

Buying the Impact:  
Social Media Influencer Fraud  
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### **Abstract**

This research project seeks to understand fake social media influencers and real social media influencers on Instagram from a consumers point of view. The Social Impact Theory was used to help create the online survey that was distributed to 143 participants. The survey included a total for four SMI accounts, two fake SMI's and two real SMI's. An analysis of the data showed that the majority of the respondents can correctly identify fake social media influencers. The research also showed that the majority of the participants were more likely to follow the real social media influencers compared to the fake social media influencers.

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**Signature Page**

We certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Professional Communication

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## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Signature Page.....	4
Table of Contents.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Literature Review.....	7
Method.....	16
Results.....	17
Discussion.....	21
Conclusion.....	25
Reference List.....	27
Appendix.....	29

## **Introduction**

Looking around a college campus a person could either find a student with their head in the books, or and even more likely, scrolling through their Instagram feed. In fact, it wouldn't be uncommon for any college-aged student to scroll through their favorite social media platforms multiple times a day every day for months on end. In the digital age, social media has become ingrained in society and has become a vital part of the 21st century. According to Mohsin, in 2019 there were over 3.5 billion social media users which equate to roughly 45% of the population (2019).

Due to the popularity of social media, businesses have learned they can profit and increase sales off of social media platforms in the form of Social Media Influencers (SMI). This is just the beginning of SMI's, as it is projected by [influencemarketinghub.com](https://www.influencemarketinghub.com) that 63% of marketers are planning on, "increasing their influencer marketing budget in the next year" (2020). SMI's can be categorized by their reach of influence, amount of followers and the opportunity to make money off of their posts. Influencers are able to make money by marketing/advertising certain brands in their posts and captions, so being a SMI has become a goal for users. In fact, it has become so popular that users on social media platforms are paying money to become Fake Social Media Infleuncers (FSMI). They do this by buying likes, comments, and followers to look like a real social media influencer and hopefully become a real Social Media Influencer one day.

FSMI can become a black pit for businesses for a variety of reasons. If a person becomes an FSMI and doesn't have a big following or no real influence on social media, the business is paying them money for nothing. Also, the business is not getting their product advertised in posts

where potential customers could see their brand. Instead, the FSMI is costing the business insurmountable amounts of money. But unfortunately since FSMI can buy engagement rate, which consists of likes, comments and followers, so it is hard to tell the difference between an SMI and a FSMI.

The focus of this study will be the impact of Fake Social Media Influencers on Instagram. The Social Impact Theory will be used to understand how the strength, immediacy and number of followers play a role for fake social media influencers. A survey will be used to compare and contrast Social Media Influencers and Fake Social Media Influencers. The purpose of the study is to understand if consumers notice the difference between SMI and FSMI. The results of this study can help both business and consumers understand the difference between these two types of influencers and avoid FSMI.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Impact Theory**

Originally proposed in 1981, Latané defined social impact as, “any influence on individual feelings, thoughts, or behaviour that is exerted by the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of others” (1981, p. 344). Latané went on to utilize this definition to develop his Social Impact Theory to, “to predict how and when sources of social influence will affect a target of influence” (1981, p. 344). Fink (1996) built upon Latane’s theory and found that “the theory discusses the creation, maintenance structuring and alteration of attitudes, beliefs and belief systems; the dynamic of social influence” (p.5). Teretriller (2018) believes that the social

impact theory, “seeks to explain how social influence causes changes in behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals as a result of their interactions with others” (p.12).

Social impact theory proposes that the amount of influence a person experiences in group settings depends on three things: 1) the strength (power and social status) of the group, 2) the immediacy (physical or psychological distance) of the group, and 3) the number of people in the group exerting their social influence (i.e., number of sources) (Baumeister & Vohs, p. 344). In other words, a group that has many members, high power, and close psychological proximity should exert the most influence on an individual.

Chidambaram clearly outlines the subcategories of the theory by stating:

“The strength of social impact is best described as the importance of the social group to the individual being influenced. The social strength of an influencer will be determined by their status, age, socioeconomic status and prior relationship with or future power over the target. The immediacy of social impact is determined by how close the social influence is to the individual in time and space; the closer the influencer is to the person being influenced in physical proximity, and the more urgent the influence the more impact will be experienced by the person being influenced. The number simply refers to how many people are in the group” (2005, p.11).

Elaborating on the definition given above, Latané defines social impact as “any influence on individual feelings, thoughts, or behaviour that is exerted by the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of others” (1981, p. 344). Strength in this context refers to the “salience, power, importance or intensity” of a given source, usually determined by “the source's status, age, socioeconomic status, and prior relationship with, or future power over, the target.” (Latané,



1981, p. 344). Terentiller (2018) describe strength as the importance or intensity of the influencing source, which will be of use when discussing social media influencers.

Social impact theory suggests that the number, relational strength, and immediacy of individuals exerting social influence determine its effectiveness. Tefertiller (2018) found that social context cues included in social media advertisements did influence brand attitudes and that these cues could be formed and fabricated by brands and individuals alike (p. 119).

Perez-Vega et al. define immediacy as, “a multi-dimensional construct, and different types of immediacies exist between source and target which are labelled: physical immediacy, temporal immediacy and social immediacy” (2016, p. 2). Physical immediacy refers to the geographic location, temporal immediacy refers to time between announcements and the duration of said announcements, while social immediacy refers to perceptions that others are “like us” (Perez-Vega et al., 2016, p. 15).

More specifically temporal immediacy is defined as, “the length of time between an act and the consequences resulting from the act” (Barnett, 2001). Or as Terentiller (2018) says immediacy is “conceptualized not only as the proximity of influence in time, but also the proximity of influence in space” (p. 13). Evidence suggests that source immediacy relates to social impact at both the behavioural (Chidambaram & Tung, 2005) and cognitive levels (Blaskovich, 2008). Chidambaram (2005) found that immediacy played a big role in the social impact. He found that when sources were stronger it lead to greater participation.

Source number is the numerical value of sources of influences and that as this numerical value increases so does the degree of social impact (Latané, 1981). Defined as, “the number of influencing sources directed toward the individual” (Perez Vega et al., 2016, p. 15), the social

force of number could be anything from the number of people in a group, to the number of messages posted on an online community board. Perez-Vega et al (2016) simply defines the term number as, “the number of influencing sources directed towards the individual” (p.14).

In 2016, Perez-Vega et al. proposed that Social Impact Theory is an appropriate framework for social media research because social media has an ever-increasing influence on society. Said authors utilized Facebook fanpages to analyze consumer behaviors through the concept of social influence.

Social influence is recognised as a critical shaper of consumer behaviour in situations characterised by ambiguous information or in situations where there are unclear standards of conduct (Mangleburg, et al, 2004). In other words, people rely heavily on others behaviour when they do not possess much information regarding a certain outcome or behaviour. According to Fink (1996), “...social impact theory shows that clustering people together into networks creates an influence structure.” Thus, at its very core, social penetration theory is uniquely suited to observe and analyze the impact and effectiveness of social media influencers.

Each of the different categories found in the social impact theory, strength, immediacy and number are important to understand. Perez-Vega et al (2016) stated that, “one of these social forces proposed by the theory affect a consumer's behavior” (p. 25). Using these three subcategories of the theory there is now a better understanding to help evaluate the FSMI and SMI on the social media platform Instagram.

### **Marketing on Social Media**

According to Arora (2019), social media has surpassed being just a medium for communication and has turned into a power house to reach the masses. Social media isn't just focused on sharing content of what a person does daily. It instead has become a way to reach the masses and help/persuade people to make decisions. The growth of social media was revamped and altered the way people interact, engage and communicate (Auroa, 2019).

Shen and Kuo (2017) found that social media “encompasses social networking sites, media sharing sites, creation and publishing tools” (p.210). Through their research Shen and Kuo (2017) noticed that for the younger generation social media is used for communication, to seek information and social engagement as well as helping build a community.

Due to the popularity of social media, businesses and brands have now turned to social media to reach their audiences in a new and unique way. Perez-Vega et al. (2016) stated that organizations and brands are looking for ways to develop a presence in social media to increase awareness and consumer engagement with the brand. Aurora (2019) found that, due to the fact that there are so many social networking platforms available, it has become a hot spot for marketing professionals to reach more consumers.

Garland found that brands have noticed a decline in advertisements by word of mouth and direct advertising strategies. So, brands have now turned to social media influencers to push out their product to the masses (2018). In the twenty first century, social media is becoming infiltrated with influencers (Garland, 2018). Due to this infiltration “businesses need social influence to connect with their existing and prospective customers” (Auroa, 2019, p.87.). Many brands and organizations have chosen to engage in sponsored content with influencers to help the reach the big consumer audience online (Vilma, Tuiska (2019). When referring to sponsored

content (Vilma, Tuiska, 2019) defined it as, “in the context of influencers means that brand or organization offers an influencer either money or free products, in return, the influencer endorses the brand in content of the influencers platform” (p. 354). Garland (2018) compared influencers instruments in the world of brands and marketing.

The Social Impact Theory will be utilized in this study in a variety of ways. The theory will be used to create the survey questions. It will also be used when deciding what real and fake SMI the participants will analyze in the survey.

### **Social Media Influencers**

The term Social Media Influencers (SMI) can be classified in a variety of ways. Penny describes SMI as, “someone who has the power to sway the decisions of an audience.” Garland (2018) continues this train of thought by adding that influencers have a sizable media following and that they can make money from their organized reach on social media platforms. SMI’s can shape the attitudes of their audiences through social media (Garland 2018).

Arora defines the term social influencer as, “the ability to drive action and receive peoples engagement on a post which is shared by a strong social influencer on social media in real life” (2019, p.87). SMI’s play vital roles in spreading awareness to their followers (Shen and Kuo, 2017). The reason they play such a vital role is because people trust these SMI’s more than brands (Koslow, 2017). Teretiller (2018) defined social influence in a slightly different context as “the effect that words, actions or mere presence of other people have on thoughts, feelings attitudes or behaviors (p. 3). Along with driving action, SMI’s also has be “highly established and credible in a specific industry” (Arora, 2019, p. 87). Once a SMI becomes credible in the

field they are working, using their influence they, “influence what we buy or how we think about brands” (Hubble, 2018, p. 20).

A SMI crosses the traditional boundaries in terms of intimacy, publicity, and distance (Borshcer, 2019). Since SMI’s are communicating in a way never done, there is a certain awe reach with teenagers and young adults that has been found to lead to promotional activities (Borscher, 2019). Followers or audience members can form strong connections with their favorite influencers and so the endorsements from the influencers were found to increase purchase behavior and perception of the brands and organizations (Vilma, 2019).

Since SMI’s can have such an effect on consumer consumption, “social media marketing is a technique that employs social media and social influencers to achieve marketing and business goals” (Perez-Vega et al, 2016). Koslow in his research found that “influencer marketing is an effective discipline when used right” (2017, p.1).

Since branding through SMI’s can be effective, brands want to know who they are working with before investing in them (Nelson, 2019). Due to this influencers have “more pressure than ever to prove their influence to brands that want to continue to get paid partnerships” (Garland, 2018, p. 27). These influencers, even though they have thousands of followers according to Borscher (2019) are struggling to get eyes on their content. This directly affects their livelihood. This panic has lead SMI’s to influencer fraud or allows the way for fake social media influencer to step in and try and make some money.

### **Fake Social Media Infleuncers**

The biggest difference between social media influencers and fake social media influencers is that fake influencers buy likes, comments, and followers. Jacqueline (2019)

defines fake social media influencers as “Having no actual influence over a real audience, these fake influencers deliver no real results...can set back a brand's reputation and drain your marketing budget” (p.1). Jacqueline (2019) goes on to state that FSMI look like real SMI but the difference that their following is mostly composed of fake accounts and bots. Or in other words that do not have a meaningful influence over a real audience. They do not have a true following. Instead they have pay money to make it look like they are popular. Penny (2018) voices the concerns of business by stating, “ if the audience behind an influencer isn't real, this defeats the brand's objective. Purchased followers are not only useless, but unethical and can be hugely damaging to brand's integrity.”

FSMI can easily buy their followers using a variety of websites and their credit card number to amplify their perceived importance on social media. In 2018, Twitter did a cleanse of fake followers and it came to attention that a lot of influencers bought their fellowship to create the illusion that they had a strong following on social media (Nelson, 2019). Garland (2018) found that influencers could buy 1,000 followers for \$10 in under a minute making it both easy and cheap. Since it is so cheap to become an FSMI it has become a common trend on social media.

Fake followers have been an issue on social media for years according to Nelson (2019) but they have recently come to the forefront as more brands began utilizing influencer marketing as a major tactic. Nelson (2019) also found that brands are expected to spend between \$5 billion and \$10 billion on influencer marketing campaigns by 2022. With the rise of FSMI, brands will lose both valuable time and resources on are going to see major hit on resources (Jacqueline, 2019). This can be especially detrimental to new up and coming start up businesses because if

they create a partnership with an FSMI, all their resources will be wasted (Jacqueline, 2019). Jacqueline found that FSMI can generate no significant results and will also damage a brand's reputation.

The concern of FSMI's and fake followers has caused businesses to look hard at how they select their influencers based on more than just follows (Nelson, 2019). Some of the characteristics of FSMI include larger number of followers and very low engagement (Koslow, 2017). Jacqueline (2019) did more research into FSMI and found a common theme among the comments made on posts.

“In cases of fake influencers, you might notice a significant amount of emoji-only comments and generic comments that could be used on any post. Generic comments would include comments like "nice", "great pic", "amazing shot" etc. Since they don't say anything specific in relation to the content, they are versatile enough to fit any post.

There's a good chance these comments are coming from fake followers or bots”(p.9).

The term bots will be defined as, “accounts that pretended to express genuine opinions of real people to deceive the public” (Larson, 2019, p. 2). FMSI buy followers and use bots to look like real SMI. This can be damaging for the brands and consumers.

Using both the Social Impact Theory and the definitions of social media, social influencers and fake social influencers the research can now take place. A qualitative research method will be used for this study to compare and contrast Fake Social Media Influencers and real Social Media Influencers.

## **Method**

### *Data Collection*

A total of 143 subjects participated in the self-administered online survey among the 1,363 people contacted, resulting in a response rate of 10%. A total of 47 males and 86 females took the questionnaire with three participants who preferred not to disclose their gender. The age range of the participants was 18-50+. The sample size represented consumers at all ages. There were no incomplete questionnaires, so all 143 responses were used in the analysis.

A 17 question survey will be used for this study to compare and contrast fake Social Media Influencers and real Social Media Influencers. This is an important demographic to study because they are found to use social media the most frequently. The survey will be distributed to two undergraduate classes and published on Facebook, a social media platform to help obtain the right amount of responses. The survey will focus on testing the participants psychological reactions toward each of the influencers as well as their intention to follow the influencer. As well as if they could tell a difference between the real and fake Social Media Influencers.

### *Measurements*

The online survey will be used to compare and contrast fake SMI's and real SMI's. Participants will be asked to look at real SMI Instagram accounts and fake SMI Instagram accounts. A total of two real SMI's and two Fake SMI's accounts will be used.

The two fake SMI's accounts, "calibeachgirl310" and "wanderingggirl" were originally created by MediaKix, a full service influencer marketing agency. Both of these accounts took the same approach by purchasing fake followers and engagement. The Instagram account "calibeachgirl310" posted content created by a one-day photoshoot with a hired model. The focus of the account was focused on being by the ocean and on the beach. The second fake SMI



Instagram, “wanderinggirl” account was created using only stock images. This account was made to look like a girl who likes to travel and enjoys photography.

The two real SMI accounts used in the survey were, “hommeboys” and “blondeblissblog.” The Instagram account “hommeboys” is an account focused on two men who do interior design. The Instagram account “blondeblissblog” is a style account focused on affordable fashion.

The survey’s questions will focus on testing the participant’s psychological reactions toward each of the influencers as well as their intention to follow the influencer. As well as if they could tell a difference between the real and fake Social Media Influencers. The questions are a compilation of multiple-choice questions, open-ended responses and seven-point scale. The variety of questions will allow a more well-rounded and accurate understanding of the participant’s perception of fake social media influencers and real social media influencers. The questions will test their knowledge of SMI’s and what kind of SMI’s they are more likely to follow. The responses will be collected through Qualtrics and then analyzed through an SPSS system using crosstabs.

The demographic of respondents such as age and gender will also be collected. Collecting the participants age and gender will allow the researchers to see if there is a trend or if the understanding of SMI’s increases or decreases with age. Knowing the participants' gender helps see if the understanding of SMI’s are universal or if one gender has a better understanding of them.

## **Results**

The 143 subjects' responses to their perceptions of FSMI and SMI were analyzed. Using a crosstab analysis on SPSS, the quantitative data was extracted. When analyzing the data, there was a significant difference in two of the datasets where  $p < .005$ . The dataset from Table 1. and 2. used crosstabs tests and Table 3. and 4. used Monova. Similar results were obtained using both types of tests.

In Table 1., the dataset showed a significant difference with a  $p < 0.01$ . This dataset compared whether the subjects thought the social media accounts were real or fake. There were four accounts given in the survey. Account #1 represents the two fake accounts and Account #2 represents the two real accounts each participant was asked about, as labeled in the first row. The first column is labeled as to what the subjects thought each account was. As seen in the table, 73.2% of the participants found that Account #1 was fake, which was the correct answer. And 77.5% of the participants found Account #2 to be the real social media account, which was also the correct answer.

**Table 1.**

Opinion Real of Fake	Account #1 (Fake Account)	Account #2 (Real Account)	Total
Fake	227 (73.2%)	83 (26.8%)	310 (100.0%)
Real	59 (22.5%)	203 (77.5%)	262 (100.0%)

In Table 2., the dataset showed a  $p < .001$ , which shows that this dataset has a significant difference. This question asked participants how likely they would follow each of the accounts.

Account #1 represents the two fake accounts and Account #2 represents the two real accounts. A seven-point scale was used with 1 being very unlikely to follow that account to 7 being extremely likely to follow the account, or in other words 1-4 meaning low intention and 5-7 high intention in following that account. On the seven-point scale, 312 votes or 47% of the total number of voters said that they would not follow both the real and fake social media accounts.

**Table 2.**

How Likely to Follow	Account #1 (Fake Account)	Account #2 (Real Account)	Total Votes
1	204 (63.6%)	117 (26.4%)	312 100.0%
2	28 (33.3%)	56 (66.7%)	84 100.0%
3	20 (31.7%)	43 (68.3%)	63 100.0%
4	20 (40.8%)	29 (59.2%)	49 100.0%
5	9 (23.7%)	29 (76.3%)	49 100.0%
6	2 (22.2%)	7 (77.8%)	9 100.0%
7	3 (37.5%)	5 (62.5%)	8 100.0%

Both compiled datasets for Table 3 and Table 4 were created using the Monova test. With a  $p < .05$ , statistically the real and fake accounts do have an impact on the participants likelihood to follow the Instagram accounts, as well as their opinion on if the accounts are real or fake.

**Table 3.**

	Number of Social Media Accounts	Instagram Accounts Given	Mean
How Likely to Follow the Instagram Account	1-2	1(Fake)	1.6529
		2 (Real)	2.1882
	3-4	1(Fake)	1.6273
		2(Real)	2.8182
	5+	1(Fake)	3
		2(Real)	2.333

Table 3 was made using a multivariate test in order to understand the relationship between the variables and the stimulus. The  $p < .05$  proves that this dataset is significantly different. This dataset focused on how many social media accounts they have and how likely they were to follow the real and fake Instagram accounts given. The box labeled 'Instagram Accounts Given' represents the four Instagram accounts given in the survey '1' representing the two fake accounts and '2' representing the two real accounts.

The results for the MONOVA test show that when the participants have 1-4 social media accounts, the likelihood to follow both the real and fake accounts were very similar. The participants were more likely to follow the real Instagram accounts and less likely to follow the fake Instagram accounts. The likelihood for a participant to follow the real account increased

significantly by .07 when they have 3-4 social media accounts. The opposite happens when the participant has 5 or more social media accounts. These participants are actually more likely to follow the fake account over the real account.

**Table 4.**

	Number of Social Media	Instagram Account	Mean
Opinion on whether Instagram is Real or Fake	1-2	1 (Fake)	1.1765
		2 (Real)	1.6706
	3-4	1 (Fake)	1.2364
		2 (Real)	1.8
	5+	1 (Fake)	1.5
		2 (Real)	1.1667

The dataset for Table 4 was obtained after finding that with a  $P \leq .006$ . This proves statistically that the amount of social media accounts the participants have affects whether they think the Instagram accounts are real or fake. The box labeled 'Instagram Accounts Given' represents the four Instagram accounts given in the survey. One representing the two fake accounts and two representing the two real accounts. The results show that when the participants had 1-4 social media accounts, they were able to decipher which accounts were real and fake. Interestingly enough once again when the participants had more than 5 social media accounts,

the data is the opposite. The opinions of the participants switched and they were not able to tell which accounts were real and fake.

### **Discussion**

In this study, the aim was to understand the consumer's view and perception of real SMI's and fake SMI's. This was done by distributing the survey to two college classes as well as posting it on Facebook. Findings from the survey were given in the Results section.

In Table 1. the majority or over 70% of the participants, were able to figure out which of the accounts were fake and which of the accounts were real. This proves that consumers do have logic when it comes to following people on social media. The original assumption was that consumers would not know the difference and would not be able to pick out which ones were real and fake. Yet when probed, social media users can look at different influencers and find out which ones are real and which ones are not. The results are different than what was originally presumed. Consumers do know and can pick out the differences between the two different types of SMI's. This proves that fake SMI's are noticeable different and therefore it will be easy for businesses to use real influencers. Also, if a business were to use fake SMI's, consumers would be able to tell the difference.

The findings from Table 2 were not as clear cut. The participants were asked to state how likely they would follow the four accounts. On the seven-point scale, 1-3 meaning low intention, 4 meaning indifference to the account and 5-7 high intention, the assumption was that more people would want to follow the real social media accounts. And conversely, fewer people would want to follow the fake accounts. This pattern followed for points 1, 5, 6 and 7.

Point 1 is easy to understand, 204 people had no intention of following the fake account and only 117 people had no intention of following the real account. The majority of the subjects didn't want to follow the fake account which makes sense after looking at the dataset from Table 1. On points 5, 6 and 7, the data set showed that the subjects were more likely to follow the real SMI. Once again that makes sense, participants want to follow the real SMI. The results from point 2 and point 3 are significantly different. Both of these data sets are the opposite of the rest of the findings in Figure 2.

For point 2 on the seven-point scale, 56 people said they were less likely to follow the real SMI account, whereas 20 people said they were less likely to follow the fake SMI account. That means more people are less likely to follow the real accounts compared to the fake accounts. This was not expected in the data. Point 3 on the seven-point scale was similar to point 2. The data showed that 43 people were less likely to follow the real account compared to only 20 people who were less likely to follow the fake account. Once again, participants said that they were less likely to follow the real account. But point 2, which represents low intention in following the account seems to have made participants more unsure of their decision and the same with point three. What can be gathered from point 2 and point 3 is the participants know exactly what they don't want. But when they are even slightly unsure they start second-guessing their decisions.

This can be applied to consumers and help businesses because it shows that there is a grey area for consumers when following certain accounts. Consumers know exactly what they don't like and what accounts they absolutely won't follow. But there is a big market for consumers who don't know what they want. If marketing is done correctly on social media with

the use of real SMI's, businesses can not only hit their target audience, but also get a lot of followers that are initially unsure if they like the brand or product.

Table 3 provided some unique insight into the consumer's mind. If the participants had between 1-4 social media accounts, they were more likely to follow the real accounts (which is what businesses typically strive for). The participants that had 3-4 social media accounts had the highest percentage of being likely to follow the real social media accounts. This is probably because they are immersed in the social media world and know what to look for. Although, when the consumer had more than 5 social media accounts, they ironically were more likely to follow the fake Instagram accounts.

One possible reason this happened was because when a person has a plethora or in this case 5 or more social media accounts, they follow accounts just to follow them. They aren't focused on the content of the Instagram page. The participants just want to follow as many accounts as possible to fill up their feed. Another possible deduction to be made from the results could be about the types of photos used on the fake Instagram pages. The fake accounts are very focused on millennials and fit a certain stereotype that is very popular at this point in time. If a person has more than 5 social media accounts they could be focusing on what they think is an example of a popular trendy page and not whether the account looks authentic and real.

Table 4 was focused on the participants' opinions of the real and fake Instagram pages and builds upon the results in Table 3. When the participants had 1-4 social media accounts they were able to more correctly decipher which accounts were real and which ones were fake. The demographic that had the biggest percentage of correct answers was once again the group that had 3-4 social media accounts. They had the best performance and were more likely to guess



correctly. This group of participants were able to correctly guess which accounts were real and fake because they have immersed themselves into the digital world.

The participants with five or more social media accounts contrarily had the lowest percentage of guessing correctly which accounts were fake and real. They were more likely to make mistakes. This could be due to oversaturation. Participants may have oversaturated themselves in the digital world and therefore not be able to make sound judgement about the accounts. Participants in this category already have so many social media accounts, they most likely follow fake accounts and don't even realize it. So when it came to testing their understanding they didn't know the difference because to them, there was no real difference between the accounts.

### **Conclusion**

In this study the aim was to investigate the impact of fake SMI's and real SMI's on social media users. This was done by creating a survey using two real SMI accounts and two fake SMI accounts. Participants in the survey were asked to compare and contrast the two different types of SMI's and see which accounts were real, as well as which accounts they were more likely to follow.

After analyzing the data from the online survey, the research showed that the majority of the social media users were able to correctly tell the difference between the two different types of SMI accounts. This proves that consumers in the real world can identify which accounts are fake and therefore only follow the real SMI accounts. The research also showed that participants that have 3-4 social media accounts were found more likely to follow the correct or real SMI accounts. Participants that had five or more accounts were found more likely to follow the fake

SMI accounts. The respondents that fit into this category could not correctly identify the fake accounts.

This study does have a couple of limitations. First, the four social media accounts that were used were not completely identical. The real SMI accounts had Story Highlights and the fake SMI did not. This could have helped the participants find out which accounts were real and fake. The best way to improve upon this limitation is to find fake accounts that do utilize the Story Highlights feature on Instagram.

Second, not all the Instagram accounts were based around the same topic or genre. There was slight variety amongst the SMI's focus on each of the accounts. This could have also made the data slightly biased off of the subject and not off of the account itself. In order for less bias in future research, it would be beneficial to choose four accounts that are all based on the same topic or genre. This way the data will be based off of the accounts and not the content.

There are several areas that warrant further research. It would be interesting to see how product placement would do on a fake SMI account versus a real SMI account. This could be done by creating sign experimental stimulus and do the same product placement as real SMI.

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## Appendix

**How many social media platforms do you use on a daily basis?**

- ☐ None
- ☐ 1-2
- ☐ 3-4
- ☐ 5+

**How many hours do you spend on social media daily?**

- ☐ Less than 1 hour
- ☐ 2-3
- ☐ 4+

**What is the main reason you use social media? Choose all that apply**

- ☐ Entertainment
- ☐ News
- ☐ Product information
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Social Interaction
- ☐ Other



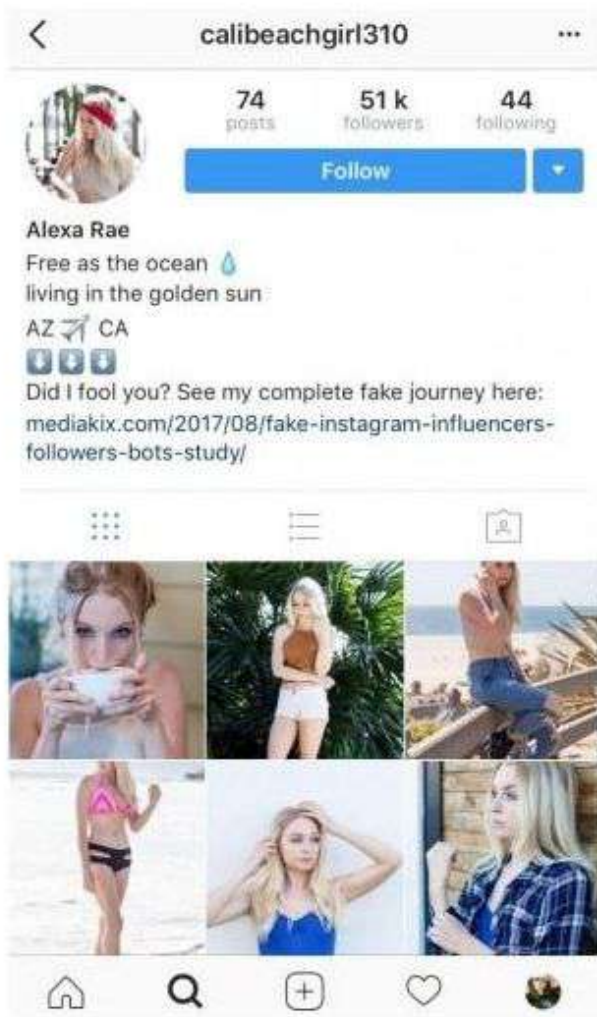
**What are Social Media Influencers?**

- ☐ Anyone with a social media account
- ☐ A person who makes political statements on the internet
- ☐ A person who shapes the attitude of their audience through the use of social media

**What are Fake Social Media Influencers?**

- ☐ A person who uses money to buy likes, follows and comments on social media
- ☐ A person who is trying to become a Social Media Infleuncer
- ☐ A person who has partnerships with companies to promote products and ideas





In your opinion, do you think this is:

- ☐ Fake Social Media Influencer
- ☐ Real Social Media Influencer

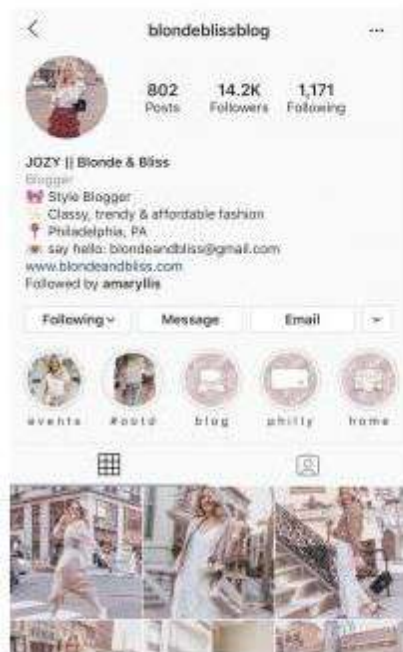
How likely are you to follow them?

Very Unlikely



Likely





In your opinion do you think it is:

- ☐ Fake Social Media Influencer
- ☐ Real Social Media Influencer

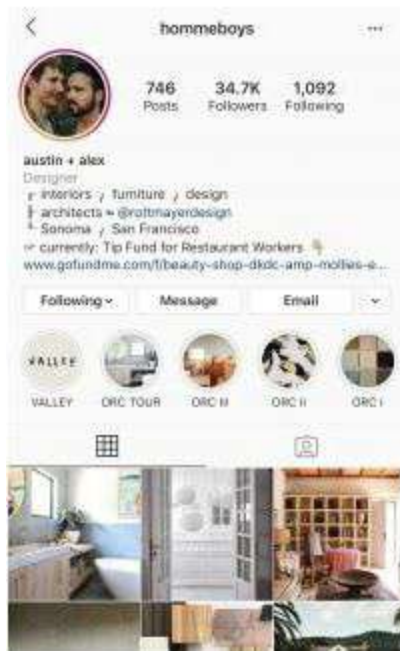
**How likely are you to follow them?**

Very Unlikely

● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Likely





In your opinion do you think it is:

- Fake Social Media Influencer
- Real Social Media Influencer

**How likely are you to follow them?**

Very Unlikely | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | Likely



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Institutional Review Board  
351 W. University Blvd., GC 308  
Cedar City, UT 84720

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(435) 586-7864

*Institutional Review Board*

**To:** Cassidy Harmon (PI) and Lijie Zhou (Faculty Supervisor)  
**From:** Bryan Koenig, SUU IRB Chair  
**Date:** 1 April 2020  
**RE:** Research Proposal: *Buying the Impact: Fake Social Media Influencers*

The SUU Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research under exempt category 2 (surveys). The following modifications are required.

1. Provide a copy of the survey (a draft is fine)
  2. Consent form: delete, "NOTE: If using internet based data collection, please format this document to reflect this (e.g., participants cannot initial an online document)."
  3. The consent form has places for initials and signatures, but those seem irrelevant given that the study will be online (assuming the survey is online; let me know if any data will be collected other than online)
  4. Consent form, delete, "If the research includes the potential for medical attention or other types of treatment due to injury while participating in the study (e.g., vigorous physical activity), the following statement could or perhaps should be included to clarify payment for such injury: In the event that you suffer a research-related injury, your medical expenses will be your responsibility or that of your third-party payer, although you are not precluded from seeking to collect compensation for injury related to malpractice, fault, or blame on the part of those involved in the research."
  5. Consent form, delete, "- The participant shows signs of unsafe physical discomfort- The participant is expressing signs of extreme emotional and/or psychological discomfort."
  6. Consent form, delete, "and ( if relevant ) the research funding agency. If relevant, include the following statement . Moreover, the law may require us to show your information in court or to tell authorities if the information indicates that you pose a danger to yourself and/or others."
  7. Consent form says, "A copy of the results from this study can be obtained on or after 04/18/2020, by contacting Cassidy Harmon at the phone number listed above." but the number above is for Lijie Zhou. Please fix.
-



The IRB must approve these modifications before you begin your study. Email related documents to [irb@suu.edu](mailto:irb@suu.edu).

If you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Notify me immediately should any unexpected risks to the participants become evident.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive-like mark that appears to be a combination of the letters 'A' and 'J'.

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IRB Chair

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1 April 2020

Date

IRB APPROVAL #01-042020b