A comparative analysis of CGI Instagram influencer, @lilmiquela, and human Instagram influencer, @_emmachamberlain

The careful balance between being “insta-famous” and being relatable: discussions on media representation and media production of influencers on Instagram

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Abstract

In an increasingly digital world, the relatively under-researched realm of the social media influencer industry is slowly becoming more pertinent and revealing for academic research areas for media production and representation. In this paper, a comparative visual analysis was undertaken to compare human influencer, Emma Chamberlain, and computer-generated influencer, Lil Miquela through the examination of a total of 16 Instagram posts across the two influencers. These images were further dissected through the use of pre-defined cultural scripts, such as calibrated amateurism, personal branding, being ‘cool’ and selfies. The analysis of the cultural scripts and visuals revealed the two juxtaposed categories of behavior — a traditional celebrity culture of fame, wealth and exclusivity versus a down-to-earth, ‘just like you’ and amateur type of influencer. Both subjects vary their content to suit both categories as if balancing the two opposing versions of their digital personas; this characteristic appears to be distinct to both influencers. Further research could be carried out to examine the generalizability of this finding and to further understand the influence that this might have on media audiences.

Keywords: Instagram, social media, influencers, media production, media representation
# Table of Contents

**Changes made for the re-submission of the thesis:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures and Tables</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Context</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Literature Review</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Calibrated Amateurism, authenticity and relatability</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Personal branding and commodification of the branded self</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Being &quot;cool&quot;</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Selfies</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Theoretical thematics</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Methodology and Research Design</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Case Study Selection</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Data Collection</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Data Analysis</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Limitations</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ethics</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Presentation and Analysis of Results</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Calibrated amateurism, authenticity &amp; relatability</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.1 Calibrated amateurism</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.2 Authenticity &amp; relatability</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Personal branding and commodification of the branded self</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.1 Commodification of the branded self: merchandise</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.2 Commodification of the branded self: sponsorship</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Being &quot;cool&quot;</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1 Fashionable</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.2 Exclusive access</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.3 Pictures with other celebrities</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Selfies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Discussion &amp; Conclusion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures and Tables

**Figure 1**: Calibrated amateurism from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018b)

**Figure 2**: Calibrated amateurism from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2017b)

**Figure 3**: Relatability from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019c)

**Figure 4**: Relatability from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2018a)

**Figure 5**: Commodification of the branded self through selling of merchandise from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018c)

**Figure 6**: Commodification of the branded self through selling of merchandise from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2019b)

**Figure 7**: Commodification of the branded self through brand collaboration and sponsorships from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019a)

**Figure 8**: Commodification of the branded self through brand collaboration and sponsorships from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2019c)

**Figure 9**: Cool and fashionable from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019b)

**Figure 10**: Cool and fashionable from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2019d)

**Figure 11**: Being cool in relation to luxury and access to exclusive events from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018d)

**Figure 12**: Being cool in relation to luxury and access to exclusive events from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2019a)

**Figure 13**: Being cool in relation to access to celebrities from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019d)

**Figure 14**: Being cool in relation to access to celebrities from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2018b)

**Figure 15**: Selfie from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018a)

**Figure 16**: Selfie from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2017a)

**Figure 17**: “Functions of Selfies Practices” (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 943)
1. Introduction

The digital realm of Instagram with its 1 billion monthly active users grows increasingly relevant for discussion and analysis in social media studies (Statista, 2019). With more and more users and producers of media content on the platform cultivating a unique digital culture and exploring the platform’s possibilities, the platform offers many possible complex discussion topics in the context of media.

As Sarvas and Frohlich write in their 2011 book, “From snapshots to Social Media,” we have seemingly moved from The Portrait Path that spanned from the 1830s to 1888, through The Kodak Path that lasted from 1888 to the 1990s, into The Digital Path in which digital photography, the camera phone and social media reign. (p. 2) Guiding The Digital Path has been the invention of the camera phone, which compared to older versions of cameras, has allowed for the capturing of “the more fleeting and unexpected moments of surprise, beauty and adoration in the everyday.” (Manovich, 2016, p. 32) Manovich (2016) considers Instagram the epitome of the modern age of “digital photography,” (p. 11) and alongside this rise of Instagram as a social media platform, came the existence and growth in popularity of social media influencers, and as Sheldon & Bryant (2016) suggest, social media influencers as an academic topic is still a fairly under-researched topic (p. 89) Thus, the broad purpose of this paper is to present findings to further the academic discussions of micro-celebrities (“influencers”) on Instagram. The current lack of knowledge lies in the lack of combined academic research approaches into social media influencers, Instagram as a media platform, its media producers and representational practices practiced on the app. The research conducted on the Instagram app thus far has emphasized how Instagram influencers can be utilized in advertising campaigns and as a marketing tool. (Abidin, 2016; Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017)

With Instagram becoming more pervasive in current society and the younger generation, new research is necessary to identify its effects on media audiences and shifts in our relationship with digital media; in an increasingly media-saturated world, understanding “how processes of communication work in all their forms and guises” grows in significance (Hodkinson, 2011, p. 279). This thesis will attempt to contribute to this knowledge gap by focusing more on what makes an influencer an influencer in digital media as opposed to their purposes for marketing or advertising.

This thesis will aim to do this by examining one particular topic: the topic of computer-generated imagery (CGI) influencers vs. human influencers on Instagram. By examining one sub-component of the influencing industry (CGI influencers) and how it interrelates to other components of the industry (“regular” influencers), this thesis will try to determine if any cultural and representational practices exist, as well as help infer or derive more understanding of the culture and representational practices of Instagram influencers and media users and producers. The study of the users and producers, so-called “producers” (Praprotnik, 2016, p. 88), on the platform is academically relevant as it speaks to topics of representation, audiences, and how this form of media is produced in its own unique way and has a form of subtle ‘culture’ of its own.

Specifically, visual analyses of the content produced by CGI influencer, @LilMiquela’s presence on the platform will be conducted and compared to that to the online presence of
Instagram influencer, @emmachamberlain. An individual visual analysis on each account will be carried out and then the findings will be presented cohesively, comparing and contrasting the two and how the researcher personally interprets their forms of media and media practices.

The topic of Instagram influencers has captivated me ever since my first assignment in Key Themes where I conducted a very preliminary and broad look into the terms of “influencer” and “digital media” and how they coincide with the four media themes: society, audiences, production, and representation. In the Research Methodology course, I was given the opportunity to dive deeper into one of LilMiquela’s images to pilot a visual analysis study. This piqued my interest in CGI influencers and the topic of media representation and the manufacturing and production process of media content for Instagram.

As written in my Research Methodology assignment:

“Miquela, as a completely man-made account, character and personality, also links to the idea of whether or to what extent online identities from humans are also man-made. Miquela’s creators have produced a personal brand and a personal commodity, similar to the practices of influencers and the building of a personal brand. Comparable to Miquela, influencers edit their photographs and their digital presences to grow in popularity on the platform. (Abidin, 2016, p. 4)"

Abidin (2016) describes that as the platform becomes more popular, representational practices are becoming more and more common; “everyday Instagram users are beginning to model themselves after Influencers, taking up the ‘cultural scripts’ of the app itself.” (p. 87) These cultural scripts as well as the extent to the way that they form the experience of Instagram, how influencers embody them and how representational practices of Instagram influencers are undertaken on the platform. Thus, for this thesis, four specific cultural scripts of influencer culture will be analyzed and elaborated upon:

1. Calibrated amateurism, authenticity and relatability
2. Branding and self-commodification
3. Being “cool”
4. Selfies

These are the two research questions that I would like to focus on:

1. How does LilMiquela’s imaging mimic or respond to representational practices by traditional Instagram influencers such as @emmachamberlain?
2. What does this comparative analysis say about authenticity, the ‘manufacturing’ and ‘producing’ of media content by Instagram influencers?

To begin investigating and facilitate the analysis of influencer culture and Instagram as a social media platform, this thesis will first begin with a contextual background of social media, Instagram and influencers. Following the contextual background, the thesis will present a literature review of existing and relevant discussion topics in academia concerning the particular influencer cultural scripts examined in this case study. The theoretical framework for this paper will be clarified in the following section, followed by the research design and methods that will be used in this thesis. A brief section on ethics for this thesis
will follow. After the ethics section, I will present the findings of the data collection process and the analysis of the results. Finally, to summarize, concluding remarks including relating the results and findings back to the research question and the general purpose and aim of this study will be put forth along with limitations to this paper and opportunities and suggested paths for further or additional research.

2. Context

As this study will focus exclusively on the social media digital platform and app, Instagram, and influencers on the platform, a little contextual and background setting will be provided in this section.

Instagram was founded in October 2010 as a photo-sharing iOS and Android application with the unique feature of using hashtags (‘#’) to find other users’ photo content (Hwang & Cho, 2018, p. 1305; Marwick, 2015, p. 141); it has, since its invention, become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in the world with over one billion monthly active users. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016, p. 89; Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya, 2018, p. 49) The main user age bracket is between 18 to 34 years old, and its users use the platform for both private and professional purposes. (Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya, 2018, p. 49; Manovich, 2016, p. 31) Marwick (2015) describes Instagram succinctly as “a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption.” (p. 139)

Influencer culture is one culture that has distinctly arisen from the Instagram platform. (Abidin, 2016; Chae, 2018; Carter, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Meyers, 2017; Senft, 2013) Influencers are described as micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2015, p. 138) and opinion leaders (Song, Cho, & Kim, 2017), and those that have sought out the use of the Instagram platform to create influence and fame for themselves. Marwick (2015) succinctly writes, “Microcelebrity is a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status.” (p. 138) Papers have been written about this culture, though not as extensively as to cover all aspects of the new phenomenon. (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Abidin, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015) In this thesis, the topic of influencers will be discussed in the context of a comparison to a computer-generated imagery (CGI) influencer within the themes of media representation and media production.

Academic writings on computer-generated imagery influencers are extremely limited, but there has been plenty of online articles and news articles written on the topic and how it relates to post-feminism, post-humanism, and CGI influencers’ roles as micro-celebrities. (Sommer, 2018; Fishwick, 2018) Sommer (2018) brings up the question of authenticity in her article, stating that CGI influencers “whose identities, brands, and presented-selves reveal performativity and defamiliarize notions of perceived authenticity within social media”. Sommer (2018) suggests that CGI influencers can invite us to think about how many, if not most, digital identities are manufactured in varying levels. Hodkinson (2011) similarly has described virtual identities on the Internet as dancing on the line between real and artificial, and references Turkle (1995) who suggests that “cyborg identities on the internet...” can be “argued to be blurring the boundary between human and technology, authentic and artificial, real and representation.” (p. 274)
By comparing the visuals posted by a CGI influencer to a traditional influencer, I aim to investigate the few cultural scripts mentioned in the previous section in more detail and how a CGI influencer can purposefully or accidentally represent aspects of traditional influencer culture, including self-branding, calibrated amateurism, selfies, authenticity, and relatability (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Marwick, 2015; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Abidin, 2015, 2016, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Senft, 2013). These characteristics and the literature that has been written on them will be described in more detail below.

3. Literature Review

In this section, I will dive into the literature behind characteristics of the influencer media production process, which I have previously touched upon above as cultural scripts; concepts such as “calibrated amateurism”, “authenticity,” and “production and commodification of the self.” (Abidin, 2016; Chae, 2018; Carter, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Meyers, 2017; Senft, 2013) There has been a solid amount of literature already written and analyzed by scholars in social media studies, such as examinations into its uses and gratifications (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Huang & Su, 2018; Hwang & Cho, 2018) and into the terminologies of micro-celebrities and influencers (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2013).

The knowledge gap that this thesis will attempt to fill is, on one hand, to contribute to the growing research topic of social media influencers as it is a relatively under-researched topic (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016, p. 89), and on the other hand, to introduce the tools and characteristics behind the production of social media content to media users. As Sheldon & Bryant (2016) describe: the popularity of the platform necessitates more analysis into why users use Instagram and what gratifications are being fulfilled through the usage of Instagram. (p. 89) As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis will focus on four key cultural scripts, including calibrated amateurism, branding and self commodification, being ‘cool’ and the use of selfies; thus, a preliminary literature review on these cultural scripts was conducted and will be outlined below as a foundation for this thesis.

3.1 Calibrated Amateurism, authenticity and relatability

In Sarvas and Frohlich’s (2011) writings, they describe how the Digital Path that we are currently on has paved way for more amateurs to participate in the production of photography and that there is a slight shift away from gathering commercially produced photographs. In this vein, Abidin’s (2015, 2016, 2017) works are some of the most comprehensive pieces to examine social media influencers and their characteristics, and this thesis will aim to delve further into the vein of authenticity that she touches upon in her 2017 paper on calibrated amateurism. The concept of calibrated amateurism refers to a form of media production by social media influencers in which being an amateur is ‘faked’ to appear more “raw, unfiltered, spontaneous, and more intimate” to one’s audience. (Abidin, 2017, p.7)

Abidin defines the ‘calibration’ as three-fold. Firstly, it is defined by the complex ability to use a variety of digital tools to conduct their work. Secondly, the calibrated quality is seen in the adjustments of different forms of content in different forms of ‘realness’ when looking across multiple content platforms and channels — in the sense that some content is created with a more finished look and others more casually. Finally, calibration is shown by “various
performances of apparent spontaneity and revelations into the backstage with a larger standard of an emergent BTS (“behind the scenes”) genre of (scripted) performance.” (Abidin, 2017, p.7)

Abidin (2017) also discusses the five ways in which influencers enforce their relatability through their ‘amateurism’; these include 1) the frequency at which content is posted, suggesting no time or room for editing or rehearsing, 2) genre of the content which is normally day-to-day living and ‘ordinary’ content, 3) affordances of multiple platforms to show different versions of the same piece of content, 4) by breaking cultural norms to show that they are indeed ‘just like you’, and finally 5) the use of the behind-the-scenes aesthetic to suggest they are sharing a private moment with their media audience. (p. 8)

This concept of calibrated amateurism distinctly relates to the topics of the representation of authenticity in influencer work and the struggle for relatability (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Khamis, Ang & Welling (2017) describe authenticity as valuing “uniqueness, original expression, and independence from the market”. (p. 203) Yet this form of authenticity is often called into question in the topic of social media influencers, especially when this form of media production is influenced by external factors such as brand collaborations, sponsorships, and monetization as well as goals to increase popularity and fame by appealing to the target media audience.

Much of appealing to the target audience revolves around the topic of being relatable to some degree. Relatability is a key characteristic of influencers that separates them from traditional celebrities, as users perceive them as more trustworthy because of their amateur and “down to earth” nature. (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) Many influencers started out on the internet as regular users who slowly gained their fame and popularity through the posting of specific forms of content and strategic personal branding. As Berryman & Kavka (2017) suggest, this is done by “connecting intimacy to authenticity with self-promotion as the driver”. (p. 309)

3.2 Personal branding and commodification of the branded self

The second cultural script to be examined is personal branding and the commodification of the self-brand in efforts to monetize a digital following and collaborate with brands. The creation of the digital self is a task that is fairly complex and requires tremendous effort and planning; Lee’s (2010) research found that much work was done by social media users in “selecting, modifying, editing, storing, or uploading numerous photographs they have taken, and they have done so as part of a sort of “self-impression management” on the Web.” (p. 270) Self-branding is defined specifically as creating “a public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital”. (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017, p. 191), and its significance for career development and enhancement in the realm of influencers has been highlighted by many scholars. (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 3; Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2018, p. 2; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017, p. 191) As Berryman & Kavka (2017) write, the successes of influencers prove “the capacity for new media technologies to grant, and facilitate, fame in the twenty-first century through ‘the commercialization of amateur content.” (p. 309)

Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun (2017) have written extensively on the influencer marketing industry; specifically that the industry is set to hit at least 15 billion dollars in 2020. (p. 139) As such, brands are increasingly searching for influencers to partner with to create unique, sponsored content on the Instagram platform or act as endorsements for brands and
products both online and offline. (p. 139) This relates to Marwick’s (2015) writings of an “attention economy” — an economy that revolves around the power of influence and ability to draw attention, which has become a more and more valued power in a “media-saturated, information-rich world.” (Marwick, 2015, p. 138) In such a noisy digital media world, self-branding becomes ever more important to stand out and to create a unique and personal presence and connection to your target media audience. (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017, p. 194 - 195) Manovich (2016) connects this to Instagram posts in suggesting that many promotional pieces of content skew towards having a “more personal” vibe with its “‘being in the scene’ pathos”. (p. 135) As traditional forms of marketing become less effective, brands and businesses are now branching out into influencer marketing in hopes to find higher returns for their investments. (Carter, 2016, p. 2) This form of brand and influencer collaboration can be a paid-for Instagram feed photo post, it can be a number of Instagram Stories posts, it can also be hashtag or mentions of the brand in the Instagram caption. Influencers can charge up to hundreds of thousands of dollars for these collaborations. (Carter, 2016, p. 2)

While brand collaborations are one possibility of monetizing an online following, many influencers have also created merchandise such as branded clothing or accessories to sell onto their media audiences in efforts to generate revenue for their work (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018); this is often done by “combining commodification and celebrification, using the one to fan the flames of the other.” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 309) The art of creating the “branded and marketed” self is an art practiced by many influencers in the “promotional culture of advanced consumer capitalism,” (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017, p. 200) and will be further explored through the visual analyses undertaken for this thesis. (Schwarz, 2010, p. 179)

3.3 Being “cool”

One cultural script that appears in the influencer industry that closely mimics traditional celebrity culture is the idea of being “cool”. While Cambridge Dictionary defines being “cool” as “fashionable or attractive”, the word “cool” comes along with more connotations than simply being attractive or fashionable. In the social media world, being “cool” can be argued to relate to aspects of being traditionally attractive (Xu & Pratt, 2018, p. 959), of being wealthy or exhibiting luxury (Abidin, 2017, p. 7; Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.6; Marwick, 2015, p. 154), and of being popular and relevant as evidenced by exclusive access to celebrity and celebrity events (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.6).

Duffy & Hund (2015) describes this as being luxurious and having “the glam life, characterized by global travel, invitations to exclusive events, and access to luxury goods and swag.” (p. 6) This resembles traditional aspects of celebrity culture in which celebrities are thought to be rich, popular, and connected; influencers not only seek to be celebrities themselves, but they also seek to be associated with other celebrities to elevate their social standing. “By aligning their personas with established celebrities,” influencers portray the “glamorous aura of elite work, wherein prestige becomes a vital form of social currency.” (p. 6) Marwick (2015) touches on the concept of being “cool”, suggesting that Instagram influencers may be so admired because of their ability to be “seemingly effortless cool”. (p. 150) Marwick connects the idea of being ‘cool’ or ‘famous’ on Instagram with traditional notions of being popular, such as being popular in a high school setting.
3.4 Selfies

Finally, this thesis will observe the use of selfies in influencer culture by comparing the use of selfies by the influencers in question. As defined by Senft and Baym (2015), selfies can be considered a “cultural artifact” and “social practice” (p. 1588) in which “a self-portrait picture is taken by oneself using a digital camera or a smartphone for posting on social networking sites.” (Qiu, Lu, Yang, Qu & Zhu, 2015, p. 443) Tiidenberg (2018) writes extensively about selfies in her book, “Selfies: Why We Love and Hate Them”, and she describes selfies as “a self-representational object” (p. 323) and can be thought of as “photos we take of ourselves with an extended hand, or in a mirroring surface, and share on social media.” (p. 165)

Specifically, Tiidenberg clarifies that in order for a photograph to be classified as a ‘selfie,’ it must have the following three elements:

1. “photographic,
2. visually self-representative, and
3. networked object.” (p. 359)

Thus, selfies must be a photograph, taken by the producers themselves, and have the possibility of participating in digital networks. The images posted by both Miquela and Emma can both be generally classified as “photographs” as well as “networked objects” through their prevalence on Instagram. The visually self-representative component can only be shown through the evidence of an “extended hand” or the usage of a digital camera or smartphone to take one’s own photo in a “mirroring surface” are important, if not, essential components of what defines an image as a ‘selfie.’ (p. 165)

Further, Tiidenberg proposes the following six reasons as motivations for selfie practices. These six functions will act as guidance for the analysis in later chapters when discussing the influencers’ selfies and the images selected.

“Functions of Selfies Practices” (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 943)

In the online world, especially in the world of Instagram, selfies are all-pervasive (Marwick, 2015, p. 141) and often used as a tool to create an authentic representation of the self. (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2018, p. 2) And despite how all-pervasive selfies
are, they still have a relatively unfavorable reputation for being “a sign of a pathological self-obsession, lacking artistic merit, and are the reason why people behave in dangerously stupid ways.” (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 154, p. 1588) Abidin (2016) considers selfies a key component to the social practices that influencers partake in, and warns that the dismissing of selfies as frivolous is a mistake, and that in actuality, selfies act as a form of “subversive frivolity,” which she defines as “under-visibility and under-estimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive.” (p. 2) Abidin suggests that because selfies have been largely dismissed as lacking real meaning or productive result, influencers have been able to use selfies to aid in their quests for “self-branding, financial gains, and self-actualization pursuits.” (p. 16) Chae (2018) echoes Abidin’s work in stating the careful staging that goes into the creation of a selfie image, and that tremendous forethought and planning must be undertaken in crafting the perfect selfie, including picking out clothes, makeup, hairstyling, posing and lighting as well as post-photo processes such as editing. (p. 258)

Marwick (2015) goes one step further to say that not only are selfies carefully curated and staged, that these are done for promotional purposes, (p. 142) while Schwarz (2010) suggests something similar and says that “self-portraits function as a currency,” (p. 180) as they are in essence, being traded for fame and popularity on the Instagram app platform by influencers. Marwick continues on to describe selfies in the context of a very specific transitional process where we shift from taking photographs of others and of objects to taking photographs of ourselves for “the consumption of others.” (p. 141)

4. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks “are orientations or sweeping ways to see and think about the social world. They provide assumptions, concepts, and forms of explanation,” (Neuman, 2011, p. 85) With the formulation of this thesis, I aim to stay within the classical interpretivism paradigm with my visual analysis approach and in the attempt to form an understanding of “the world as it is experienced and made meaningful by human beings” (Collins, 2010, p. 39; Blaike, 2009, p. 131). I will be taking an exploratory approach in an attempt to openly look into and decipher the meanings behind these analyzed visuals.

Much of the analyses that will be undertaken in this thesis will be of a subjective matter which fits well within the interpretivism paradigm assumptions. “Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledges,” (Rose, 2001, p. 32) and as such, the visual analysis falls within the interpretative paradigm as it will be constructed from my interpretations and subjective view. My subjective view is colored by my upbringing in an age where technology and the internet flourishes, where much of my work and schooling has involved the use of digital media, and by my personal interest and following of Instagram influencers and social media celebrities. This may lead to an overly optimistic view of Instagram and an exaggerated assumption of the significant role social media plays in our everyday life. This view, however, may also help with the understanding of Instagram in a more holistic manner and the understanding of the more subtle context and thought processes of others who grew up in a digital era. These components surely cloud my interpretations and will influence the findings of this paper, no matter how objective I attempt to undertake my analysis. Interpretivism aims to discover meaning and take on the topic with an inductive approach; it is inductive with the intent of starting with the data in order to construct the theory and to move from the specifics into the
more descriptive general of observation and understanding the visuals and their representations. (Neuman, 2011, p. 70)

This thesis will take on an exploratory approach that is slightly limited in nature. Several cultural scripts have been identified and visuals have been selected based on these cultural scripts as parameters to constrain this thesis into a viable topic as well as realistic and hopefully answerable research questions. The defining of the cultural script as parameters is grounded in the theory mentioned in the previous sections; the definitions and process of categorization of the samples were founded on academic work by scholars such as Abidin (2016, 2017) for calibrated amateurism, Duffy & Hund (2015) for the portrayal of a luxurious and cool lifestyle, Khamis, Ang & Welling (2017) for self-branding, and Marwick (2015) for selfies. While the analysis is exploratory and aided by theory and guidelines, I hope to draw more conclusions regardless of which direction the analysis takes this paper. (Greener, 2013, p. 4)

The beauty of digital media alongside its billions of media users and producers is the variability of opinion and thoughts of each individual user; each piece of content is constantly being interpreted by each individual in their unique way of seeing the world. Manovich (2016) relates this more precisely to Instagram in stating that when it comes to photography for the Instagram platform, the goal is “making visual images that communicate through their [producers] techniques, styles, and visual choices —and not only content.” (p. 40)

McKee (2003) writes on the process of textual analysis; in his publication, he identifies a piece of ‘text’ as anything that “produces an interpretation”. (p. 4) Specifically:

“Textual analysis is a methodology for gathering information about sense-making practices, that is, how members of various cultures interpret the world around them. We analyse texts using a form of ‘forensic’ analysis and treating them like clues (or ‘traces’) of how people have made sense of the world.” (p. 63)

Naturally, an element of interpretation comes alongside this form of textual analysis, as different people make sense of the world in different ways. But as McKee suggests, as a digital photograph produces meaning and interpretation, there is legitimacy in it as a research method to analyze and understand the more abstract. Collins (2010) describes it as photo ethnography and suggests this method for understanding “structures of culture and people from within” and to analyze a broad topic. (p. 188) Neuman (2011) considers visual analysis a qualitative research method, and writes that in a visual analysis, “the evidence is just as “hard” and physical as the numeric measures of attitudes, social pressure, intelligence, and the like found in a quantitative study.” (p. 177) In a similar fashion, McKee (2003) argues that objectivity is difficult in the face of some forms of social research; “it is difficult to see how the study of human sense-making can be truly scientific. Human reactions aren't the same thing as chemical reactions.” (p. 120) Neuman (2011) summarizes it succinctly to suggest, “facts are fluid and embedded within a meaning system; they are not impartial, objective, or neutral.” (p. 108)

4.1 Theoretical thematics

The theoretical thematics of this thesis will center around the topics of media production and representation in particular as well as larger societal impacts of influencers and the power that they wield. The cultural scripts that will be examined are characteristics of the media
production process of this specific niche of media producers; in the comparative exploration of the CGI influencer and the human influencer, I hope to understand whether the CGI influencer reveals representational practices in relation to traditional human Instagram influencers.

5. Methodology and Research Design

5.1 Case Study Selection

The selection process of Emma Chamberlain and Lil Miquela as case study subjects of this thesis was a highly selective process on the part of the researcher. Lil Miquela was of interest to the study of CGI influencers as she is one of the most prominent CGI influencers currently on Instagram (Fishwick, 2018; Sommer, 2018; Shieber, 2018), and Emma was selected by the researcher on account of two specific reasons: one, the researcher has been following Emma’s content for over a year and has familiarity on the influencer and the relevant context for more thorough contextual analyses, and two, the researcher found her cross-platform presence on both Youtube and Instagram useful for understanding more perspectives on her media production. The contextual aspect of the visual analysis process will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.3, but it is highly useful to have cross-platform media to access for analyzing multifaceted media (Abidin, 2017).

As such, it is also important to disclose that Emma is not solely an Instagram influencer, but is more well-known as a Youtube vlogger who creates regular content on her channel, boasting close to 8.3 million subscribers. (Chamberlain, 2019h) Her content is cross-platform as she often shares about her Instagram photographs’ behind-the-scenes on her Youtube channel, and shares sneak peeks of her Youtube content on Instagram. (Chamberlain, 2017c) The audio-visual platform of Youtube also offers more ‘explanatory’ possibilities for Emma in the media production process and gives more insight as opposed to the static visual images on Emma’s Instagram feed.

The researcher, in her initial research, also found that Emma’s first Instagram post was posted on June 22nd, 2015, (Chamberlain, 2019g) which precedes the creation of her Youtube channel account, which was created June 13th, 2016. (Chamberlain, 2019h) It is thus hard to discern and assume which platform, if either, was used for microcelebrity purposes first as well as if the platforms work in conjunction as Instagram has become a route to internet fame in and of itself. Similarly, one of Emma’s Youtube videos (Chamberlain, 2017c) revealed the amount of effort and dedication that Emma puts into her Instagram account, which again, suggests her recognition of the significance of her presence of Instagram. Emma has posted over 500 images on her Instagram feed since 2015, some of which are high quality photoshoots and professional and paid collaborations, which can be considered to be a consistent and professional use of the platform as an Instagram influencer to accompany and grow her reach, popularity and brand online.

5.2 Data Collection

The qualitative data collection process was a selective process; based on the cultural scripts identified, visuals applicable to the category of script were selected from the respective Instagram influencers’ online Instagram feeds. The cultural scripts are grounded in the theory and research mentioned in Section 3, and the visuals were allocated by use of these
theories and definitions as a basis for working within pre-established parameters. This is the process that was undertaken in regards to the collection of the subjects for the visual analyses, and visual analyses were conducted on eight comparable images for the CGI influencer and eight for the human influencer. Hearn (2018b) indicates that in the context of self-branding in the digital space, a “self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries” is evident. (p. 198) The images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries would be similar to the images examined in this thesis as LilMiquela and Emma Chamberlain can be argued to be a part of the mainstream culture industry of Instagram influencers.

The images fall under the categories of influencer practices as presented in the previous section including the use of selfies, the commodification of the branded self, being “cool” and calibrated amateurism at work. The sixteen selected images can be found in the appendix of this thesis. All images were downloaded in their full, original sizes for this study and the ability to zoom in on all elements of each visual. All current live visuals since the creation of the influencers’ Instagram accounts were considered in the selection process, and along with the image, the captions that accompany the images were also gathered and added to the appendix of this thesis. If a visual could fall into multiple categories of cultural scripts, the most predominant cultural script as determined by the researcher was chosen. The limitations of this decision will be mentioned in the following section.

5.3 Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach was utilized for the analysis portion of this thesis, consisting primarily of visual analysis as well as textual analysis of the Instagram captions.

As the internet becomes an increasingly visual medium (Liu & Suh, 2017, p. 13; Marwick, 2015, p. 138), a visual analysis seems most fitting in the sense that it allows for the capturing and interpreting of more details in comparison to other analysis methods such as interviews, content analysis or data analysis. As a digital photograph produces meaning and interpretation, there is legitimacy in it as a research method to analyze and understand the more abstract. (McKee, 2003) Collins (2010) describes it as photo ethnography and suggests this method for understanding “structures of culture and people from within” and to analyze a broad topic. (p. 188) Neuman (2011) considers visual analysis a qualitative research method, and writes that in a visual analysis, “the evidence is just as “hard” and physical as the numeric measures of attitudes, social pressure, intelligence, and the like found in a quantitative study.” (p. 177) When it comes to a visual platform like Instagram, one can discover many interesting notions simply by observing as well as performing multiple visual method techniques (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 347), including the formal analysis, contextual analysis as well as discourse analysis, drawing from Neuman (2011) and Collins (2010).

In a visual analysis, details can be pulled out by the individual conducting the analysis that may be more descriptive and comprehensive, and in the case of Instagram, a “visual digital medium” (Marwick, 2015, p. 141), it allows the examination of more subtle cues or cultural scripts of representation and self-branding. Unlike a quantitative study, a qualitative study reveals data that is more “voluminous, diverse, and nonstandard.” (Neuman, 2011, p. 204)
In the context of the discourse analysis method, Collins (2010) found that visual research can often involve the investigation into representation, and a “dual perspective” of analysis: content and context (p. 138). Content in the sense of the meaning of the visual as well as the subject and the setting within the visual; context in the sense of “Who produced the art object, and for whom? Why was a photograph taken of this person?” (p. 138) This form of analysis allows for a significantly more complex analysis process than that of a content analysis, for example. One of the major shortcomings of the content analysis is, as Hodkinson (2011) describes, “rather than being carefully understood as part of the particular context in which they present themselves to viewers, selected segments of media texts are extracted and simplified into instances of abstract categories.” (p. 72) When media elements are extracted from their original environment, much of the context, meaning, and representation within the visual is also lost. Visual methods “add to traditional methods by capturing more detail and a different kind of data than verbal and written methods.” (Glaw, Inder, Kable & Hazelton, 2017, p. 1) Thus, a visual analysis allows for more liberal and broad interpretations of visuals, taking into account both the content and context of the art piece.

For the purpose of a visual analysis in the realm of discourse analysis, Collins (2010) suggests three layers of analysis examining the composition, content and design, as well as context, the background, how the visual is presented, and for what purpose it is used. (p. 140) She proposes three stages to take on this form of analysis:

“In the first stage, which could be termed a pre-iconographic description, all details of the image are systematically described. In the second stage, which could be termed the iconographic analysis, the meaning of the image is established by using knowledge from beyond the image, along with knowledge coming from other, comparable images and information about the image’s product and use. Although the focus rests on analysing the image itself, both the narrow and broader contexts of the image are taken into consideration in its interpretation. Finally, in the third stage, which could be termed the iconologic interpretation, the unintended meanings of the image can be reconstructed by considering its historic, political, social and cultural context.” (Collins, 2010, p. 140)

The pre-iconographic description stage that Collins describes closely resembles a formal visual analysis conducted in art history on “what we can see” in a visual; in the formal analysis, the subjects, composition, and characteristics within the image are described in detail aided by the following categories: scale, line, tone, form, pictorial space, lighting, texture, pattern, and color. (Khan Academy, 2018) This will be the first stage of visual analysis, followed by a contextual analysis as Collins describes an “iconographic analysis” where we establish meaning from knowledge that is not derived from just the image, but also from external sources and comparable images. Alongside looking to Instagram and popular news sources for context, the Youtube presence of Emma Chamberlain was also taken into consideration in the analysis process as it oftentimes offers a cross-platform perspective that allows more layers of context to the creation of one piece of media and may offer a “behind-the-scenes aesthetic” that adds to the visual analysis (Abidin, 2017, p. 3). As Abidin (2017) describes, “each of their social media platforms and the various channels on each platform may be curated for specific content and reasons” and by examining the Youtube videos relevant to the selected Instagram visuals, more light can be shed on the medium (p. 9) Finally, in the last stage of the process as outlined by Collins, the general implications and further interpretations for the selected cultural scripts will be reflected upon and discussed;
for the purpose and feasibility of this thesis, only the social and cultural contexts of the visuals will be established as the historical and political contexts for all sixteen visuals would be too complex to analyze in just one research paper.

To accompany the visual analyses, a textual analysis on the captions of the chosen images and how they are similar or different will be carried out to further compare the two influencers and their unique practices. The method employed in this thesis draws primarily from Smith & Sanderson’s study of athletes on Instagram (2015, p. 349), in which they took on “a grounded theory approach using constant comparative methodology” (p. 349) to allow categories to emerge from their analysis rather than pre-define categories through which to analyze the captions. They chose this method as they considered the captions to be more dynamic than the visuals and with the notion that the caption may not directly relate to the image itself. Similar to Smith & Sanderson’s (2015) study, this study will treat each caption as a unit of analysis and the researcher will take on a form of active reading, which “involves researchers searching for meanings and patterns, rather than just casually reading through the data. This approach allows the identification of possible patterns to emerge and be shaped. This process also involves making notes about what is interesting in the data and producing initial categories.” (p. 349) The captions will be analyzed both individually and in relation to the image to examine whether it provides context to the image during the contextual analysis or discourse analysis stage of the visual analysis process.

5.4 Limitations

There are naturally limitations to the visual analysis method and to the research process for this thesis. One large shortcoming includes a selection bias and a selective observation process both exist in the research process as the visuals and influencers were hand-selected by the researcher rather than chosen randomly. It is possible that because the visuals were chosen based on the predefined cultural scripts, it could simply be reinforcing preconceived notions rather than proffering a neutral, unbiased and holistic perspective on the entire scope of Instagram influencers. (Neuman, 2011, p.4) Similarly, visuals were categorized only into one sole cultural script rather than into multiple categories or with varying degrees of multiple scripts. This is a limitation in the capabilities of examining how the cultural scripts may interact or overlay with one another across samples.

Another limitation in relation to the case studies selected is that, as mentioned above in Section 5.1, Emma Chamberlain herself is a Youtube vlogger who rose to fame due to her efforts on the video platform. Thus, Emma is not exclusively an Instagram influencer, unlike Miquela. As discussed above, the researcher took into consideration the fact that Emma’s Instagram account predated her Youtube channel in addition to her regular use of the Instagram platform in terms of her consistency in posting high quality images to be notions that Emma is indeed an Instagram influencer. But this is a limitation to the ability of studying Emma’s role as an Instagram influencer on its own, completely separate and apart from her Youtube entity and presence.

Finally, it would be nearly impossible to analyze every component and facet of the complex digital world of Instagram and microcelebrities in one thesis, which is why some element of selection is required to create a realistic scope. Moreover, Lil Miquela has over 520 images posted on her Instagram account while Emma Chamberlain has over 530 images live on Instagram as of the writing of this thesis; an individual analysis of each of these visuals would be unrealistic for the scope of this thesis. This is therefore why the specific cultural
scripts and limited visuals were chosen; in doing so, this thesis will not be touching on any other elements of Instagram as an app, its features nor other varying topics of discussion on social media influencers. In the discussion and conclusion, general remarks will be included on the overall Instagram feeds and media content of both influencers in its entirety to present a holistic overview, but as mentioned above, only the selected visuals will be analyzed in detail along with context to each visual.

6. Ethics

Ethical concerns are an important aspect of the research process to address as it tells us “what is or is not legitimate to do or what “moral” research procedure involves.” (Neuman, 2011, p. 145) There are a few potential issues to cover: privacy and consent. The first issue relates to the right to privacy for both influencers; Instagram is a public forum and its data is public information. This study took on a form of digital covert observation, in which in efforts to portray the most realistic form of understanding for the platform and the natural cultural scripts by social media influencers, a level of non-participatory observation was employed. (Neuman, 2011, p. 152)

As the data analyzed was public domain, no consent was required but as an act of courtesy, an explanatory email was sent to both Emma Chamberlain and the team that runs LilMiquela’s account informing them of the existence of this Master’s thesis where they will be used as case studies. Both of these emails have not been responded to as of September 2019. From Neuman (2011), “the ethical researcher violates privacy only to the minimum degree necessary and only for legitimate research purposes. In addition, he or she protects the information on research participants from public disclosure.” (p. 154) Thus, this thesis will only be read by those absolutely necessary for the academic and cataloguing purposes of this paper, which includes both staff and students.

7. Presentation and Analysis of Results

As written in the previous section on data analysis, the visual analysis portion of this paper will take on a threefold approach as suggested by Collins (2010). First, a formal analysis will take place in which the physical attributes of the visual will be noted, then a contextual analysis will be taken into consideration in which external factors and context will be provided to layer meaning into the visual. In each of the following sections, the analyses’ findings will be presented in aggregate for each cultural script. The final step of the visual analysis: the discourse analysis examining unintended meanings and representation from the visuals will be reflected upon generally during the analysis process by the researcher and summarized in the discussion section as a whole.

7.1 Calibrated amateurism, authenticity & relatability

Four visuals are involved in the comparative analysis of the first cultural script of calibrated amateurism, authenticity and relatability; specifically, Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4 as shown in the Appendix of this thesis.
7.1.1 Calibrated amateurism

In Figure 1, LilMiquela is shown to be eating a sandwich and appears to be in the process of taking a bite when this ‘photograph’ is snapped of her. Miquela is wearing a red jumper underneath half-undone denim overalls and is seated outside of a shop that has a neon sign that reads ‘sandwiches.’ The glass door of the store is wide open and an employee can be seen behind Miquela inside the store. There are four sandwiches on the table along with a pack of snacks, a plastic bottle of water and paper wrappings presumably from the sandwiches. Miquela’s hair is pulled into two buns on the sides of her head, her fringe cuts cleanly across her forehead, and she has two thin lines cut into her left eyebrow. Her right hand is holding an uneaten sandwich, her mouth is parted and her eyes are staring directly into the camera.

In Figure 2, the photograph of Emma appears to be taken during nighttime as the overall image is very dark; the background is almost completely black except dark red hues in the horizon. Emma has aviator sunglasses, a white singlet, two choker necklaces and a wristband on. Her hand is outreached and her eyes are staring off to the left of the image. The photograph is not sharp as Emma is out of focus, and she looks as if she is reaching for something and unaware of the photograph being snapped.

Both images broadly appear to be photographs; though upon closer inspection, one may notice that Miquela is not actually a biological human and this is not entirely a photograph in the traditional sense of the word. Miquela’s visual seems to be a mixture of a photograph as well as a digital rendering and animation of Miquela inserted into this real-life situation. The way the glass behind Miquela reflects as well as both the objects within the photo and the person within the shop suggest that these are real elements, yet the way Miquela’s smooth facial and skin features and both the shadowing and highlights reveal her artificial quality. The amount of texture on Miquela’s face, her hair, her clothing and the objects surrounding her shows how much work went into the creation of realism in this visual.
Figure 1 and Figure 2 were selected for this cultural script because at first glance, both images imply a candid and snapshot nature. Contextually, this is a form of calibrated amateurism in the sense that while it appears to be an easy and simple photograph, it is in actuality a piece of digital art that has been planned, sculpted and created with more than just a simple “snap” from a camera.

When considering Miquela’s work, seen in Figure 1, the importance of remaining relatable is exemplified in that her creators made the conscious decision of producing images representing everyday experiences. Miquela, despite being a CGI character, still being portrayed as holding a sandwich and looking straight into the camera (Figure 1), and in the process of ‘[...] eating my feelings’, as the caption suggests, shows that the creators have deliberately aimed at a sense of relatability. The caption is not only a joke but also suggests that Miquela is a three-dimensional character with a personality and a sense of humor. The calibrated amateurism is further supported by the choice of portraying Miquela with a slightly open mouth and an otherwise expressionless face, indicating that she has been caught off guard right before eating her food. The caption further supports this statement, showing that the artists were not only trying to re-create a random image, but rather that Miquela has just gone through a difficult moment in life and is using food as a form of comfort and support. Needless to say, the creation of the image involves a lot of strategic thought and monetary resources. Although this image may first be seen as to aim towards relatability through calibrated amateurism, the followers are all aware that Miquela is a CGI production and that re-producing this type of content is not something that someone without adequate resources can do. In this way, Miquela’s account always has this subtle undertone with it, which is that money, time and human resources all go into producing each of these images, and this sets her, or her creators, apart as an entity with status and reach similar to that of a traditional celebrity.

Emma’s photograph is blurry and appears to have been taken at night judging by the darkness and lack of lighting on the background of the photograph. She is out of focus and does not appear to be looking at the camera. However, the contextual analysis revealed a Youtube video by Emma showing the behind the scenes of this photograph titled “GOING TO EXTREME LENGTHS FOR INSTAGRAM PHOTOS” (Chamberlain, 2017). This 11-minute video shows Emma and her friend spending the day taking photographs specifically for Instagram; Figure 2 is one of the photographs produced on this day. This exemplifies calibrated amateurism as the photograph implies a lack of effort in its amateur quality, when in actuality, tremendous thought, planning, and execution was utilized in the creation of this visual for Instagram. It could be suggested that Miquela’s visual, in its complex creation, is similarly an attempt to portray the lack of ‘care’ and general effortlessness in the production of media content for Instagram as an influencer.

Figure 2 plays towards the relatability side, with much effort and conscious thought going into producing and selecting particular images that mimic amateur photographs. The deliberate blurriness and her stance indicating she’s unaware of the picture being taken play towards amateurism and the need for relatability. However, with the subsequent Youtube video depicting the process behind taking these types of pictures, Emma states her struggles about the painstaking process of taking the right Instagram photos. This subtlety, yet probably deliberate nature, reminds the viewer of her high social status and the pressure that falls onto her from being popular online. The collective group of social media posts linked to the process of taking this picture is therefore trying to maintain that balance by
itself, with the more obvious picture and down to earth Youtube video tipping the scales towards relatability, and the overlaid context from the Youtube video counter-balancing the overall implication by reintroducing the pressure that comes with fame.

7.1.2 Authenticity & relatability

In Figure 3, Miquela is shown sitting on the countertop, cross-legged with her head resting on her hand. She is wearing a black jumper, two necklaces, shorts, and mismatching long socks. Miquela is holding a pink mug in her left hand and has her hair in two hair buns on the sides of her face. The location appears to be a kitchen setting as the space features a sink, a coffee maker, salt and pepper shaker and miscellaneous utensils. Miquela has a small smirk on her face and is looking into the camera. The lighting falls onto Miquela in a way that creates both shadows and dimensions to her character and emits a sense of realism to her otherwise smooth facial features.

Figure 4’s main subject is Emma Chamberlain, who sits on the floor in a white sports bra with ‘Tommy’ written on it and black sweatpants. Her hair is pulled into a messy top bun with many messy strands of hair falling around her face. She is in the process of biting into a slice of pepperoni pizza and is staring with an apathetic look into the camera. The background of the image is sparse with nothing in particular to note other than the laptop on the ground in the far left.

Figure 3 and 4 were selected as a show of relatability primarily because both Emma and Miquela appear relaxed in their facial features, hand placements, and overall body posture and also appear casual in nature with a lack of “production” in terms of editing, lighting or staging of the backgrounds of the visuals. Miquela’s photograph is once again a mixture of a real photograph taken of a kitchen and the digital image of Miquela being added to the setting. The way the shadows fall on Miquela and the depth of Miquela’s facial features present a hyperreal nature in which the artistic representation is exceptionally detail-oriented with the goal of depicting a real human. Yet the mismatch of the socks as well, as the way
she leans on her hand casually on the kitchen counter with her mug, sculpts not just an “I'm just like you” feeling, but also an intimate feeling of being a part of her private life as we are invited into her kitchen.

Similarly, Emma’s photograph appears unstaged with a bland background; Emma sits in her pajamas and is in the process of eating a slice of pizza. Her hair is unkempt, her body posture is hunched over, and she looks generally displeased at the photographs being taken of her. Contextually, this image was posted in a set of seven total images in which Emma is posing with the slice of pizza. In contrast with some of Emma’s other more staged, posed and produced Instagram photographs, this visual appears to be unplanned and relatable in the sense of eating pizza in an untidy state.

These two visuals can also be connected to Abidin’s mention of the five ways that influencer enforce relatability; predominantly, these visuals exhibit the ordinary and day-to-day genre of their lifestyle. (Abidin, 2017) One interesting note is despite the rather unglamorous nature of the photograph, Emma is wearing an exclusive sports bra from premium brand Tommy Hilfiger that retails for around 40 dollars; this element gives a small glimpse of luxury in an otherwise relatively lackluster photograph.

Similarly, Miquela’s image comes with the accompanying caption, “Eyoo good afternoon. Your girl is in the desert thanks to @youtubemusic, ready to soak up all the @coachella goodness. Are any of you out here? Who are you excited to see? #sponsored,” which reveals that this is actually a sponsored post where Youtube has supposedly invited Miquela to the popular music festival, Coachella. This caption context can be argued to detract from the cultural script of being ‘relatable’ as ordinary followers of Miquela probably do not get sponsorships from Youtube, and may suggest that this digital rendering is less casual, authentic and unstaged as it appears.

7.2 Personal branding and commodification of the branded self

Within the area of personal branding and the commodification of the branded social media self, both Miquela and Emma Chamberlain have multiple instances in their Instagram feed. For the examination of this cultural script, four images were selected.

The commodification of the personal brand including opportunities for releasing merchandise based on a personal brand or conduct brand sponsorships and collaborations with established companies and brands. In Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8, aspects of being popular and internet famous begin to emerge and are more obvious than in other visuals; only those that have achieved a true level of online stardom are able to release their own merchandise and apparel line or partner with large brands such as Calvin Klein, Samsung, Tommy Hilfiger, and Hollister.
7.2.1 Commodification of the branded self: merchandise

Miquela is seen in Figure 5 standing in front of a plain white background. She is wearing a blue singlet with a graphic of her face and the word “overheating” over it as well as high waisted light blue pants on. Her arms are behind her head, and she has her hair in the regular buns on the sides of her head with a few loose strands hanging out. She is staring directly at the camera. The texture of her face, as well as the way the light falls onto Miquela’s arms, face and neck show depth and make her appear lifelike.

In Figure 6, Emma is smiling with one arm and one leg raised. She has on a blue T-shirt that features a graphic of Emma as a centaur with an iced coffee and a rainbow, trees, and mountains in the background; the T-shirt is tucked into high-waisted denim shorts. Emma seems to be standing on a balcony, and natural forms of clouds and trees along with architectural forms of ordinary-looking buildings can be seen in the background.

Figure 5 and Figure 6 both proffer more meaning with context taken into consideration as both images were posted in efforts to sell the influencers’ merchandise. In Figure 6, Emma’s shirt can be seen to feature her as a centaur and is a form of commodification of the branded self which her brand being relatively quirky and random. Emma has commodified her personal brand not just through her fame but also by capturing her unique personality and why her followers enjoy her content and love her as an influencer. Emma, herself, is essentially the product and why she is the main focus on this piece of merchandise.

Similarly, in Figure 5, Lil Miquela’s merchandise also features an image of her face with the text “overheating”, which is seemingly a play at her being a robot. Her recognizable hairstyle and face are commodified by this photograph and product; she is the brand and she is what is being sold to her followers.

The perks of having a loyal following in the “attention economy” as Marwick (2015) writes are vast. Millions of followers are on hand who love the personal brands that have been designed by both Emma and Miquela, and the purchasing of this merchandise can be
thought of as a way of supporting your favorite online personas and to be closer to them. By examining Emma’s caption in more detail, the phrase “[...] if u wanna twin w me” stands out — if you’d like to dress similar to Emma, you can easily do so by purchasing her merchandise. The way that the caption has been constructed with shorthand and emojis also gives off a vibe of a lack of effort and casual nature. In reality, however, the production of a branded apparel line requires much planning, investment, and thoughtful promotional tactics. Figure 6 could technically also be a form of this carefully planned promotional tactic.

As Berryman & Kavka (2017) have suggested, this exemplifies the coming together of “commodification and celebritification, using the one to fan the flames of the other.” (p. 309) In the branding of their own online personas, both Emma and Miquela are able to then monetize their digital characters to sell merchandise to their loyal followers.

7.2.2 Commodification of the branded self: sponsorship

![Figure 7: Commodification of the branded self through brand collaboration and sponsorships from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019a)](image)

In Figure 7, Miquela is seated on the floor, leaning in the corner of a bright pink room. Although the pink of the room seems to be digitally generated in nature, it is still a relatively dark photograph in terms of lighting. Miquela is holding a phone up in her right hand and appears to be looking into the phone, and she has on a turtleneck sweater, high-waisted pants, and dark boots. The pictorial space is constructed in such a way that shows depth as Miquela’s feet are bigger than her head as her feet are ‘closer’ to the camera. The illusion of dimension creates a realistic and three-dimensional photograph that shows a “sense of logic, placing us at a particular point of space in relation to that which we are viewing” as described by Khan Academy (2018).

![Figure 8: Commodification of the branded self through brand collaboration and sponsorships from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2019c)](image)

The patterns and textures on Miquela’s sweater, along with the spiral lines on the pink walls seem ‘trippy’ as they form an optical illusion known as the moire effect (Baraklianou, 2014); this happens when multiple patterns placed closely together in television or images end up being distorted. Baraklianou (2014) writes, “the misalignment occurs due to the frequency of the photographed pattern coinciding with the frequency of the capturing chip.” (p. 81) What is interesting to note is that this happens when something is photographed, which suggests
that Miquela's creators purposefully created this effect in attempts to suggest it is indeed a real photograph taken of Miquela.

Figure 8 is an image of Emma, looking tanned and fit by societal standards, seated in a pool-side recliner chair. She has on a light blue bathing suit, sunglasses, a necklace as well as a red hat with monstera plant prints. Emma's hands are behind her head and appear to be adjusting the hat that she is wearing; Emma is looking down in the photograph, perhaps unaware of the photo being taken. The shadow of the person taking the photograph can be seen as well as the phone that is taking the photograph, but there are no other major elements in the background of the image.

These two photographs were chosen for this cultural script as another form of commodification of the branded self conducted by influencers: brand sponsorships and collaborations. Through the growth of a personal brand, influencers can easily exercise their influence on their followers and fans using their platform of millions of followers. In Figure 7, Miquela does just that with a partnership with Samsung Galaxy, who is tagged on Instagram as a paid sponsorship. The image itself features a lot of bright colors in the background with the dimensions of the photograph arguably pulling you into the subject of the image, Miquela. She is holding the product in her hand and may be taking a selfie of herself using it.

In Figure 8, Emma is seen in an uncomplex photograph on a pool chair with a swimsuit on and a cap. The background is bland, and there are not many components to the photograph. The main subject is Emma, and the image does not look particularly glamorous, edited or high quality. Context plays a role as it reveals that the tag of the photograph which says this is a paid sponsorship with Hollister, the swimwear brand. While the formal analysis sets the technical basis of the image and draws attention to, for example, the shadows in the image show the phone and the photo being taken of Emma, the context is what gives meaning to the purpose of the piece of media.

Both Figure 7 and 8 are clear sponsored posts as disclosed by both influencers in the posts. Interestingly, even in images that do show a specific level of fame, wealth and exclusivity, the struggle to be relatable is still prevalent in the overall presentation of the visual. The use of humor in captions for relatability can be thought to be attempts to look like they're trying 'less hard' than they actually are when producing content for Instagram. In Figure 7, Miquela's caption includes the phrases, "[...] Naming him Samuel Phoington III. We're tight. I love him. And he'd never make a toaster joke about me." This casual nature plays off the carefully outlined and professional collaboration with Samsung. In a comparable fashion, the caption of Figure 8, "I edited this picture to make me look tan im not actually tan at all" accompanies an image sponsored by billion-dollar brand Hollister. The caption seems to offset the brand collaboration by showing that even influencers edit their photographs and that Emma has imperfections and insecurities just like her followers. The caption seems to downplay the subsidized brand deal that most of Emma's followers would not be able to attain and thus, may not be able to relate to.

7.3 Being “cool”

As mentioned in the literature review, the traditional sense of the word “cool” involves being fashionable, but in the broader sense, the word has evolved to far more complex meanings involving being not just fashionable, but effortless, wealthy, exclusive and having fame. In
this section, six separate images will be examined under 3 sub-cultural aspects of being cool online.

7.3.1 Fashionable

Figure 9 is an image of Miquela looking down at the camera in front of a plain white background. Miquela is wearing a cropped denim singlet, denim jeans, a necklace and an oversized denim jacket that hangs off her elbows. Miquela is showing her midriff and has a yellow popsicle in her mouth. Her hair is in two buns on the sides of her face with loose strands and a sharply cut fringe. The pictorial space offers dimension as Miquela's face seems to be further from the camera than her legs; her head is tilted down and gives the impression that this photograph was taken at an upward angle.

In Figure 10, Emma is seen standing in front of a mirror; the side of Emma's face can be seen as well as the full mirrored version of Emma. She has on a black leather bikini top, tight, colorful and striped high-waisted pants, a choker, hoops, a wristband, and thin red sunglasses. Her hands are on her pants and appear to be adjusting them, but Emma is looking straight at herself in the mirror. The background of the image seems to be the interior of a house, but nothing major stands out otherwise. Emma looks thin and tanned in the photograph. The colors of the photograph appear highly contrasted, and the lighting seems dramatic, dark and full of shadows.

Figures 9 and 10 offer a lot of contextual meaning as both of these images were set at the Coachella music festival. The Coachella music festival is known specifically for exemplifying “millennial cool,” being “a playground for the rich” and being the “world’s most sought after selfie destination”. (Beaumont-Thomas, 2019) Emma has mentioned in multiple Youtube videos (Chamberlain, 2018c, 2019e, 2019f) that Coachella is a big deal for her personally, and that for the 2019 edition of Coachella, she spent four months picking out her outfits for the event. This behind-the-scenes peek discloses the amount of effort and time dedicated to attending a “cool” event and to look “cool” whilst at the event. She has also suggested that she has spreadsheets and powerpoint presentations that help her decide on which outfits to wear for Coachella, and she has dedicated a portion of her closet space specifically to
Coachella outfits (Chamberlain, 2019a) The outfit shown in Figure 10 features pieces from luxury brand Moschino as well as UNIF, American Apparel and Dolls Kill. Interesting to note is on the last day of the event, Emma took photographs of her outfits to post on Instagram but did not attend the last day of the event (Chamberlain, 2019f); this further hints at the priority that taking photographs for Instagram has.

This all goes to suggest that a lot of effort and work has gone into the crafting of the fashionable outfit and into the crafting of the photograph seen in Figure 10. The photograph is of high quality, in focus and has an element of artistic ability and thought in which Emma is staring at herself in the mirror without the image being a selfie; the camera is shown to be a professional DSLR camera rather than a phone in her Youtube video (Chamberlain, 2019b). In the same video (Chamberlain, 2019b), Emma highlights the significance of posting Instagram pictures at this event and shares multiple versions of photographs taken in the same outfit at the same location.

While Figure 10 shows a relatively high-quality photograph of Emma in an expensive outfit at a fashionable event, it is still accompanied by the caption “me being conceited”. The joke and honesty in the caption seem to highlight and make light of Emma staring at herself in the mirror; it also juxtaposes the visual itself and grounds the level of “coolness” in the image as if to say ‘I’m still just like you even if I’m wearing expensive clothes.’

Meanwhile, Figure 9 also tags Coachella as the location that this photograph was taken, which is a clear play at being both relevant and relatable as Miquela herself can not physically attend an event. The manufacturing of Miquela’s presence at the event seems to further represent the attendance of such events by the Instagram elite. Miquela is similarly in a fashionable outfit. The jacket is hanging half off on her arm, suggesting a posed nature to reveal the outfit in its entirety under the jacket. Miquela’s visual has required just as much work as Emma’s has, and in similar ways. Emma’s effort in producing this piece of media has gone primarily into careful planning of her outfits and the photographs that would be taken for her Instagram feed, while the creators of Miquela similarly have spent plenty of time in planning this photograph of Miquela and her outfit as well as executing this rendering of Miquela to appear realistic with human-like dimensions and perspective.

7.3.2 Exclusive access
Figure 11 shows Miquela standing upright, staring directly into the camera in front of a green, plant-filled backdrop. Golden words adorn the backdrop but can not be read in entirety in this visual. Miquela has two buns on the sides of her head and has on a matching outfit consisting of monstera printed, glitter patterns on a loose T-shirt and long pants. She does not have any jewelry on and her arms hang loosely on the sides of her body. The pictorial space that is relatively three-dimensional with the backdrop of the sign and Miquela standing in front of the background; the shadows and lights bouncing off her face and arms gives a realistic view to the space that she is taking up in the photograph. Miquela is the figurative form before the built form of the background, which is both natural and architectural, combining the natural plants and the constructed display.

Figure 12 is a high resolution photograph which shows Emma fully in focus and sharp with a slightly blurred background. Emma is not looking into the camera. Her hair is pulled tightly back into a ponytail and her facial features are well-defined by makeup. In this photograph, she is wearing large earrings and a dress with fringe detailing and an abstract shape pattern. She is holding a purse that has Louis Vuitton patterns across it in her right hand and her phone in her left hand. The photograph itself also has a watermark from ‘getty images’ on it, suggesting this was a professionally taken image of Emma. Finally, in the background, a fence can be seen as well as parts of an architectural form of a building.

The contextual analysis, such as when reading through the image captions or conducting an internet search, gives more information as to the setting of Figure 11: the British Fashion Awards. Lil Miquela’s captions also share that this outfit was designed by luxury designer Richard Quinn; this outfit retails for over 11,000 dollars (Net-a-Porter, 2019a; 2019b), and illuminates that effortless opulence of the traditional and social media elite. Miquela’s pose in front of the brand sign seems to mimic the red carpet photographs that traditional celebrities have taken of themselves; this suggests Miquela is famous enough to have photographs taken of her at exclusive events.

The contextual analysis for Figure 12 shows Emma at Paris Fashion Week wearing a 6,000 dollars dress by the luxury brand, Louis Vuitton (Louis Vuitton, 2019). The photograph has the “getty images" label on it which is a label that oftentimes accompanies celebrity paparazzi photos and is taken by a professional paparazzo. The context of the “getty images" label, the location of this photograph and the dress presents a luxurious view into social media influencer Emma’s life. The flaunting of wealth by both influencers is a characteristic very predominant in traditional celebrity culture and will be discussed further in the later sections.
7.3.3 Pictures with other celebrities

The subjects of Figure 13 are two women, one of which is Miquela; both women are looking directly into the camera and photographed up to their stomach. The woman on the left is pursing her lips, her facial features are defined by the way the light and shadows fall on her face. Her hair is slicked back and she is dressed in a black T-shirt that says ‘calvin’. Her arm is draped across Miquela. Miquela is wearing her hair in two buns on the sides of her head with loose strands dangling and a fringe that goes across her forehead. Her face is dotted with copious freckles, and she appears to have light makeup on her eyelashes and lips. Miquela is wearing a white tank top that has letters written on it, though the arm of the other woman is covering these letters. This visual seems to play between the lighting on the two women to show stark contrast with the way the light and shadows are sculpted on their bodies and the juxtaposition of the colors of their shirts. The close-up image has very saturated colors and high resolution and clearly defined patterns in Miquela’s freckles and hair.

On the other hand, Emma’s photograph, Figure 14, consists of four main human subjects in what looks like a Christmas family photo taken in front of a winter-themed backdrop and Christmas tree while all subjects in the visual wear matching holiday-themed sweaters that say “Where’s the Mistletoe?”. The colors in the picture are vibrant and contrasted sharply with harsh shadows, and the forms consist of structural forms in the background and the four figurative forms. Emma’s facial features make her look unhappy, her hands are clasped over her knee tightly, she is hunched over, and she is not looking into the camera. She looks barefaced and her hair is pulled into a loose ponytail with a scrunchy. The other three subjects are staring directly into the camera and have small smiles on their faces.

The contextual analysis of Figure 13 reveals it as a sponsored advertising campaign for the clothing brand, Calvin Klein; in addition, this photograph features supermodel Bella Hadid alongside Miquela. Bella Hadid has over 25 million followers on Instagram, which is substantially more than Miquela’s 1.6 million followers (bellahadid, 2019). Bella also posted a few Instagram sponsored posts for Calvin Klein around the same time that Miquela posted
this visual, but none of the images that Bella posted featured Miquela (bellahadid, 2019). The overall ad campaign on Miquela’s Instagram feed included a multi-photo and video spread that includes a video snippet of Miquela and Bella Hadid intimately kissing (LilMiquela, 2019).

The contextual analysis for Figure 14 uncovers that the other members of this photograph are popular YouTubers, James Charles and the Dolan Twins, all of whom are considered well-known in the online media space and each has more Youtube subscribers and Instagram followers than Emma Chamberlain. The Dolan Twins, James Charles and Emma regularly create “collabs”, or collaborative videos together for their Youtube channels, one of which is a vlog of when this Instagram photo was taken (Chamberlain, 2018d). In this 12-minute vlog, Emma, the Dolan Twins, and James Charles write letters to Santa describing what they want for Christmas and then take photographs in matching sweaters. The video has an ironic and sarcastic undertone, and uncovers the amount of activity and effort that went into the creation of this video and photo; the photoshoot itself included multiple snaps of the four YouTubers, many of which Emma is smiling in the photograph as opposed to the one that she posted. The Dolan Twins and James Charles did not post this image or any variation of this image with the matching sweaters on their personal Instagram feeds.

Being photographed in an intimate setting with the insinuation from both the visual and the caption being that they are a family in Figure 14 is highly relevant to the discussion of being “cool” online. Being pictured with other celebrities can be said to be a show of a high level of fame and prestigious stature in the sense of being on the same level of stardom with other celebrities; this inherently contributes to that “cool” factor. It can be considered a legitimization of one’s position being present in an appropriate society.

7.4 Selfies

Figure 15: Selfie from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018a)  
Figure 16: Selfie from Emma Chamberlain (Chamberlain, 2017a)
Qiu, Lu, Yang, Qu & Zhu (2015) define a selfie as “a self-portrait picture taken by oneself using a digital camera or a smartphone for posting on social networking sites.” (Qiu, Lu, Yang, Qu & Zhu, 2015, p. 443) Similarly, Tiidenberg (2018) touches on the necessity of a “self-representation” practice through the evidence of a photograph taken or made to look like it is taken of oneself. (p. 359) Drawing from these definitions, the only selfies that were considered ‘selfies’ for the purpose of this thesis were self-portrait pictures of Miquela and Emma in which the “digital camera” or “smartphone” is visible in the photograph itself. Without a visible smartphone or camera, it can not be said with certainty that an image is a self-portrait. Thus, for the purpose of this cultural script, Figure 15 and Figure 16, images in which a smartphone is seen within the frame of the image will be discussed.

Figure 15 is a selfie taken by Miquela of herself in a heart-shaped mirror; the colors of the image are warm and the lighting is relatively dark, suggesting poor lighting in this photograph. The darkness of her face and the way the light source appears to fall onto her body is once again an illustration and dedication into the realistic portrayal of Miquela as a three-dimensional, hyperreal human. LilMiquela is holding up a black phone and appears to be looking at the phone’s viewfinder to take this photograph. She is wearing a black singlet, her hair is pulled into buns on the side of her face, and she is not wearing any jewelry. The wallpaper of the room and the background of the image is a repetitive gallery pattern of the words, ‘love me’ written out over and over again in varying shades of pink.

In Figure 16, Emma appears to be in a bedroom in front of a large mirror, snapping a selfie of her outfit as her face is covered by the phone. There is a drawer in the background as well as two carpets and what appears to be a bathroom. Emma has a stylish outfit consisting of a white tube top and high-waisted, camouflage pants on. Emma is posing for the snap with her right hand tucked into her pocket, and her hip popped out slightly.

Interestingly, Emma’s caption appears to be joking about the camouflage pattern of the pants, and the way the caption is written with abbreviations for words like “are” and “I am” seems to suggest it was written quickly and effortlessly. Meanwhile, Miquela’s caption seems to be the music file name of a popular song by rapper, 21 Savage called “No Heart”. This seems like a pop culture play on the heart element in the photograph, which suggests a rather witty, relevant and clever double meaning with the suggestion of ‘No heart’ in the caption.

While Figure 15 similarly appears to be a quick snap and a casual selfie, when put into context and seeing as Miquela is a digital avatar and the visual is a piece of art, one can only imagine the amount of forethought, planning, and production necessary to create this work. The creation of this selfie and the construction of it can be argued to be a representation of not just how traditional social media influencers use selfies, but also how social media audiences and users use the platform to express themselves through the use of self-portraits. A selfie, as Abidin (2016) describes, is often seen as a frivolous, casual act with no deeper meaning, but it seems that this cultural script of taking selfies is significant enough to post as an influencer that the creators of Miquela have spent both time and money in the construction of this visual. When referencing back to the six functions of selfies practices as presented by Tiidenberg (2018, p. 943), both of these images can perhaps be considered to fall within the ‘interact’ function through their jokes in the captions or simply ‘work’ to generate attention and gain popularity on the platform though the true intentions of the selfies are impossible to clarify without speaking to Miquela or Emma themselves. The
partaking in this culture includes the posting of selfies in perhaps an attempt to create an authentic representation (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard, 2018, p. 2), as a means to generate fame and popularity on Instagram (Schwarz, 2010, p. 180) through taking “photographs of ourselves for the consumption of others.” (Marwick, 2015, p. 141)

8. Discussion & Conclusion

This thesis took on a comparative visual analysis approach in which two social media influencers, CGI influencer, Lil Miquela, and biologically human influencer, Emma, and their social media content were compared by examining pre-defined cultural scripts. The cultural scripts selected were as follows:

1. Calibrated amateurism, authenticity and relatability
2. Branding and self-commodification
3. Being “cool”
4. Selfies

These cultural scripts were selected as a way to structure the analysis and limit the amount of relevant markers to analyze and compare. They were also selected in attempts to fill the current knowledge gap on the way social media content is produced by social media influencers. Most research thus far has focused on the branding and advertising aspects of social media influencing (Abidin, 2016; Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), and this thesis attempted to offer analysis into a different aspect of the multi-faceted discussion of social media and influencers.

The two research questions that were considered for this thesis were:

1. How does LilMiquela’s imaging mimic or respond to representational practices by traditional Instagram influencers such as @emmachamberlain?
2. What does this comparative analysis say about authenticity, the ‘manufacturing’ and ‘producing’ of media content by Instagram influencers?

To conduct a systematic visual analysis, a three-stage process was undertaken that began with a formal analysis, followed by a contextual analysis and ending with a discourse analysis. The formal analysis and contextual were presented in the previous section, while the discourse analysis and overall findings and meanings will be more holistically summarized in this section to draw larger-scale conclusions.

Thus, to answer the first research question, it can be argued that LilMiquela’s imaging does both mimic and respond to representational practices by traditional Instagram influencers in that similar cultural scripts, such as calibrated amateurism, relatability, being ‘cool’, and branding, are present across both influencers’ content. In addition, the CGI influencer creates a human-like performance and mimics the sense of humor and relatability that Emma exhibits. Miquela’s attempt at relatability is oftentimes done by trying to relate to regular human occurrences such as losing something at an event as evidenced in Figure 9. The caption of Figure 9, “I lost my 19 necklace somewhere,” highlights an element of relatability. By mentioning that she has lost her necklace, Miquela offers another layer to her platform. Clearly losing a necklace is not possible for Miquela but the additional text in the caption gives depth to her and the character that she is playing: she errs just like a human
being. She also exhibits qualities such as self-branding and self-commodification; as an example, Miquela’s familiar hairstyle in the majority of her photographs can be distinguished as a method of self-branding, to create a recognizable persona and character of herself in efforts to gain followers for her uniqueness and thus, to monetize more of her efforts. Miquela also appears to partake in cultural scripts of being cool and relevant in the industry by wearing expensive clothes, ‘attending’ exclusive events such as Coachella and being featured with other social media elites, such as Bella Hadid.

However, not only are similar individual cultural scripts present in their imagery but through the analysis of all the visuals from both influencers, an unforeseen pattern seemed to emerge. To develop the answers to the research questions further and present the main findings of the analysis, it was revealed that the examined cultural scripts can, essentially, be distinctly categorized into two separate larger themes: firstly, being a professional, traditional elite celebrity who is “insta-famous” (Marwick, 2015), and secondly, being a relatable human being. Calibrated amateurism, authenticity, relatability, and selfies all fall within the theme of being a relatable human being while branding, self-commodification and being cool in attempts to portray wealth, exclusivity, access to other celebrities and being fashion-forward fall within the category of traditional celebrity culture. These two opposing sides pull and push against each other as the social media influencer finds balance and career success in being, ideally, a relatable celebrity. One could say that this is one of the ways that social media influencers differ from traditional ones.

As mentioned in Section 3, social media influencers normally gain fame through their own online efforts; they are ‘just like you.’ And while that may make them more effective in their marketing efforts as we find them more relatable, it also means that they must take extreme caution of remaining relatable and not becoming too distant from their followers and fans as they grow in popularity. As revealed by the analysis, both Miquela and Emma exhibit efforts to achieve a balance of the relatable nature of modern-day social media influencers and the rich, famous, and exclusive nature of traditional celebrities. For both Emma and Miquela, the range of social media content that they post bounce between being ‘just like you’ and being a celebrity with the perks of fame. There seems to be an invisible, fine line between being relatable and being an elusive, unreachable and distant celebrity, and Emma seems to juggle that fine line in her Instagram feed and similarly, Miquela seems to be following along in those footsteps. The juggling and maintenance of this fine line requires very dedicated, meticulous, fine work. Influencers seem to lean into being a professional celebrity to grow their success, social standing and to become more sought after, but because their unique personal brand has been founded on their relatability and ordinary qualities, they are obliged to remain relatable to truly achieve stardom.

Both sides of the equation are present in every post analyzed of each of the influencers. To explore each of these cultural scripts of relatability in more detail, we have to understand the role that each of them contribute to an online character, and to better understand this distinction, a brief summary of each cultural script and why it falls under each theme will be given. Calibrated amateurism, a concept coined by Abidin (2016, 2017) suggest a production method in which influencers fake the amateur quality. Alongside that, relatability and authenticity are additional tools used by these influencers, which all aim at accomplishing the overall goal of remaining a relatable friend to their followers to remain trustworthy. (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) The result of this was illustrated in Section 7.1. It can be said that while influencers are depicting a level of authenticity in their forms of content, it is regardless still
an extremely strategic authenticity. A type of authenticity that requires plenty of deliberation and calculated execution in order to appear normal and similar to their followers. The behind-the-scenes components of the media production processes, as seen, for example, on Youtube or Instagram Stories acts as one layer, but the behind-the-scenes aspect of the seemingly less staged photographs seem to also ‘let the audience in’ in a different yet familiar way. Miquela pictured on the kitchen counter with mismatched socks and with her head resting in her hand in Figure 3 or Emma pictured on her floor, messy hair with a slice of pizza in Figure 4 are both forms of that behind-the-scenes layer as it lets us into what appears to be a more intimate setting. They are seen as less formal and less untouchable as a wealthy celebrity (as images such as Figure 11 and Figure 12); it is a reminder that they are ‘just like you.’ Selfies similarly, as shown by Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard (2018) and Tiidenberg (2018), are used as a method to reveal a truly real “representation of the self.” (p. 2) Selfies are one of the most widespread forms of images on the internet (Marwick, 2015, p. 141), and can be considered relatable as any person can take a selfie. There is no wealth, no status, no fame, and essentially, no prerequisite to taking and posting a selfie. It can be thought to show, “I take selfies just like you.”

For the theme of becoming a traditional celebrity and seeming less approachable to followers, commodification and branding are both tools heavily used in professional businesses as it sculpts “a public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital”. (Khamis, Ang & Wellling, 2017, p. 191). Scholars such as Duffy & Hund (2015), Khamis, Ang & Wellling (2017), and Audrezet, de Kerviler & Guidry Moulard (2018) have all touched on the creation of the branded self in attempts to monetize and grow a loyal following; this practice is a very masterful and seasoned way of creating and using a digital persona in a strategic manner; the amount of effort and time that is dedicated in the sculpting and management of the “self-impression on the web” is extensive. (Lee, 2010, p. 270) Finally, being ‘cool’ in terms of attending exclusive events, accessing exclusive people and wearing exclusive outfits is akin to traditional methods of being popular. Based on Duffy & Hund (2015), influencers resemble celebrities with this “glam life, characterized by global travel, invitations to exclusive events, and access to luxury goods and swag.” (p. 6) In addition, by ensuring their association with “established celebrities,” (p. 6) they are able to climb the social ranks both online and off. This often relates similarly to the capability to be “seemingly effortless cool in the face of fan adoration.” (Marwick, 2015, p. 150)

This finding of the juggle between being relatable and being famous was unanticipated and interesting because it presents a new angle in which to study social media influencers in the realms of media production, media representation, and media audiences. Some literature has already been published on the topics of the influence on media audiences, but this research needs to be further developed with the understanding that influencers may be more impactful with their influence given their careful balance of being relatable. These findings support broader knowledge or understanding of the research problem in that it builds upon the research on social media influencers as well as the cultural scripts examined in this thesis by scholars such as Abidin (2016, 2017, 2018), Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard (2018), Chae (2018), Duffy & Hund (2015), Marwick (2015), Khamis, Ang & Wellling (2017), Liu & Suh (2017), Senft (2013), and many more. Their works have thoroughly and comprehensively described and defined the varying aspects of being relatable and being an Internet celebrity, which formed the basis of the cultural scripts used as parameters in this study. The main finding of this thesis is in line with concepts addressed by Abidin (2016, 2017, 2018) in her years of study into influencers; concepts such as ‘calibrated amateurism’
and even the idea of ‘staged authenticity’ described by MacCannell (1973) well before the invention of Instagram. The hidden and discreet amount of effort that goes into the creation of a self to commodify and sell to the public has been written about by many including Khamis, Ang & Welling (2017) and Duffy & Hund (2015). Similarly, Berryman & Kavka (2017) have also written on the potential of “commercialization of amateur content” (p. 309) in our current digital age.

The real, human-like qualities injected in the generated images posted by Miquela mimic those of human influencers such as Emma and adds to our understanding of influencer culture in that it suggests perfection is not the goal of social media influencer content. It is perfection on one hand but also being human and down-to-earth that is the goal; the ideal vision is being perfectly human which comes with imperfections all on its own and even becomes a form of being perfectly imperfect. The depiction of a computer-generated image as having a sentient life exhibits that there is more to the influencer culture than just selfies and producing the perfect Instagram image. It could be proposed that there is a lot of careful curation of equal amounts of cool content and still being relatable not only in each piece of visual posted on the platform but also in the overall Instagram feed as a whole. The curation of the entire feed involves both relatable content as well as celebrity content in efforts to establish individual balance within each post and balance in the overall Instagram profile.

Regarding research question two, Miquela’s Instagram, an entirely artificial and rigorously planned persona and presence, begs for interesting discussions on the amount of manufacturing that goes into the curation of an online character. Further, it goes to say how much thought is actually given to the juggle of being a celebrity with endorsements and sponsorships and yet still being someone that followers actually like and can relate to.

Brud, the corporate entity that created Lil Miquela and produces her content, has spent over six million dollars into the creation of Lil Miquela. (Shieber, 2018) This gives an indication to the tremendous production costs invested in the creation and production of an online celebrity. Miquela, in the mimicking of a traditional influencer such as Emma, has garnered 1.6 million followers and landed multiple branding deals with well-known companies such as Calvin Klein. Miquela’s designers generated a personal brand and commodity, identical to how Emma has created her own personal brand and commodity. The sculpting of a personality, of an online presence that is consistent, well-rounded and realistic across all platforms is hard work, and can hardly be considered a task that can be executed successfully by an amateur.

Research question two leads us into the question of how to distinguish between real and artificial in the digital sphere, and how and to what extent any being or character that has been created online can be truly “authentic” or “real” as almost every piece of visual media and accompanying aspect of the media (such as the caption and the cross-platform context) has elements of production embedded within it. As both Hodkinson (2011) and Sommer (2018) imply, digital identities all carry degrees of production and manufacturing, and no true online presence can be considered fully authentic and genuine.

To close, a few limitations of this paper need to be addressed. For one, the analysis process presented outside assumptions onto the researcher’s own interpretation of the images, rather than the owner’s intention and thought process behind the creation and publication of the social media content. A more accurate approach that could be taken in the future is an
extensive interview format with the influencers to understand their ideas in developing and producing their visuals; do they agree with the struggle between being relatable and being famous? Are they aware of this balance in the creation of their content? If so, are there specific, logical processes that they undertake to ensure the balance and quality of their overall brand?

Additionally, the researcher has limited data in that only media that is public is accessible; there is no way of knowing if these are representative of the reality of the situation as the interpretations were conducted simply on the available knowledge found via research. Another limitation is that we cannot generalize these findings for all social media influencers, naturally. These findings could simply be a case-by-case basis, or alternatively, they could be based on the personalities of Emma and Miquela as online personal brands. It is possible that not all influencers struggle with being relatable when they reach higher levels of fame, and it is possible that some influencers do not partake in traditional celebrity cultural scripts even if they are able to. We also may not be able to generalize these findings even for Emma and Miquela as it may be possible this is only reflective of the current phase in their professional journey. Perhaps in this phase of their online celebrity growth, they are trying to climb the ranks and find it more productive to achieve the balance. They may abandon this juggle once they reach even higher levels.

Further research in this field, as mentioned above, could go to understanding the media producer's perspective and thought process behind the production of each piece of media. An interesting way to take this on would be to conduct large-scale interviews with both influencers with over a million followers and influencers with less than 1 million followers to understand whether this balance is indeed a reality for their production process, or if other factors are more pertinent from their perspective of being a media producer on Instagram. Other further research opportunities include expanding the timeline of the analysis and whether these findings hold true across all time spans or whether they are indicative only of certain phases of online growth; do social media celebrities with more than ten million followers behave differently than those who are still climbing the ranks? Another area of potential for research is feedback from the community and analyses of the comments section of each post, how the posts are received by the media audience and whether there are any obvious patterns in the engagement and social interactions for each post. A more comprehensive study could also include multiple online platforms and how the content posted by influencers differ on platforms like Instagram versus Youtube and Twitter.

The implications of this research and its findings for society at large are varied. It could be speculated that this form of media producer is more effective and real than any before, which in turn increases the influence and power they yield over media audiences. Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) have shown that media users consider influencers more reliable because of their amateur and relatable qualities, and through “connecting intimacy to authenticity with self-promotion as the driver,” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 309) these forms of media contain newfound potential and authority. The mastering of the attention economy is a skill that grows in capability as our world becomes increasingly saturated by information and media. (Marwick, 2015) This requires in-depth and further research to fully comprehend the true impacts on society; it perhaps calls for more media literacy of the general public as we move into a more and more digital era.
Turkle (1995), who was evidently ahead of her time, cleverly described “the blurring between human and technology, authentic and artificial, real and representation” (p. 274) — the faltering of the divide between on- and off-line, real and fake, and virtual and reality. As we begin to notice aspects of this in media and our own lives, we must remain curious about understanding and examining the attributes and cultural shifts that emerge naturally from this digital phenomenon.
References


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Chamberlain, E. [@_emmachamberlain]. (2019a, Mar 5). “um idk how this actually happened but thank u @louisvuitton & @youtube” [Instagram photo]. Retrieved Feb 12, 2019, from https://www.instagram.com/p/Buo32SPnihP/.

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Miquela[@lilmiquela]. (2019b, Apr 13). “I’m having a great time (I think I saw Jaden Smith, but also everyone here looks like a celebrity, so who knows)” [Instagram photo]. Retrieved Feb 1, 2019, from https://www.instagram.com/p/BwNhhe1HiXC/.


### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Script</th>
<th>Calibrated Amateurism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td>Figure 1: Calibrated amateurism from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caption</strong></td>
<td>Now I’m eating my feelings.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Script</th>
<th>Relatability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td>Figure 3: Relatability from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Script</td>
<td>Commodification of the branded self</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figure 5</strong>: Commodification of the branded self through selling of merchandise from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caption</strong></td>
<td>If you’ve ever yearned for a baby blue tank top with a photo of yours truly, tomorrow is your chance to buy one! I linked up with @fooandfoo to create this limited piece available EXCLUSIVELY in NYC at 314 Canal St. starting TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18TH AT 18h00. 24 hours only! Freakishly smooth armpits not included. ✔✔</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Script</th>
<th>Commodification of the branded self</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figure 7</strong>: Commodification of the branded self through brand collaboration and sponsorships from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Caption</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is it cool to crush on inanimate objects, y/n? Next time I like one of your toaster jokes (they “never” get old, y’all), it’ll be on my cute new #GalaxyS10 because me and #TeamGalaxy made it official at today’s After Unpacked party. Naming him Samuel Phonington III. We’re tight. I love him. And he’d never make a toaster joke about me.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Script</th>
<th>Being cool: fashionable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figure 9</strong>: Cool and fashionable from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caption</strong></td>
<td>I’m having a great time (I think I saw Jaden Smith, but also everyone here looks like a celebrity, so who knows), but... I lost my 19 necklace somewhere. Trying not to stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Script</td>
<td>Being cool: access to exclusive, fashion events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figure 11</strong>: Being cool in relation to luxury and access to exclusive events from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
<td>![Image of a person wearing a outfit in partnership with Swarovski]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caption</strong></td>
<td>Wearing @richardquinn at the @britishfashioncouncil’s Fashion Awards. Richard won for British Emerging Talent Women's Wear and it was an HONOR to wear one of his designs. I want to live in this outfit and feel like a glittering hibiscus queen forever. Congratulations, Richard!!! 🌺 #fashionawards #bfcnewwave 📸 Darren Gerrish</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Script</th>
<th>Being cool: pictured with celebrities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figure 13</strong>: Being cool in relation to access to celebrities from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2019d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Caption</td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>No one else can define our own truths. #MYTRUTH #MYCALVINS</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Script</th>
<th>Selfies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><strong>Figure 15</strong>: Selfie from LilMiquela (Miquela, 2018a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caption</strong></td>
<td>21_savage_no_heart.mp3</td>
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