social media influencers, where they could get support and discuss with each other on work-related issues.

Furthermore, this study found that when social media influencers decide to address meaningful social issues such as feminism in their content, they often receive intense negative engagement that causes them severe emotional strain. This is a finding that is in line with earlier research, where the same phenomenon has been identified, for example, in the online abuse of specifically women bloggers (Eckert, 2018). Similarly to the interviewees of this study, in Eckert's (2018) research some of the bloggers who had become targets of harassment online had decided to avoid discussing certain topics or keeping a lower profile when it came to content that triggered negativity towards them. However, the bloggers interviewed by Eckert (2018) also had other ways to cope with online harassment, that included e.g. exposing their abusers, banning commenters, deleting comments and contacting the police. The influencers interviewed in this study reported some of the similar, less extreme response mechanisms to negative engagement they received, but had often mostly relied on leaving controversial topics out of their content altogether. In their study, Eckert (2018) calls for the recognition of online abuse as a gendered crime that societies should identify better and discuss solutions to. This would be an important public discussion also in Finland to ensure that all social media influencers would feel more comfortable taking other measures against severe negative behavior, bullying and harassment than merely silencing themselves on meaningful issues.

Conclusions and implications on parasocial relationships

This study supports previous research on parasocial interaction and relationships in the regards that parasocial relationships on social media are more interactive and two-way in nature when compared to traditional parasocial relationships described by Horton and Wohl (1956). In the traditional understanding of parasocial relationships, it was seen that only the persona can control and develop these connections (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, this study suggests that now in the age of social media, audiences specifically seek to influence these relationships and this attempt might unravel itself as negative engagement. Therefore, this study introduces an important academic implication by suggesting that negative engagement behavior gives audience members the power to influence these parasocial relationships.

The fundamental characteristic of these relationships was highlighted in the results of this study especially when it came to face-to-face interaction, in which audience members are very familiar with the performer and consider them as a friend, whereas in reality to the performer they might be a complete stranger. When the influencers came into contact with their followers in live situations outside of social media, the dynamics of the parasocial connection 'spilled over' to this live environment. The followers were eager to talk to the influencer as if

they were a close acquaintance they happened to meet at the store, whereas the influencers felt uneasy and unprepared that their privacy and personal space was invaded. Therefore, it could be argued that surprising interaction situations where the existing feelings rules are unclear increase the potential need for emotional labor.

7.2   Managerial implications

Paid collaborations were recognized as the strongest trigger of negative engagement towards influencers in anonymous social media discussions (see Figure 5, p. 53). The results also showcased how influencers did not only experience dislike and worry towards strict guidelines posed by brands they collaborated with, but also a sense of relief in cases where the brand was to respond with a reactive measure to allegations. When combined with the statements that influencers made regarding how followers perceive paid collaborations, the followers appear to have a negativity bias towards paid content. Therefore, there is an indication towards brands having an impact on the dynamics of parasocial relationship that is not necessarily of a positive nature.

Currently, the damage control of the unfavorable consequences of the collaborations is mostly left for the influencer to manage. As discussed in the results, respondents were to do research regarding the brand they were planning to collaborate with. This could be understood as a risk prevention method which makes paid collaborations less risky for them in the light of parasocial relationship dynamics. However, in cases where risk prevention methods would fail, the responsibility of addressing negative interaction falls to the influencer, whereas the brand may be content with the campaign rather than addressing possible consequences faced by the influencer.

Therefore, this study suggests that there is a call for a new form of corporate social responsibility. In this study, this form of corporate social responsibility is addressed as influencer marketing responsibility, which would require organizations to be accountable for possible damages they may cause to the relationship between influencers and their followers. In case the brand executes its influencer marketing campaigns via a PR agency, the brand should ensure that the PR agency is committed to being a responsible party in influencer marketing, reflecting similar principles.

Some suggestions for practical applications of influencer marketing responsibility are:

1. **Proactive measures in social media platforms**

Although reactive measures are deemed to be helpful, taking proactive measures towards negative engagement received regarding paid collaborations could be more effective.

2. Acknowledgement of imbalance in power structure

Influencers work either as freelancers or entrepreneurs. Furthermore, many influencers are young and inexperienced in work life. As influencers often do not have a trade union, other organized support systems or any industry related standards to refer themselves to, they may have to take the blow and maneuver the negativity from the audience, giving an economic advantage to the brand.

3. Critical reviewal of brand guidelines

Although brand guidelines regarding paid collaborations are there to make sure that the reputation of the brand is consistent, guidelines are to interfere with the creative freedom of the influencer. A critical review towards guidelines starts by understanding the perspective of the influencer. Asking questions such as 'how does each directive affect the content creation process' and 'is there a possibility to be less restrictive on our end' are a good starting point. As these guidelines steer the content production of the influencer, they also inevitably attach themselves to the interaction and relationship between the influencer and their followers.

4. Considering influencers as specialists instead of a marketing tool

Successful social media influencers have spent their time building their audience and therefore are more likely to understand it more thoroughly compared to the brand. Moreover, their experiences have made them experts in terms of emotional labor. Not only did interviewees consider strict brand guidelines limiting but in some cases influencers considered these guidelines to lead to paid content that is of less quality. Acknowledging influencers as equal professionals is not only responsible, but also respectful, leading more likely to better results. Thus, a responsible brand should perceive influencers as professionals instead of seeing their channel as a platform for marketing activities.

This aspect of corporate social responsibility has not been a topic of research in academia. For the brands, the benefits of responsibly managed paid collaborations become apparent in situations where the brand is keen on building long-term partnerships with the same influencers. This aspect is linked to reputation management in terms of how influencers perceive the brand as a collaborative partner. Since positive experiences of the influencer build influencers' trust towards brands, they have the opportunity to suggest a continuation to these partnerships. A long-term relationship between a brand and an influencer could lead to enhanced brand loyalty from the audience of the influencer. Moreover, a more cooperative approach could also lead to more suitable and successful collaborations as influencers are being respected and have the freedom to be creative.

7.3   Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although having first been introduced already in 1956 by Horton and Wohl, parasocial interaction has only relatively recently been started to be used as a theory applied to marketing and consumer behaviour on social media. In previous research literature, other theories have also later been utilized to explain similar social phenomena or used concurrently alongside it. These theories include for example the social influence theory (Kelman, 1958), social exchange theory (Homans 1961), personal construct theory (Perse & Rubin, 1989) and uncertainty reduction theory (Cole & Leets, 1999). Parasocial relationship was chosen as a theoretical framework due to its established disposition, having been extensively used in previous studies related to social media influencers in recent years (e.g. Daniel et al., 2018; Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020) and the fact that it explains not only how influencers influence their audience, but also how they form relationships with them.

It could be argued that in this study, terms such as negative feedback or criticism could have been used instead of negative engagement. However, in the larger picture, the two were considered merely as few types or different manifestations inside the embodying concept of negative engagement. If the study had only considered negative feedback towards social media influencers, the interactive and responsive dimension of the phenomenon might have been lost.

As for emotional labor, another term similar to that is often used is emotion work. However, whereas emotion work is the management of feelings often done in intimate or interpersonal relationships – for example between romantic partners or family members –, emotional labor is performed in professional settings for a wage and has exchange value (Hochschild, 2012). An interesting point that could be explored further in future studies would be to discuss whether the management of feeling that social media influencers perform is closer to emotion work or emotional labor and how these two intertwine, as at the same time they are working but also creating meaningful relationships with their followers. In some cases, these deep bonds they have, for example, with long-time audience members might turn into emotion work.

The frame of reference for this research was the Finnish social media influencer scene. Moreover, the research is situated in the larger western imaginary. The results of the study might be considerably different if the researchers had analyzed followers' comments and interviewed social media influencers, for example, in the context of another country or culture. In addition, all the influencers interviewed in this study made content about themselves, their lives and their personalities. The focus of their publicity was their own persona. Therefore, if the influencers interviewed for the study had been more focused on e.g. creating content around a certain topic as experts of their field or around a very specific topic of interest, the results might have been different. It could be argued that in general, lifestyle influencers who have based their fame on their

personality are more vulnerable to emotional strain and more inclined to having strong relationships with their audience per se, due to the personal connection to their public work.

Similarly, the social media platform chosen for the preliminary research of this study was Jodel. As a platform Jodel has many characteristics that differentiate it from others and shape the discussions people engage in, one major feature being its anonymity. This might affect the conversations people have on the platform, for example, by making people more inclined to be brutally honest, as they don't have to comment under their own names, usernames or faces. This can be both a positive and a negative aspect. On one hand, the audience members might feel more comfortable being honest and voicing their real opinions as they don't have to worry about losing their face because of their impoliteness. However, this possibility might also make them express their views in a more harsh and controversial manner to provoke other commenters and make the conversation more interesting. In this regard, the threshold for engaging in trolling behavior may also be lower. Moreover, activity on Jodel is rewarded by the platform by giving users 'karma' points. These points are collected e.g. by writing opening posts and comments, as well as upvoting or downvoting other users' comments. Thus, collecting more karma might also serve as a motivation for users to engage in conversation provoking discussions. Therefore, the triggers identified in the preliminary study might have differed had another social media platform been chosen instead of Jodel.

The challenges of previous research (e.g. van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) related to being successful in recruiting the most popular, influential or biggest social media influencers for interviews were present also in this study. Many of the most well-known influencers either did not answer the interview invitations at all or answered that they were unfortunately too busy to agree for an interview. Some of the interviewees and the influencers who were contacted but declined also talked about how they receive a large amount of similar requests. Therefore, some had decided to decline all research interview invitations altogether. In the end, the combined sizes of following across all platforms for the influencers interviewed in this study varied from 7000 to 700 000. The results of this study might have been different had the interviewees either all been some of the biggest and most well-known social media influencers or on the other hand, if they had all been micro-influencers.

The topics addressed in the interviews were personal and required the interviewees to reflect their experiences and feelings sometimes on a deep emotional level. Some of the interviewees answered questions more openly and readily, whereas others were more careful about how much they wanted to share. One possible reason behind this might be that the social media influencers wanted to protect their image and manage their public persona, despite knowing that the interviews were only part of a research project. This might have also been the reason why many influencers that were contacted as potential interviewees decided not to answer the interview invitation or requested to see the questions in advance.

Although including thematic questions in the interview frame allowed the exploration of social media influencers' perceptions on topics outside of the critical incident situations, it also posed challenges related to the delimitation of the focus of this study. Establishing the core focus of the study might have been easier with a more concise and compact interview frame.

Furthermore, it should be noted that decisions made about the interview design and more precisely the order of the three different themes might have affected how much information was gathered about each theme. In all the interviews, the social media influencers shared most about the last theme and when looking at the durations of the interviews, the discussions about this theme took the most time. This might be due to the fact that at the end of the interviews, the interviewees had become more familiar with the interviewers, thus feeling more comfortable about sharing their personal thoughts. Therefore, the first two themes might have become more prominent in the data had they been positioned differently in the interview frame. The decision to place the third theme as the last one was made because the researchers felt that it was the most personal and ventured deepest into the interviewees emotions and experiences, thus requiring familiarity and comfortability between the interviewers and the interviewee.

The fact that the interviewees in the main study were not chosen based on whether they were mentioned in the Jodel posts collected for the preliminary study might have posed a challenge in terms of cohesion, as these two studies addressed the same phenomenon. However, due to the fact that all interviewees recognized Jodel as a social media platform where negative engagement exists in the interviews and mentioned that either they had been targets of negative engagement on Jodel previously or that their colleagues – that is other influencers – had faced negativity on the platform, confirms that they were aware of the phenomenon. Therefore, it can be argued with conviction that both studies concentrated on the same phenomenon.

In regards to the methods, the qualitative principle of the study poses its own limitations. All the interpretations made in the study are subjective in nature. Although the researchers have paid close attention to critically reviewing their own preconceptions and prejudices, their pre-existing attitudes have undeniably affected all decisions. Furthermore, the analysis of the data and the classifications that have been made were dependent on the interpretations of the researchers. The small sample size as well as the qualitative nature of the study mean that the results of the study cannot be used to draw generalizations.

The critical incident technique is a relatively culture neutral research method, as it does not offer interviewees the opinions and thoughts of the researcher in advance (de Ruyter, Perkins & Wetzels, 1995, as cited in Gremler, 2004). Instead, it allows for the interviewee to define what they consider as critical situations and what they want to share about their experiences by themselves. However, in addition to the other commonly identified challenges related to critical incident technique, it was also noticed in this study that the fact that the

technique allows the interviewees to define for themselves what experiences are critical and what are not, might result in the reported situations being varied. This might have posed a challenge in regards to comparing and analyzing the reported incidents as equals.

The themes of this study offer fruitful considerations for further research. In this study, social media influencers were interviewed about their experiences to gather in-depth accounts and descriptions. In the future, it would be interesting to conduct a quantitative survey to test the triggers found in this qualitative study: whether they do exist and also how common they are. Furthermore, this study has achieved a certain level of understanding about the impacts of negative engagement on the relationship between influencers and their followers, from the influencers' point of view. Audience members could be interviewed or surveyed about the significance of the negative engagement triggers found in the preliminary study from their perspective. In addition, more detailed quantitative research could also be carried out among influencers to examine the classification made in this study based on Hochschild's (2012) attitudes.

This study identified that there might be an unequal power structure between social media influencers and organizations when it comes to making agreements about influencer marketing guidelines. Therefore, it could pose an interesting arena for future research and could be explored further from both the point of view of the influencers and brands that use influencer marketing in their strategies: do they recognize the existence of this power dynamic and how do they view their professional relationships.

Finally, the social media influencers interviewed for this study were asked about their motivations to continue working as influencers despite these negative experiences and what things make their work meaningful for them. However, this aspect was only touched upon briefly in the thematic questions of the interview and was excluded in the end, as it wasn't considered to be at the core of the study. Thus, in the future this topic could be studied further to understand what drives and inspires influencers to continue sharing their personal lives to the world despite all the negativity they expose themselves to.

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APPENDIX   Interview frame

Hi! Welcome to an interview for a master's thesis in Corporate Communication. This interview will be recorded as an audio file which will be later transcribed – i.e. converted into a text format. The interview will be conducted by the thesis researchers, Taru Kalvi and Iina Knuutinen.

This interview is anonymous, meaning that it is not possible to identify the interviewees from the final and published work. Short and selected quotations from the interviews might be cited in the thesis. Do you give your consent for us to record this interview?

The interview will proceed as follows. We will begin by asking you some background questions. Then we will move on to discuss three key themes of the study and will ask you to recall situations that you have experienced as an influencer. At the end of this interview, you will have the opportunity to share any thoughts that might have risen during the interview or ask us any questions about the research project.

Background questions

- Your age?
- On what social media platforms are you currently publishing content?
- For how long have you been producing content on social media in a goal-oriented manner?
- How would you define yourself? *(e.g. as a content creator, commercial endorser, entrepreneur, celebrity, social activist)*
- What is the goal of your content? *(e.g. is your goal to entertain, stir up discussion or even purposefully provoke)*

Introduction of the interview method

Next we will move on to the section of this interview where three different situations will be discussed. The objective is to recall and think about moments that have stuck to your mind in a distinct or special way. We ask you to describe these situations as precisely as possible, after which we will be asking you more specific questions relating to the theme.

Critical incident 1 – interaction with followers and audiences

The first theme we will be discussing is interaction with followers. The objective is to go back to a moment when you have experienced unpleasant or negative feelings or a situation when interaction with followers felt problematic to you.

Please recall and describe a situation in which your followers commented content that you had published in an exceptionally critical or otherwise negative tone.

- How did the situation originate?
- What feelings or thoughts did this situation evoke in you?
- What did you interpret to be the goal or motive behind these comments? *(e.g. attempt to provoke or point out a valid grievance or injustice)*
- Do you feel that this situation has already ceased or does it still come up?
- Do you feel that this experience has changed the way in which you publish content?
- Do you feel that this experience has changed the way in which you interact with your followers?
- How did you process this experience and the negative comments you received? *(e.g. did you talk about it with someone)*
- Has this experience made you take some measures to restrict conversation about this topic in your channels?
- Is this situation concerning interaction with your followers a particularly atypical or exceptional when compared to other interactions with them?

Thank you. Next we will be asking you a few questions about interaction and you won't have to answer them from the point of view of this specific situation that you described earlier. Before we move on, is there something you would like to add to the situation you described?

- Do you follow discussions about influencers on social media or other media? How would you describe the tone of these discussions?
- Did you follow the news coverage at the end of 2020 about Jodel's decision to shut down the so-called gossip channels on their platform? What feelings or thoughts did this decision evoke in you?

Critical incident 2 – paid collaborations

The second theme we will be discussing is paid collaborations and interaction with brands. The objective is to go back to a moment when you experienced unpleasant or negative feelings.

Please recall and describe a situation when a paid collaboration that you were a part of did not go as planned or failed. You do not need to name the product, company or brand that you were working with but instead you can talk about the situation on a more general level.

- What happened that made you feel that the paid collaboration had failed in some way?
- How did your followers react to the paid collaboration or the content published around it?
- What kind of comments did you receive from your followers regarding the paid collaboration?
- What feelings did this paid collaboration evoke in you before – during – after the project?
- In your opinion, was the possible criticism expressed by your followers targeted at you or at the brand or the product that was being promoted?
- How did the brand react to the outcome of the paid collaboration?
- How would you describe that this experience has changed your thoughts or opinions about doing paid collaborations?
- How has this particular experience affected the way that you do paid collaborations now?

Thank you. Next we will be asking you a few questions about paid collaborations and you won't have to answer them from the point of view of this specific situation that you described earlier. Before we move on, is there something you would like to add to the situation you described?

- How would you describe influencer marketing as a field in Finland?
- What do you feel is the responsibility of the company in a situation where a paid collaboration does not achieve the desired reaction in the followers?

Critical incident 3 – emotional strain and work-related stress

The third and the last theme we will be discussing is emotional strain and work-related stress. The objective is to go back to a moment when you

experienced unpleasant or negative feelings or when working as an influencer was an exorbitant burden on you.

Please recall and describe a situation or a moment in which working as an influencer felt exceptionally stressful or heavy to you emotionally.

- How did the situation originate?
- What feelings or thoughts did you experience in this situation?
- What kind of things evoked these feelings?
- Were these feelings evoked by followers, brands you collaborated with, your inner circle or family members or other people? If yes, who and how?
- Were there moments during this situation when the emotions you displayed did not reflect the emotions you were truly feeling?
- What thoughts did this emotional conflict evoke in you?
- Was there a disclosure or an end to this situation?
- How have your followers or the brands you collaborate with reacted to this (changed) situation? *(e.g. delays in work projects, last minute changes)*
- How has this experience affected your relationship with your followers or other stakeholders?
- What measures has this situation led you to take to help manage work-related stress and cope with emotional strain?

Thank you. Next we will be asking you a few more questions about this theme and you won't have to answer them from the point of view of this specific situation that you described earlier. Before we move on, is there something you would like to add to the situation you described?

- What decisions have you made regarding your work to avoid negativity?
- In what ways could brands or other collaboration partners better take responsibility for the well-being of influencers?
- Which things in your work bring you the most joy? What do you find to be most meaningful?
- What makes you stay and continue in this line of work?

Other questions

Is there something in your mind that you would still like to add?

Is there something you would like to ask from us? *(e.g. about the research, thesis, when it will be published, how data will be handled)*

The interview is now over. Thank you for participating in the study.