

**The Houdini Code: Discovering the Shift that Makes Nano-Influencers Great**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this study was to identify the mindset shift factors that drive social influencers to become successful. The problem addressed in this study was the need to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers. The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to determine if a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, addressing issues related to credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment. The procedure involved interviewing 25 nano-influencers, each with between 1,000 and 10,000 Facebook (now Meta) followers, across five marketing niches: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, and religious messaging, and transcribing their comments into a series of theme-based spreadsheets.

The study's conceptual framework was guided by Hovland et al.'s (1953) source credibility theory, a response to Goebbels' World War II propaganda efforts, and was further refined by Zimbardo's research into persuasion and cult survivors. This research study began with a review of the current literature on social media influencers, then moved backward in time from seminal work to seminal work to determine which theories remain relevant today. Along the way, persuasion and propaganda were examined, starting with Aristotle's principles of rhetoric. Then traveling through the ruins of World War I Germany to Germany's propaganda efforts during World War II, and the Allies' response. Then, after World War II, with the building blocks in place, came the race to the moon. Finally, the literature review ends with the current research on metaphors hijacking the amygdala.

The results identified 24 factors that, when done properly, can help the social influencer build their digital tribe. The implications, especially in our digital age, when the economy has become increasingly dependent on screen time, are far-reaching. New or failed social influencers and businesses wanting to leverage social influence to increase market share could all be impacted. The highest recommendation is for a large-scale study of nano-influencers; the second recommendation is a study of micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers).

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In Simon's (1971) attention economy, the primary currency is the capture of people's attention and the collection of their digital data (Giraldo-Luque et al., 2020). Social media influencer marketing is a \$17 billion industry (Collabstr, 2023) and continues to grow. In 2024, Simon's (1971) attention economy has expanded to encompass all aspects of life, as demands on our dwindling attention increased proportionately to Tassi's (2018) contact with content, thereby monetizing the digital media-driven economy. Goldhaber (1997) suggested linking Simon's attention economy to the digital world with social media influencers (Kubler, 2023). Today, social media influencers have grown to become the ringmasters of Simon's (1971) attention economy.

Companies are typically motivated by profits to expand their marketing efforts into the digital arena by utilizing social influencers to promote their products (Fairchild, 2007; Tian et al., 2024). The company must identify which social media influencers align with its brand and products on a personal level (Harambasic & Skare, 2024). Social media influencers are increasingly engaged in companies' marketing campaigns for one key reason: trust, or social capital. Social capital works similarly to real capital; the more real capital or trust a person has, the more real capital or trust they have access to (Pumihic, 2023). As trust is both the antecedent and the outcome of relationships (Nooteboom, 2007), trust — or, as Aristotle called it, goodwill— is the key ingredient in online relationships.

Trust, or goodwill, as Aristotle called it, is a crucial component in building rapport. It is a dominant theme that spans from Aristotle's rhetoric (350 CE) to Hovland et al.'s (1963) source credibility theory and Ohanian's (1990) three-dimensional model of trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise. However, while some naturally exhibit trustworthiness, many do

not know how to become trusted. Trust begins with the social influencer's core motivation. A social media influencer's core motivation is important because it is why they do what they do, whether intrinsic or extrinsic (An & Haryanto, 2021). Come rain or shine, the burning desire to entertain or motivate their followers is always present, and this drive typically begins with a mindset shift that replaces failure with a commitment to finding a way to win, also known as bounce back (Ng, 2018) or mental resilience.

Social media influencers play a crucial role in marketing McLuhan and Power's (1964) concept of a global village by bridging, bonding, and linking social capital. Beichert et al. (2024) found that nano-influencers have a higher return on investment per follower than macro- and mega-influencers. The higher the engagement rate between the influencer and their digital tribe, the more social capital and trust are both expended and gained by the influencer and their digital tribe, ultimately increasing company profitability (Beichert et al., 2024). Social capital value is derived from relationships and social networks, as well as the dynamics of power within society (Bourdieu, 1986).

As more companies seek to recruit social media influencers and more individuals aspire to become them, research is needed to develop a methodology that helps ensure their success. That methodology must begin with a qualitative study of what successful influencers did right and wrong, their core beliefs, and their journey as influencers. Companies and social media influencers seeking top-of-mind awareness (TOMA) with consumers must understand the powerful effects of social and psychological capital (Doci et al., 2023). Psychological capital, which encompasses confidence, optimism, perseverance, and resilience, enables individuals to achieve success (Luthans et al., 2006). These qualities are all evident in the results of a successful mindset shift.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this study is the need to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers.

Understanding these drivers can provide valuable insights into how influencers develop strategies, adapt to changing digital landscapes, and sustain audience engagement. The main drivers requiring further study among social influencers are credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment (Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ye et al., 2021), which are associated with successful social media influencer outcomes.

Harambasic and Skare (2024) stated that the top priority in social influencer research was to refine how credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment affect influencer engagement. This gap in research on the drivers of social influencers' success (Hughes et al., 2019) extends beyond standard metrics such as follower counts and engagement (Bakaler, 2018). Failing to study this problem will lead to a continued misunderstanding of the influencer-follower relationship (Harambasic & Skare, 2024; Joshi et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2021).

While the digital content of social influencers has been studied (Wies et al., 2023), research on their credibility and alignment with target audiences is limited. Mindset change, or mindset shift, has been studied among teachers to develop more effective models of academic success (Padir & Vangolu, 2023), but not among social influencers. As the use of social media influencers grows, more companies will seek to expand their digital footprint by engaging with them (Hughes et al., 2019). Companies are working to improve and leverage a sociological concept developed by Granovetter (1973), known as weak ties, which refers to communication between groups—a key aspect of social capital. The weak ties or

communications between groups bind McLuhan and Power's global village together (Antecol, 1997) and facilitate the rebroadcasting efforts of the different collective digital tribes that comprise the company, as well as their social influencers' digital footprint.

Weber's (1947) work on "the three types of legitimate rule" (Halpert, 1990) — traditional, legal, and charismatic — remains applicable today, especially in the context of social influencers. Many people perceive social media influencers as charismatic leaders (Zhang et al., 2024), and their followers often comply with or acknowledge their suggestions as manifestations of the charismatic leader's mission (Weber, 1947). Charismatic authority is generally seen in the digital world as the ringmasters of Simon's (1971) attention economy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to determine whether a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, addressing issues related to credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment. Nano-influencers typically have between 1,000 and 10,000 digital followers (Sun et al., 2022). The qualitative variables include personal motivations for getting into social media influencing (Kolo et al., 2022), the mindset shift that helped them become successful, what they would do differently, the pitfalls they faced with credibility, how they built up their content quality, their target audience alignment, and their best cash revenue stream. The target population would be U.S.-based nano-social influencers. The sample size would be 25 valid respondents. The sampling frame will be active marketing nano-social influencers in Influencer Marketing Hub's top five nano-influencer niches (Molenaar, 2025). No participant-identifying information will be included in the study, and the safety and well-being of participants and professionals will be the top priority of this

research effort (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The data analysis would consist of an Excel-designed data instrument to ensure consistency, and then be examined through NVivo for further analysis.

The research setting would involve sending an emailed invitation to randomly selected nano-influencers across various marketing niches to participate in a qualitative interview via Zoom or by telephone as part of the dissertation's data collection phase. The data would be self-reported, in line with Creswell and Creswell (2022), and focus on developing a template to aid future influencers in achieving success. It would also reflect Enes et al.'s (2023) findings on a Social Media Relationship Scale, with some rewording from 'social media' to 'social influencers' in the questionnaire.

### **Introduction to Framework**

The chosen conceptual framework for this research study is source credibility, which best fits the workings of the social influencer industry and modern marketing practices. With all strategic marketing problems, the conceptual frameworks for solving complex marketing issues span multiple academic disciplines. To discover a cohesive conceptual framework for this research study, 55 marketing theories, 13 political theories, and 14 persuasion theories were examined. Marketing has evolved beyond the exchange of goods and services (Nidubuisi, 2023); therefore, theories were screened to determine which would best fit a conceptual framework for social media influencers. First defined by Aristotle as a rhetorical appeal (Rapp, 2023), source credibility is argued by some as a multidimensional concept comprising several components (Flanagin & Metzger, 2020). Aristotle believed that if a person's words and actions did not match, they would lose credibility (Gallo, 2019). Aristotle defined persuasion as character, reason, emotion, metaphor, brevity (Gallo, 2019), and

goodwill, referred to as the lost and measurable dimension (McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

Hovland and Weiss (1951) began studying the effects of source credibility during World War II. Later, Hovland et al. (1951) defined source credibility as the communicator's perceived credibility. Hovland et al. (1953) then developed source credibility theory. Cornan et al. (2006) later identified perceived expertise and trustworthiness as source credibility. The three primary source credibility models are the factor, functional, and constructivist models (Umeogu, 2012).

Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska (2022) applied source credibility theory to social influencers in a study examining purchases made by their followers, demonstrating a positive relationship. This researcher believes that by viewing an influencer through the objective lens of whether they are personally helping or hurting their followers, the most credible influencer is likely to survive and gain followers. Social capital, which reflects source credibility through bridging, bonding, and linking, should become very apparent in the work of social influencers. If the variables of better technology, outside fame, prior experience, sponsorships, and name recognition are factored out, only source credibility through rhetoric should remain.

This researcher believes that source credibility is at the heart of social media influencers' success and that the influencer's credibility is reflected in all their mindset shifts, pitfalls, and pathways to success with their digital tribe. Goldenberg et al. (2024) discussed the natural interconnectors between members of digital tribes and influencers, which can also be observed through the concepts of bridging, linking, and bonding social capital. Source credibility theory, as identified by Hovland et al. (1953) and further explored by Han and

Balabanis (2024) in their meta-analysis, is a suitable conceptual framework for examining what makes an influencer successful.

In conjunction with Enes et al. (2020) SMR Scale and Ohanian's (1990) three-dimensional model of trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, source credibility theory is expected to yield insight into the research problem of what makes an influencer successful. The source credibility framework also supports the research questions, as expertise and trustworthiness should be apparent, along with a mindset shift and motivation. Weber's (1947) research on the three forms of legitimate rule fits nicely, as charisma is the most common form of legitimate rule. Legitimate charismatic rule is quickly developed and exploited by ordinary people, particularly with the help of social influencers. Source credibility, as a conceptual framework, should aid in building the success formula that helps influencers establish and grow their digital tribes, as well as in helping companies choose the best social influencers to represent their brands.

### **Introduction to Research Methodology and Design**

This non-experimental, qualitative survey aims to interview nano-influencers with 1,000-10,000 Facebook followers to explore how they identify the drivers of their success. The gap between failure and success can only be bridged by asking deep, meaningful questions rooted in human experience, as generated through non-experimental qualitative research (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2022). By conducting such research with social influencer participants, their origin stories (Kolo et al., 2022), lessons learned, and recommendations (Enes et al., 2020) can be organized to explore their narratives for commonalities, aiding in the identification of inner motivational alignment (Harambasic & Skare, 2024). This approach is expected to yield the detailed, rich insights that qualitative research is renowned for. The research questions and

supporting interview questions are designed to perform a limited examination into what makes social influencers successful. This is important because failure is often a common path that many follow.

Since the research centers on people's opinions, experiences, and recommendations, it is helpful to explore individuals' understanding, which can be uncovered only through qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). There is a clear research gap in understanding what contributes to the success of social influencers. Therefore, the first logical step is to conduct a comprehensive literature review to identify the seminal works and then to build upon them. This includes looking at the reasoning behind the 1940s to current research about three million papers since 2020, into how Hitler, Goebbels and the Nazis persuaded an entire nation into a genocidal quest for world dominance. The second logical step is to interview successful influencers to learn how they achieved their success and to verify whether their journey is linked to their accomplishments.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle initially defined persuasion as a rhetorical appeal (Rapp, 2023). In its original form, rhetorical appeal or persuasion consisted of three forms. Broken down, they comprise the speaker's credibility, skills, and wisdom, as well as their goodwill. Munsterberg (1916) would make two observations that still ring true today: that successful media focuses on sharing emotions and that human attention is a scarce commodity. Descartes, a French philosopher and mathematician, believed that logic was the primary driver of human thought, and his ideas profoundly influenced academia for approximately 300 years (Kambouchner, 2024). Later, the thoughts of famed futurist Marshall McLuhan (Sauer, 2023) would align with Damasio's (1994) research, which suggests that

emotions, rather than logic, govern human behavior, as there is no clear dividing line between media-induced emotions and people's own emotions (Sauer, 2023).

In working to combat the effects of Hitler and Goebbels' propaganda, Hovland and Janis, then working for the War Department, would both become experts in their fields. Hovland (1953) would later develop the Yale Attitude Change Model and source credibility theory, along with Janis, who developed the theory of groupthink (1972). The goal of propaganda is to persuade others, which is the same goal as Aristotle's rhetoric 2,400 years ago. The only real difference is that the media is the message (McLuhan, 1967), referring to how media massages the senses or emotions. Larson (2012) later recognized the five-step process: the persuader must capture the audience's attention, and the audience must understand the message. Then, the audience must accept the message, retain the information it conveys, and act on it.

Weber's (1947) charismatic rule is a key element in any social influencer's success, as there are more charismatic rulers or ringmasters in Simon's attention economy than traditional or legal authority. Meersman et al. (2022) later explored how the human brain responds to words with concrete meanings or related senses, as this captures the brain's attention for longer. This allows it to hijack the human brain within Simon's (1972) attention economy, giving the sender a distinct advantage in controlling the receiver's emotions (Munsterberger, 1916; McLuhan, 1967). Social capital is closely linked to trust (Putnam, 1993). To Simon's attention economy, as you do not listen to people you do not trust (Chen et al., 2023), which ties back to Aristotle's concept of goodwill toward the audience.

## **Research Questions**

The qualitative research questions aim to understand the motivations behind becoming a social media influencer, the mindset changes needed for success, what social media influencers would change, pitfalls to avoid, and possible shortcuts to success.

**RQ1:** What are the building blocks for a credible social influencer?

**RQ2:** What mindset shift led to improving the content quality?

**RQ3:** What would the social media influencer do differently if they had to start over?

**RQ4:** What are the biggest pitfalls of target audience alignment within digital tribes?

**RQ5:** What is the social media influencer's most successful cash revenue funnel?

## **Significance of the Study**

This research aims to capture lightning in a bottle: the human motivation driving social media influencers to success. Hyland's (1988) motivational control theory explains this process: everyone seeks success, but they attain it differently because they have different thoughts about how to achieve it. By starting with the social influencer's core motivation and moving through the process, metrics can be developed so that future social influencers can connect the dots to success. The motivation metrics also cover preparation, technology, storytelling, rehearsals, short videos, and other notable points. Brand hate will also be included (Odoom et al., 2024), which helps build a well-crafted production that motivates and persuades their digital tribe to act.

Additionally, mindset shifts are necessary for influencers to achieve success. By asking motivation-based questions, the influencers can self-report what they would do differently, what pitfalls they would avoid, and what, if anything, could lead to a shortcut to success. By leveraging nano-influencers in the early growth phase of their digital presence, a

realistic template can be developed for new influencers to follow. Interviewing well-established influencers would create an unworkable template for new influencers, as their priorities and recent experiences would not translate into a meaningful path for them to follow.

Examining these aspects of social media influencers can shorten the path to success for new influencers. This insight into social media influencers' inner motivation opens up many possibilities, ranging from helping individuals become more successful to companies assisting companies in selecting authentic social influencers, as unauthentic ones cost companies money in return (Zhang et al., 2024), and assisting in coaching and training them when necessary to accomplish company goals. Social media influencers can positively and negatively affect sales (Ki et al., 2020) through Kucuk's (2021) brand hate theory. In addition to public and private companies, many other industries, including political groups, charitable institutions, and even religious organizations, leverage social media influencers to expand their reach.

By focusing on the inner motivations and pathways to success of social influencers, the study expands the knowledge base for future researchers. From an academic perspective, examining the inner motivations of social media influencers significantly contributes to our understanding of the development of this predominantly digital phenomenon, which is increasingly shaping our economy. Additionally, from an academic perspective, the same growth mindset exhibited by high-performing students (Ng, 2018) can also be modeled by successful social influencers. A growth mindset is based on the growth of intelligence through effort and learning (Ng, 2018), the same process that a social influencer undergoes through trial and error as they build their digital tribe. Mental resiliency, in some circles, refers to a person's ability to

overcome adversity, often when they have faced complete failure. Then, their mental resiliency helps them find a way to win, which, in this case, would be a lightning-in-the-bottle solution that the template hopes to achieve.

The negative consequences of failing to study social influencers' core motivations and pathways to success include ongoing financial losses for organizations that do not leverage them effectively. Additionally, significant human potential is lost in today's marketplace, as thousands fail each year to become social influencers. This consideration is especially pertinent during these challenging economic times. While not everyone can follow their dreams of becoming famous, a working template would enable more social influencers to achieve financial success.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### ***Artificial intelligence (AI)***

Human thought can be mechanized (Webel, 2023), and machines can efficiently perform tasks that are difficult and time-consuming (Thottoli et al., 2024).

### ***Macro-influencer***

Macro-influencers typically have between 100,000 and one million followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

### ***Mega-Influencer***

Mega-influencers have over one million followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

### ***Micro-Influencer***

Micro-influencers have 10,000 to 100,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

### ***Mindset Shift***

How people act and react to their world (Waters & Riordan, 2024). This is often an indicator of a person's mental resilience.

### ***Nano-Influencer***

Nano-influencers have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

### ***Simon's Attention Economy***

The average person is constantly inundated with too much information, and the person's attention is considered a valuable commodity (Simon, 1971).

### ***Social Capital***

Goodwill, mutual emotions, and social connectivity among individuals who are part of a social unit (Hanifan, 1916).

### ***Source Credibility Theory***

Aristotle initially proposed the concept of source credibility within the context of rhetoric (Rapp, 2023). It was later developed into source credibility theory by Hovland et al. (1953).

### **Summary**

Influencer marketing is a \$17 billion industry (Collabstr, 2023) annually and is expected to continue growing for the foreseeable future. Helping social media influencers grow their digital tribe seems like an excellent application for strategic marketing. In many ways, social influencers are the new digital salespeople representing brands and products in the global digital economy. Meta, Udemy, Skillshare, and Coursera are now offering online courses on becoming social influencers, catering to the marketplace and companies seeking social media influencers. However, money may be wasted without understanding the mindset shifts, inner-driving emotions, and experiences of successful social media influencers.

This research study aims to explore the mindset shifts of successful nano-influencers, which lead to adjustments in their social media influencer credibility, content quality, target audience alignment, and business decisions, ultimately ensuring profitability. Once the survey is complete and the data are analyzed, an easy-to-follow template can be created, allowing other social media influencers to quickly replicate the mindset shift and achieve profitability for the brands that sponsor their marketing efforts. Organizations seeking social influencers can review the study at the organizational level to identify which social media influencers have made the mindset shift and are successfully growing their digital communities. The literature review will span approximately 2,369 years, beginning with the philosopher Aristotle and ending with current research conducted in 2025. The people who have advanced this field of research include the most infamous individuals on the planet, as well as modern-day researchers who, by accident, have shaped international guidelines on human experimentation.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem to be addressed in this study is the need to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers. The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to determine if a formula and pathway for success can be identified. This study examines the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, focusing on credibility, content quality, and alignment with their target audiences. The issue addressed in this study is the necessity to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers. Gaining insight into these drivers can offer valuable perspectives on how influencers adapt to evolving digital landscapes and maintain audience engagement.

The primary drivers that require further investigation regarding social influencers are credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment (Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ye et al., 2021). These primary drivers tend to lead to successful outcomes for social media influencers. This qualitative study aims to identify the successful mindset shifts that nano-social influencers experience as they begin and expand their digital communities. Qualitative interviews are designed to pinpoint the key factors that contribute to the success of nano-influencers on social media.

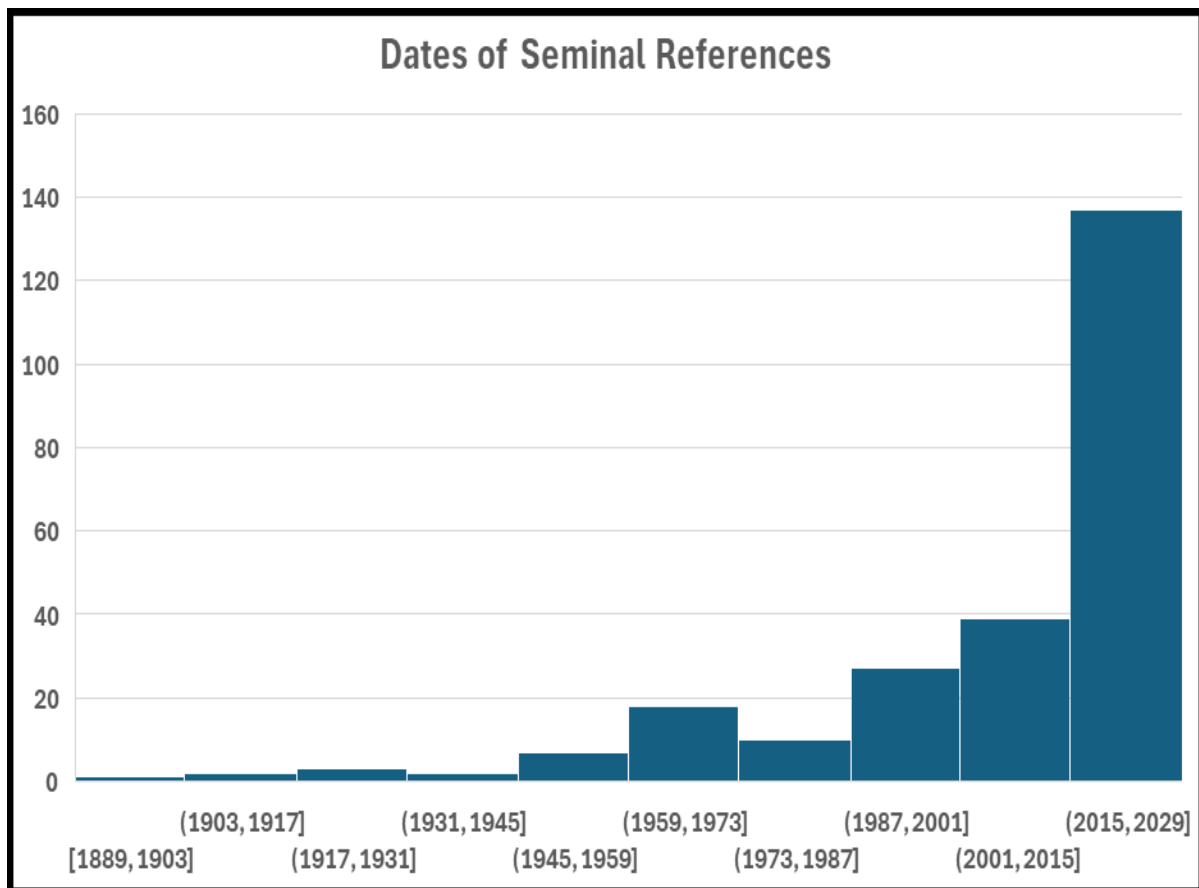
This literature review examines the history of rhetoric, persuasion, and, to some extent, propaganda, as both are forms of communication (Moscovici & Markova, 2000). It then explores the key factors driving mindset shifts in the nano-social media influencer environment, focusing on the seminal works of Aristotle, Weber, Hovland, and Ohanian while highlighting the academic evolution of these foundational studies in today's nano-social media landscape.

## Documentation

The following online library databases from Northcentral University and National University were utilized in this research study: SAGE Knowledge, eBooks Central, Taylor & Francis Online, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, SAGE Journals Online, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, and IGI Global. Search delimiters emphasized scholarly and peer-reviewed sources, including full-text journals, books, book reviews, and articles. Due to the in-depth exploration of the historical origins of rhetoric and persuasion, refereed articles from notable sources, including acclaimed literary works or published historical accounts, are utilized when peer-reviewed articles are unavailable. While refereed articles have existed in various forms since the 1750s (Moxham & Fyee, 2018), such articles, which precede peer-reviewed articles, did not take their current form until the mid-1970s (Wills, 2024). Simultaneously, an unrestricted date search was conducted on seminal works to support research into the field's history, focusing on publications from 2020 to 2025. The terminology used in the searches included charisma, persuasion, trustworthiness, attractiveness, influencers, social capital, linking, bonding, bridging, social media, attention economy, goodwill, motivations, and source credibility theory. Additionally, unconventional research was conducted to identify outlier studies that were not found during standard searches.

The research conducted by Hovland, Janis, Stouffer, and Weber focused on Hitler and persuasion, yielding 595 full-text, peer-reviewed papers in the National University Library. Simultaneously, Microsoft Bing identified over 10.9 million peer-reviewed papers worldwide that matched the search criteria of Hitler, propaganda, and persuasion. This wealth of academic literature suggests that Hitler and his minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, had a profound impact on the field of rhetoric, at least from an academic and governmental

standpoint, as will be discussed later. In the American academic realm, there tends to be an omission of non-English written research during literature reviews. In pursuit of knowledge, this researcher downloaded foreign-language papers and translated them into English using Microsoft Word Translate to better understand the contributions of foreign researchers in this area of study. Table 1 outlines the historical research path that informed this study, detailing the research milestones and seminal works that support its findings. Sztompka's (2016) research in Polish was crucial to the overall research as Sztompka is regarded as a leader in sociology, following Weber, Hovland, Simmel, and Durkheim.



**Table 1 Dates of Seminal References**

## **Framework**

Source credibility was initially investigated by Hovland and Weiss (1951) and later refined by Hovland et al. (1953) into a working theory that examined the communicator's credibility with their audience. Source credibility theory suggests that audiences can differentiate between communicators who genuinely prioritize their interests and those who do not. The theory builds on Aristotle's rhetorical appeal, which discusses the speaker's credibility, their mode of discourse, and their emotional appeals to the audience. Aristotle's persuasion model also connects with the research gap that needs further exploration regarding credibility, content quality, and audience alignment in contemporary social media influencing.

## **Origins of Rhetorical Appeal or Persuasion**

Greek philosopher Aristotle initially defined persuasion as a rhetorical appeal (Rapp, 2023). In its original form, rhetorical appeal or persuasion consisted of three forms. The first is ethos, or the speaker's credibility. Ethos breaks down into three components: phronesis, which refers to valuable skills, and practical wisdom, which dominates today's digital media landscape of how-to videos. Eunoia, or goodwill towards the audience, is exemplified by current figures such as religious leaders and motivational speakers. In ancient Greece, the arete component of eunoia, goodwill, and virtue refers to the realization of one's full potential. The modern-day equivalents would be the "Make America Great Again" and "Open Borders" movements: religious leaders and their followers, and charity organizations.

The speaker's emotion can unify or amplify emotions in the audience (Adamos, 2007), such as evoking feelings of pain or pleasure (Dow, 2011). Gorgias, also known as Gorgias the Nihilist, was an ancient Greek orator who believed that words could stir people and even bewitch their souls (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990) by speaking directly to their emotions. Fast-

forward to 1964, when McLuhan (1964) discussed the rational world being overtaken by a worldview that stressed emotions and feelings. McLuhan's thoughts align with Damasio's (1994) research, which suggests that emotions, rather than logic, govern humans. In contrast, Descartes, a French philosopher and mathematician, believed that logic was the primary driver of human thought, and his ideas profoundly influenced academia for approximately 300 years (Kambouchner, 2024).

For modern-day influencers, emotions ultimately control their digital tribe's behavior. For example, a logical argument would be that saving money is good, but an emotional argument would be that saving money to feed your family is better. For example, in Coca-Cola's "I'd like to teach the world to sing" ad in 1971, the brand and its revenue took off (Lopez et al., 2019). During the Vietnam War, this ad helped, for one brief moment, bring the world together, at least symbolically, with joy, one of Plutchik's higher-order emotions (Semeraro, 2021).

Speaking in metaphors shapes how the audience thinks, as these thoughts are primarily unconscious (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Think of a metaphor as a map for the listener (Lakoff, 1980) that guides them to a familiar place. Using metaphors to explain significant concepts helps the audience better understand the message. Metaphoric concepts are most effective when described through sensorimotor experiences (Khatin-Zadeh et al., 2023). For example, instead of considering the moon's width as 2,158 miles, leave the audience with a metaphor like seeing the big blue marble in the sky, which engages their sensorimotor function of sight. Another instance of bilateral activation is the processing of speech and hearing during a conversation, which has positive effects on the parties involved,

even when rhetorical questions are posed to an audience (Feng et al., 2023), where the audience does not answer, or when used in conjunction with therapy (Amano & Toichi, 2016).

Brevity is the result of cultural conditioning. For example, the three-minute rule for radio disk jockeys talking between songs (Zumthor, 2016). Brevity is key in microlearning, where complex information is broken down into smaller chunks by task or problem (Nissen et al., 2024). This standard is becoming increasingly prevalent on digital learning platforms. Brevity, the fourth part of a story, embodies the unity of the event; the end is the absolute conclusion, and each detail leads toward it, with brevity of words as the final component (Zumthor, 2016).

Aristotle's rhetoric, or persuasion, is founded on character, reason, emotion, metaphor, brevity, and goodwill. These elements contribute to both Aristotle's *eunoia*, which refers to goodwill toward the audience, and *arete*, representing the goodwill and virtue of the speaker, as shown in Table 2. However, both forms of goodwill diminish over time (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). While goodwill gained significance in accounting (Fisher, 1906; Canning, 1929) as an intangible asset, its complexity and definition evolved (Canning, 1929). Fisher (1906), who was striving to establish economics as a science at the time, made considerable efforts to describe psychic income as the benefits derived from a hard day's work that were not reflected in a traditional accounting balance sheet. These psychic benefits would later translate into the same goodwill or intangible asset seen when a business partner buys out another or sells an existing business to a new owner. This concept parallels Aristotle's *eunoia*, which typically denotes goodwill toward the audience but, in this context, refers to future business owners.

During and after World War II, there was a keen interest in understanding how Germany, a nation on the brink of total economic collapse due to hyperinflation in 1923, could refocus itself to pursue near-world domination in just over six years (Weidenhammer, 1932; McHugh, 2024). In 1923, a pound of beef cost 3 billion marks (Bisno, 2023), or one U.S. dollar was worth 4.2 trillion German marks (Weidenhammer, 1932; Hill et al., 1977). This hyperinflation resulted from the war debt Germany faced after World War I, as mandated in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, also known as the "guilt clause" (Binkley, 1929). Germany went from trench warfare and economic ruin to nearly ruling the world through state alliances and a new form of combined arms attacks called blitzkrieg in just over six years. This terrified governments, academics, and survivors of World War II, prompting extensive research to prevent such a situation from happening again.

### **Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeal or Persuasion Formula**

<b>Ethos</b>	<b>Credibility of the Speaker - Character</b>
Phronesis	Valuable Skills and Practical Wisdom
Eunoia	Goodwill towards the Audience
Arete	Goodwill and Virtue
<b>Logos</b>	<b>Discourse based on Inductive and Deductive Reason</b>
	Logos translates to I count, I tell, I speak, or I say (Liddell & Scott, 1889).
<b>Pathos</b>	<b>Appeals to the Audience's Emotions or Awakening - Emotions</b>
	A moving story, metaphor, or personal anecdote.
<b>Metaphor</b>	<b>Using a simple illustration or story to make a point</b>
	Communicating with the familiar to an audience to make the point Breaking down the complex and explaining it in familiar terms.
<b>Brevity</b>	<b>Less is more when it comes to persuasion</b>
	Starting with the strongest point and closing the loop quickly Making the ending the final ending.

**Table 2 Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeal or Persuasion**

## **Studying Rhetoric and Persuasion During and After World War II**

Much of the governmental and academic research has focused on Hitler and the use of persuasion. Since World War II, approximately 3.2 million peer-reviewed papers have been written on Hitler and persuasion. The goal of all this research was to figure out what happened to the German people and how to keep a man like Hitler from happening again. Joseph Goebbels produced 34 propaganda movies before 1939 and 46 movies during World War II, featuring Hitler, Nazism, and sacrifice to the fatherland (Kanzog, 1994; Saekel, 2011). Goebbels' brother-in-law was Max Kimmich, a German film director who had been a failed screenwriter in Hollywood. Kimmich worked on several of the big propaganda films in the 1930s, and his directing career took off when the Nazis seized power in Germany. Kimmich's movie *Two Foxes of Glenarvon*, a propaganda film designed to stir up anti-British feelings in Ireland (Bourke, 2007), was banned by the Allies. The Allies, who normally operated in a free society, feared the movie would hinder their war efforts and stir anti-British sentiment because, at the time, the British ruled Ireland.

### **Hitler, Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Propaganda**

Hitler believed the British had not won World War I but tricked the world through propaganda (O'Shaughnessy, 2009). Consequently, Hitler began studying rhetoric to persuade people to his way of thinking. Hitler was trained by Erik Jan Hanussen, a hypnotist, stage magician, and clairvoyant (Magida, 2011; Perry, 2012; Solomon, 2013), from whom he learned how to capture and captivate an audience. Later, when Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, he discussed persuasion as a methodical process culminating in emotionally winning over the masses during rallies (Delia, 1971). Hitler and his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, as well as Lord Haw-Haw, a British pro-Hitler radio broadcaster whom Goebbels referred to as

the best horse in his stable (Smyth, 2024), were focused on one thing: disseminating Hitler's message to influence the British to join Hitler's cause. Doherty's (2021) research estimated that half a million Britons listened to the five secret radio stations Goebbels created to broadcast pro-Hitler propaganda throughout Europe. Goebbels often met with film, radio, and the press (Smyth, 2024) to further broadcast Nazi propaganda and keep current on new trends. Modern-day influencers would do well to continuously seek the best business practices to stay current in the digital marketplace, just as Goebbels, one of the greatest villains in the history of mankind, did.

### **Hovland's Source Credibility and Persuasion**

Samuel Stouffer recruited sociologist and statistician Carl Hovland to lead the War Department's efforts in persuasion and influence. The War Department tasked Stouffer with building, energizing, and, after the war, demobilizing the American Armed Forces during World War II (Hauser, 1960). Hovland's research focused on the effectiveness of training films during World War II (Bucky, 1982), which led him to contribute to the development of the Yale Attitude Change Model, often described as "who said what to whom." Hovland et al. (1953) wrote *Communication and Persuasion*, the seminal research book on general persuasibility, order of presentation, fear arousal, communicator credibility, and group norms. Hovland's experiments at Yale University focused on the individual rather than on group experiments, which were common at the time.

However, at nearly the same time, Lasswell was developing his own "who said what to whom" model, also known as the Lasswell (1948) communications model, which is still taught in universities today and appears in many modern peer-reviewed papers. Petersen's (2011) research suggests that while written text can emotionally trigger readers, single images

cannot, as they lack framing. Movies or photoplays, as they were called in 1916, focus on depicting emotions (Munsterberg, 1916), which are then transmitted to the audience.

Munsterberg made an interesting observation that, among the internal functions that give meaning to the world around us, attention is the most important; this foreshadows Simon's attention economy and the scarcity of human attention.

One of Hovland's partners and co-researchers, Irving Janis, focused his research on group behavior and thinking. Later, Janis developed the concept of groupthink (1972). Hovland et al. (1953) would also advance source credibility theory, another seminal work in this field. Source credibility theory primarily arose from governmental and academic interest in how Hitler motivated the German nation to recover from ruin and almost dominate the world in just over six years. Hovland's research on persuasion inspired the Hovland-Yale Model, also known as the Yale Attitude Change Model, as well as other names like the Yale Attitude Change Approach, the Single Shot Method, and the Yale 5-Step Model.

As methods of persuasion evolved, the goal remained the same: to persuade others. The psychologists' primary concerns were attention, comprehension, and acceptance; later on, retention and action were added to the persuasive messaging methodology. Larson (2012) recognized that Hovland, Kelley, and Janis's model was a five-step process. The persuader must capture the audience's attention, and the audience must understand the message. Then, the audience must accept the message, retain the information it conveys, and act on it.

Larson (2012) explained that words influence the listener's mind. Supporting Larson (2012), Meersmans et al. (2022) found that different types of words can be observed in magnetic imagery, affecting test participants' brains in specific locations. Larson (2012) further noted that words possess meaning, and word meaning is shaped by attention

(Meersman et al., 2022). The more mental attention a person pays to a word, the greater its impact. Since abstract words or intangibles cannot be touched or seen, humans develop their concepts later in life (Meersman et al., 2022). Speakers must tailor their language to their audience, using the appropriate words to persuade effectively, as younger audiences may struggle to conceptualize abstract ideas compared to older ones.

Meersman et al. (2022) studied how the brain responds to words using the valence and concreteness dimensions. Concrete words can be experienced through a person's five senses, with some words, like water, being tasted, seen, heard, smelled, and touched. At the same time, words like fire evoke fear in our brains. A word that grabs the brain's attention is processed within 100 microseconds (Palazova et al., 2013), which typically results in a more substantial impact on the listener. When someone discussing a new product says, “that product is fire,” the word fire affects the listener more intensely and through several pathways in their brain, making them remember the product better.

Larson (2012) also discussed the theme of the message, also called the thematics. For example, a 2020s movie about a gangster with thematic messaging that crime does not pay. The thematic advantage is gained as the audience’s emotions become engaged. For example, in a gangster movie, the audience witnesses the death of a previously portrayed charitable character at the hands of the evil gangster. Then, the thematic advantage of crime not paying can be further exploited to support the movie's theme when the gangster is arrested.

### **The Loss of Goodwill from Aristotle’s Rhetoric**

Research on goodwill and its implications ended in the 1960s, and this gap persisted until the early 1980s (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). During this time, many researchers focused on credibility, trustworthiness, and competence, rather than goodwill. The likely

reason for this shift was Hitler's attitude toward Jews and, later, the German people. Hitler's propaganda campaigns that dehumanized Jews, whom he blamed for Germany's economic troubles, and his ability to manipulate the emotions of the German people to commit horrific acts (Landry et al., 2022) probably contributed to the lack of study on goodwill.

However, goodwill made up two-thirds of Aristotle's rhetorical ethos: goodwill toward the audience and the goodness and virtue of the speaker. Since Hitler's goodwill was questionable to the German people, Goebbels had to create the propaganda image of Hitler as a Teutonic knight who cared for his people (O'Shaughnessy, 2009). Goebbels's extensive propaganda efforts, where goodwill toward the German people and their perceived allies was a key theme of Hitler being a caring leader, further caused researchers to overlook goodwill. As a result, goodwill was largely ignored by most scholars (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), and while the concept is hard to define, the goodwill felt by the audience can be measured. Goebbels's propaganda used movies, radio, large and small public events, newspapers, and magazines. Imagine how terrifying it would have been if Goebbels had access to a 24/7/365 digital news cycle, the internet, and dedicated social influencers to spread Nazi propaganda even further.

### **Ohanian and Source Credibility**

Ohanian (1990) research, based on the work of Desarbo and Harshman (1985), examined celebrity-brand congruence and identified three factors that establish a source's credibility: expertise, trust, and attractiveness. Notably, attractiveness enhances the message (Corina, 2010). Expertise, coercive, reward, referent, and legitimate power comprise the five bases of power (French & Raven, 1959), with informational power added as the sixth base (Raven, 1965). All six power bases are essential in persuasion, as they relate to the role of the

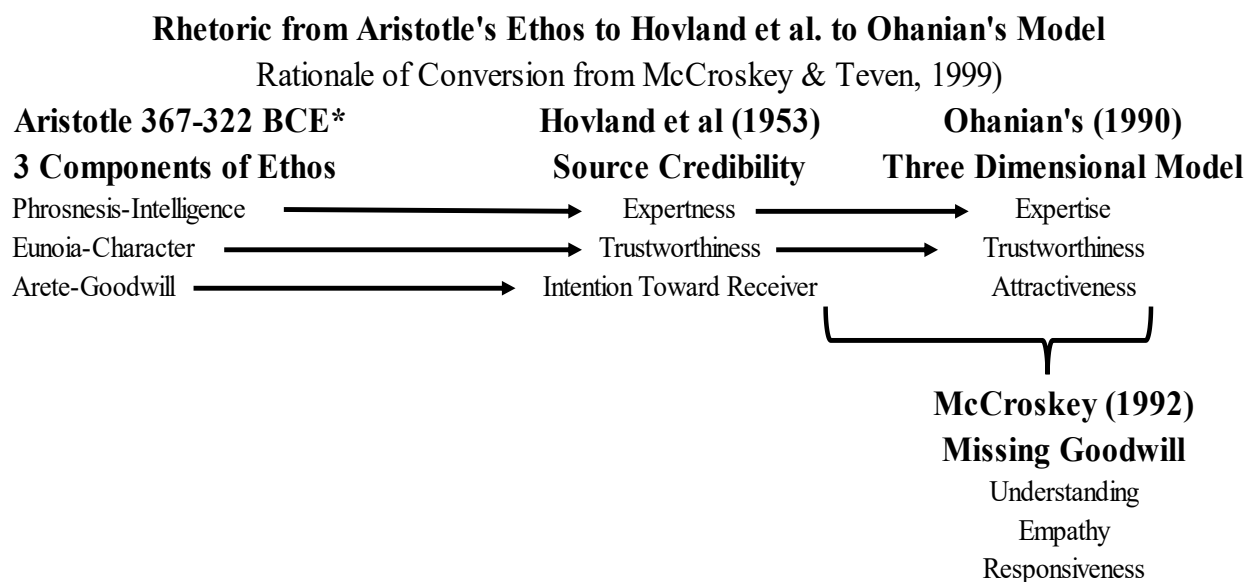
speaker in this research. Expertise aligns with the definitions provided by Aristotle, Hovland, and Ohanian. Trust is regarded as honesty, consistent with Aristotle's, Hovland's, and Ohanian's definitions.

The difference is that Ohanian highlights goodwill as a key factor in attractiveness, viewing it as a blend of style, elegance, and beauty (Corina, 2010). It relies on familiarity, similarities, and sympathy, which influence the audience (Erdogan, 1999), but do not originate from goodwill itself. A lack of goodwill would have affected America's mass media culture for many years, as the most attractive people tend to shape our first impressions, thereby influencing our decisions (Talamas et al., 2016). Research shows that the more attractive a student is, the higher the expectations for their abilities (Kenealy et al., 1988), with attractive students often seen as socially adept and more likely to become leaders. In terms of influence, the more attractive the influencer, the more likely they are to persuade their digital audience to make a purchase.

Examining Goebbels' work through the framework of Ohanian (1990), Table 3, provides insights into the impact on audiences who viewed Goebbels' propaganda films. These black-and-white films, with lighting crafted to make the black German uniforms leap off the screen, appealed to a nation that was starving for food as Hitler rose to power. The same can be said of Reverend Jim Jones, who donned a white suit and black sunglasses designed to stand out in a crowd. Additionally, the German Army's Torchlight procession in Berlin in 1939 (British Pathe, 2014) exemplifies how Hitler was portrayed as leading Germany out of darkness (Erdogan, 1999).

When compared to President Hindenburg's 1929 film of his review of the German troops (British Pathe, 2020), Hindenburg's soldiers looked more like children pretending to be

soldiers. Oddly, the German High Command would allow and release such footage for public viewing. Contrasted with Hitler's Army during the Berlin Torchlight procession of 1939 and the difference between Hindenburg's Army and Hitler's Army is clear and signals what is to come for the rest of the world. Seen through Goebbels' propaganda of strength, determination, and goodwill for the German people, Aristotle's ideas of persuasion and goodwill become even more apparent.



**Figure 1 Timeline of Dominant Research into Rhetoric**

### **The Missing Pieces to the Charismatic Equation Held by Max Weber's Research**

Weber's (1947) research identified three types of legitimate rule over people: traditional rule, such as a king or religious institution; legal rule, exemplified by a president or prime minister; and charismatic rule, with examples including Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Jim Jones of the People's Temple, and Adolf Hitler. A casual observer might see these charismatic leaders as both good and evil, depending on the perspective of historians, followers, and, most importantly, those in power. For example, Gandhi began as a British loyalist who served as a decorated soldier in the British Army during the Boer War and the Zulu Rebellion. Later, he

encouraged his fellow Indians to join the British Army during World War I. However, the British later despised him after his non-violent movement for India's self-rule (Mehrotra, 1961) gained momentum in the 1920s.

Weber's charismatic rule is highly sought after, especially among social influencers, because only a few can hold legal and traditional power, while many can wield charismatic influence. Therefore, the focus shifts to social influence through charismatic leadership that many can use, such as anyone with a cellphone and the desire to post. Gaining market share through charismatic leadership is also why businesses highly value social influencers; the more charisma an influencer has, the more attention they attract to the company's products. Gandhi led his country to freedom from British legal and traditional rule through charismatic leadership. Jim Jones led his followers with charismatic authority, down the same dark path that Hitler did, by leaving America and building a compound or prison for them, depending on the point of view, similar to how Hitler ended up in the last days of Germany. Today, through social influence, many people hold this charismatic influence, which is very appealing to marketing teams. Additionally, companies benefit from not having to pay employee-related expenses, such as healthcare, internet access, and workspace, for social influencers.

### **Max Weber's Forms of Power and the Modern-Day Social Influencer**

Weber, having died in Germany in June 1920, did not see the descent of the German people into Nazism following the hyperinflation beginning in 1923. If Weber had lived long enough, he would have witnessed the conversion of rational-legal authority to the charismatic authority of Hitler. All three forms of authority share a common goal: they strive diligently to influence the masses (Moscovici & Markova, 2000) through propaganda or persuasion; for

instance, government health programs, social initiatives, churches spreading their religious message, or the infamous Jonestown incident in Guyana, where followers joined the doomed People's Temple.

Both propaganda and persuasion are forms of communication. The main difference between them is their nature: propaganda is a one-way, monologue-style form, while persuasion involves a two-way, dialogue-based process (Markova, 2008). Additionally, propaganda does not need a charismatic leader; it can be government-sponsored (Markova, 2008), as loyalty to norms is expected, especially from institutional perspectives (Lachmann, 1971). Even Simon (1976) described loyalty as the replacement of the individual's goals with those of the organization.

Weber (1947) believed that authority is a form of legitimate domination or rule. Historically, legitimate rule began as charismatic authority, transitioned to traditional authority, and finally evolved into rational-legal authority, progressing in stages. Table 4 shows the typical progression in a society according to Weber, including Goebbels' use of persuasion and propaganda to get Hitler elected. However, Weber leaned slightly toward an optimistic view of capitalism's development, having written several papers on the German economy (Lachmann, 1971) that supported converting Germany to capitalism to rebuild its economy after World War I.

Weber also helped draft the new German constitution after World War I. His work may have further influenced Weber's view of rational-legal authority as the final stage in a country's natural development. Weber might have stepped back and watched the growing efforts of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, with propaganda fueling the rage of ordinary German workers over the hyperinflation that devastated Germany. This also serves

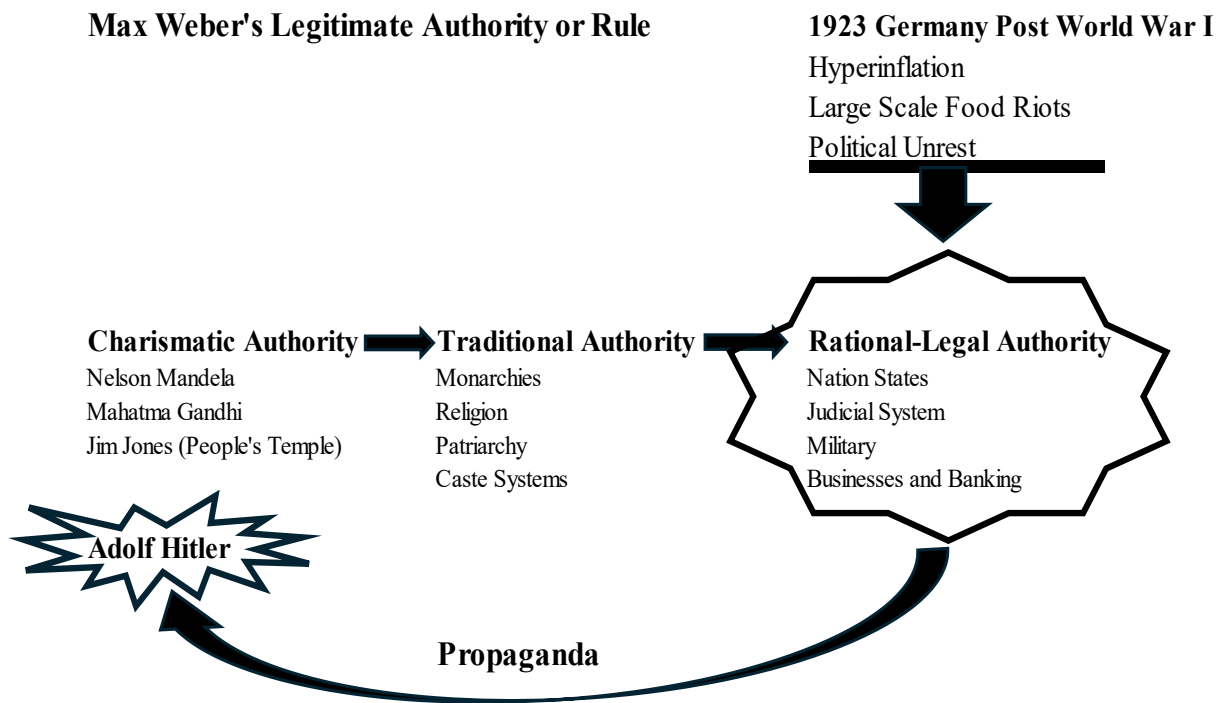
as a historical example of Damasio's (1994) idea that emotion can outweigh logic, as the Nazis exploited the suffering of everyday Germans for their political advantage. Meanwhile, during the early 1920s, Goebbels was working on his doctoral thesis about Wilhelm von Schütz (Manvell & Fraenkel, 2010). Schütz was a romantic dramatist who intertwined right-wing politics into his writing, serving as a precursor to Goebbels' later works.

After graduating, Goebbels worked for Gregor Strasser as a newspaper editor and later as a public speaker for the growing Nazi party. Strasser was the leading Nazi organizer in northern Germany and had leanings toward socialism, which Hitler did not like. During this time, Hitler noticed Goebbels and invited him to a conference in Bamberg, after which they met in Munich. During the Munich meeting, Goebbels offered his complete and total loyalty to Hitler. For this, Hitler rewarded Goebbels with a high-level posting in the Nazi Party. At the same time, Hitler was planning to kill Strasser and Father Bernhard Stempfle, one of his fellow prisoners at Landsberg prison and one of the editors of *Mein Kampf*. Both men were killed during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 when enemies of Hitler and the Third Reich were murdered. The lesson for modern-day employees of a dictator is clear: one never knows what the boss is planning.

In modern times, Zhang et al. (2024) saw social media influencers as charismatic leaders. Their followers like their posts, purchase products they recommend, or at least acknowledge the influencer, a sign of Weber's (1947) charismatic mission. Weber's original research (1922) translated to English (1968), defined charisma as a certain quality that made one person different from others, and then it gets complicated. Two academic schools of thought focus on charisma: the individual-centered and relationship-centered (Zhang et al.,

2013). In today's digital world, charisma is one of the most sought-after personality traits, especially among social influencers.

However, Zhang et al. (2013) believe that charisma results from a three-factor relationship among the influencer's personality, behavior, and their connection to the organization or, in this case, their digital tribe. Zhang et al. (2013) also found that the leader's charisma had three dimensions: love toward followers, public virtue, and a combination of talent and wisdom that shape their leadership abilities. E.L. Doctorow, an American novelist, once said that historians tell you what happened, but novelists let you feel it (Doctorow, 2025). This aligns with the idea that influencers tap into their followers' emotions to help them grow their digital tribes. This aligns with Aristotle's rhetoric, Hovland et al.'s (1953) persuasion, Damasio's (1994) research on emotion, and Mikels et al.'s (2011) work on emotion-based decision strategies.



**Figure 2 Weber's Legitimate Authority and Hitler**

### **Simon's Attention Economy and the Charismatic Ringleaders of Our Attention**

Simon (1971), a psychologist and economist, theorized that because humans have only a limited amount of attention to allocate at any given moment, attention should be considered a scarce resource in an information-rich world. Simon's worldview was shaped in 1971 when 7,948 television and radio broadcasting stations (FCC, 1971) generated \$2.81 billion in revenue. As of October 2024, there are 33,305 television and radio stations (FCC, 2024), with an estimated 2022 revenue of \$189.9 billion (Guttman, 2024).

Simon believed the overload of information a person experiences is an economic rather than a personal issue (Simon, 1971). However, even Simon did not foresee the future of the digital world, where, 54 years later, there would be an estimated 50 million social influencers (Santora, 2024), all competing for the average person's attention. With 1,200 US-based marketing agencies specializing in connecting influencers with companies and influencers operating independently, influencer marketing has grown into a \$24 billion industry.

As the social media influencer industry matures, new revenue streams will form. These will include a mix of sponsors, digital and non-digital products, affiliate partners, and other revenue sources yet to be imagined. Zhang's (2024) charismatic leaders will become more ingrained in our digital lives, driven by technology and the outreach efforts of companies, governments, and non-profit organizations aiming to influence the masses, as marketing has shifted beyond simply exchanging goods and services (Nidubuisi, 2023). While social influencers need to sleep, artificially driven influencers will soon replace human influencers (Koles et al., 2024).

## **Social Capital Theory and Digital Relationships**

After Hanifan (1916) defined social capital, Bourdieu (1985) revised the definition to highlight the importance of social networks and relationships, whether in actual or potential value. Social capital includes two main elements: the quantity and quality of resources within a social network, as well as the relationships themselves (Bourdieu, 1985; Portes, 1998), both of which are important for social influencers. For example, the affiliate marketing opportunities that social influencers offer their digital tribes provide real value in the form of cost savings for followers while also benefiting the influencers.

At the same time, followers in the digital tribe gain an emotional boost or social capital from their participation. The opportunities for social influencers as they achieve status in the digital space from other marketing groups also serve as a form of social capital. Both aspects of social capital support Coleman's (1988) research, indicating that social capital is a resource available to both influencers and their followers.

An important aspect of social capital is the information channels that followers and influencers can access through their involvement in the digital tribe (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). For example, membership in a local civic organization gives members opportunities to build social capital and acquire tangible assets that are not available to the general public. In the digital world, simply providing online badges that show the connection between the influencer and the tribe member boosts audience retention and strengthens the emotional bonds between the influencer and the digital tribe member (Xu, 2024).

## **Social Capital Equals Trust**

Pumihic (2023) compared social capital to financial capital because social capital can be invested in relationships, thereby increasing access, influence, and knowledge. Successful

social influencers learn to master social capital. Families, businesses, local governments, and communities generate social capital by supporting activities such as their local high school sports teams. However, digital tribes cross geographic and institutional boundaries. McLuhan and Powers (1964) envisioned an electronic global village connected to libraries, universities, and businesses. Their vision has expanded in ways they couldn't have imagined, where people can search for anything on their cell phones simply by pressing a button and saying "Google" or "Siri," and within microseconds, their phones sift through terabytes of worldwide stored information to answer their queries.

Social networks enable society to work together (Pumihic, 2023) and produce and function effectively. Social capital serves two essential functions: it has a structure and facilitates actions by individuals within that structure (Coleman, 1988). As in person-to-person relationships, social capital and trust also end when the relationship ends. Social capital is challenging to measure, as it is closely tied to relationships and, therefore, intangible (Ostrom & Ahn, 2000; Dasgupta, 1988). Pumihic (2023) also discusses time as an important factor in social capital, as the more time invested, the more people become engaged; for example, a typical wedding where two families unite under a common bond to support the new couple is loaded with social capital, inspiring trust and high levels of reciprocity between the two families.

### **Bridging, Bonding, and Linking Social Capital with Digital Tribes**

Low-follower influencers outperform high-follower influencers in sharing information (Galeotti & Goyal, 2009; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Their findings contradict earlier research suggesting that high-follower influencers are more crucial to direct-to-consumer businesses (Beichert et al., 2024). One reason low-follower influencers tend to be more effective at

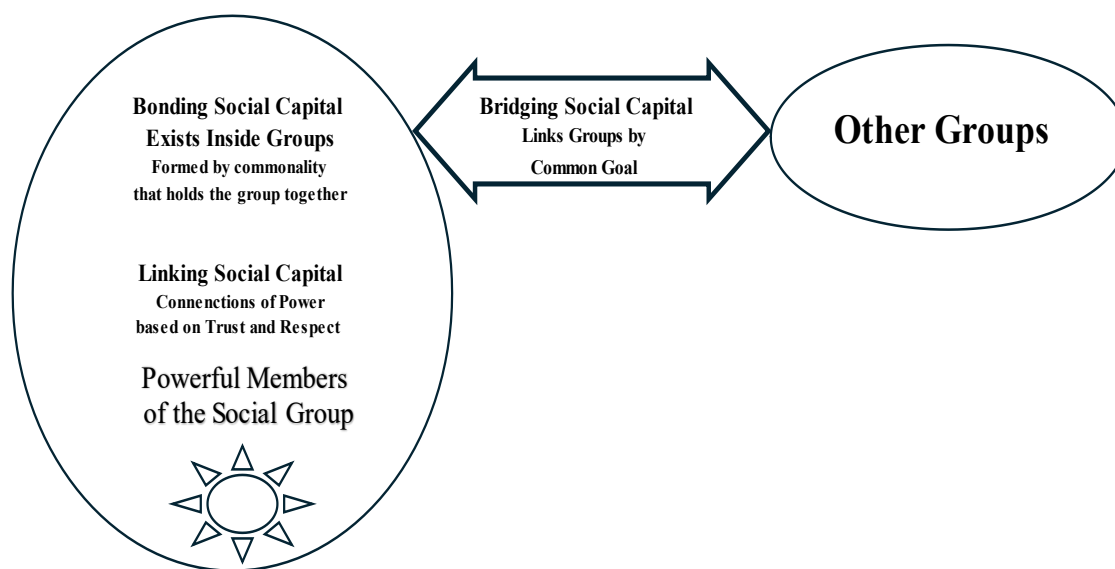
passing information is the concept of social capital. Hanifan (1916) defined social capital as including goodwill and mutual sympathy among groups. Although he made his observations about a schoolhouse from the early 20th century and the students, teachers, and community supporting it, his insights remain relevant today in the digital world and are considered foundational.

There are three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital exists within groups, referring to the relationships that form within them. These bonds come from individuals with similar attitudes, backgrounds, or socio-economic statuses. Bridging social capital connects different groups through a shared theme or goal, such as a presidential election, in which various groups unite around a common purpose. Linking social capital describes the power connections among trusted group members. These connections are built on mutual trust and respect; through linking social capital, individuals can leverage their social influence for various benefits once these power ties are in place. Table 5, Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital, shows how social capital functions in the digital world.

Social capital in the digital world also appears as activity-based virtual badges, where participation pays off. These badges enhance the credibility of digital tribe members, helping to establish linking social capital within the community. For example, the number of friends a user has on Facebook contributes to their social capital. Furthermore, Facebook's mutual friends indicate the linking social capital involved in relationships with other users. Even at the low end of the novice-user spectrum, accumulating social capital still satisfies an end user's hedonic needs.

## Content Quality

Bachelor (2018) believed that people prefer learning from relatable individuals rather than faceless companies, which typically excludes celebrities. Bachelor's (2018) research connects to the idea that consumers are attracted to individuals at or above their socio-economic, experience, or educational level. On the other hand, associating a brand with the wrong celebrity can backfire, as seen with Katy Perry's flight on Blue Origin's spacecraft. In many respects, social influencers serve as the new salespeople of the 21st century, presenting selected products and brands to their digital communities with either positive or negative recommendations. When introducing a new product, different forms of social capital, including bonding and linking social capital, will emerge within the digital tribe, connecting various digital groups through bridging social capital.



**Figure 3 Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital**

Duffy et al. (2021) introduced the concept of precarity, or insecurity, among content creators across various industries, platform features, algorithms, and the marketplace.

Precarity or insecurity aligns with Bucher's (2012) thoughts that modern-day visibility in the

social media influencing industry comes and goes, with the possibility of disappearing altogether. Adding to Duffy et al.'s (2021) insecurity, COVID-19 was a real fear of death by social contact, where 90% of urban people from India avoided social contact (Roy et al., 2020). However, being locked down with only digital devices as an outlet from fear and uncertainty helped the industry grow through social capital, which serves as a buffer against crisis (Chrzanowska et al., 2024). This increase in people seeking social capital led to the emergence of many new social influencers, who had the time and motivation to reach out, join, or establish their digital tribes.

Sztompka (2016) made an interesting observation from Simmel and Durkheim's earlier works: the smaller the group, the less social distancing there is between its members. Smaller social distances online could explain the dynamics of nano-influencing, which offers a higher return on investment for companies than mega-influencing. Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber, considered the founding fathers of sociology, wrote extensively about their World War I experiences, questioning the role of government and humanity (Cotesta, 2017). From Sztompka's perspective, human needs include the desire for security, the need for human contact, the group needs of the audience, the social mirror between the audience and the influencer, and the need for social norms within the group—topics that Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber all addressed in their writings on World War I.

Farivar and Wang (2022) aim to examine content quality among 467 Instagram users. Typically, followers are attracted to opinion leaders who are credible and physically attractive in their area of expertise (Farivar & Wang, 2022), which, along with originality and content quality, helps social influencers build their digital communities. Storytelling posts by influencers also enhance their credibility and expertise among their online followers. To grow

or maintain their digital presence, many influencers share parts of their lives through live streams, photos, and other videos. Storytelling remains as effective today as it was in ancient Greece during the time of Gorgias the Nihilist, in delivering information and engaging modern digital audiences. Farivar and Wang (2022) highlight an interesting point that influencer marketing occurs within a social environment and is fundamentally a social activity.

We now live in a world where consumers create and share user content as part of their daily lives (Ye et al., 2021). This newfound personal power can be displayed on digital platforms, where they can attract the attention of many digital tribes if the content stays fresh and engaging. With the rise of social-influencer marketing, advertorials will become more frequent. Advertorials are instances where users share their experiences with products they endorse or dislike. Again, the content must remain fresh and up to date so the influencer appears to care about their digital tribe while staying relevant in a 24/7/365 social media environment.

Sundermann and Raabe (2019) identified source credibility, influencer type, and content characteristics as essential to influencer communication. They then joined Pleil et al. (2018) and Enke and Borchers (2018) in agreeing that the phrase "strategic social media influencer communication" should be used instead of "influencer marketing." Adding the word strategic implies a long-term, carefully designed plan in which companies develop a multiphase marketing strategy across various advertising media. This significant shift is further highlighted by a study by the Lego Group (2019), which found that 29% of children aged 8 to 12 would prefer to be YouTubers or influencers, while only 11% wanted to become astronauts. Conde and Casais (2023) identified micro-influencers as having higher levels of

trust and engagement, appealing to children seeking self-acceptance. Statistically, children today are more likely to become influencers than to put in the effort to achieve good grades and earn a degree in a STEM field, which offers just a 0.002% chance of becoming an astronaut (NASA.org, 2025).

### **A Lesson in Persuasion: NASA's Marketing Campaign to Go to the Moon**

The marketing effort to rally the American people behind the moon landing was as challenging as the mission itself. All 23 rocket missions tested different phases of reaching and returning from the moon. After the initial testing phase, 11 more Apollo missions followed, including Apollo 13, the nearly disastrous mission, which was heavily marketed to the American public as a rescue in space. These groundbreaking public relations methods (Weiner, 2015), which emphasized storytelling, were central to NASA's strategies for obtaining funding and political support. NASA enlisted leading journalists who had covered the civil rights movement and the Mercury space program to craft well-written articles for mass media news outlets (Weiner, 2015).

The estimated cost for Project Apollo was \$1,534 per person in 1960s currency (Pastrone, 2024), totaling around \$25.8 billion for the entire Apollo Project, or \$318 billion in 2023 dollars. The marketing efforts aimed at convincing Congress and the American public to support Project Apollo have not been thoroughly examined. Even Von Braun, the key rocket developer for both Hitler—with the V-1 and V-2 rockets that terrorized Britain—and the NASA Space Program, stressed that securing public support was essential for the success of the space program (Weiner, 2015). Wernher von Braun and about 1,600 other German scientists were brought to the United States through Operations Paperclip and Overcast to utilize the advances made in German engineering, rocketry, and medicine (Jacobsen, 2014).

Meanwhile, the Russians, eager to acquire German scientific expertise, deported around 2,500 individuals through Operation Osoaviakhim to Russia. However, these German scientists, engineers, and their families did not willingly volunteer to move to Russia; some families stayed there for six years, and others never returned.

The importance of Operation Paperclip and Operation Osoaviakhim in understanding the drivers of successful social influence dates back to the Second Moscow Conference in August 1942. Britain, America, and the Soviet Union agreed to share intelligence on Germany's war efforts. Part of this intelligence included captured films showcasing Germany's Wonder Weapons or Wunderwaffen; these well-produced films aimed to catch Hitler's interest and secure his approval for funding these types of weapons. The effect these films had on the Allies cannot be overstated; they aimed to capture German scientists to gain a military edge after World War II. A key lesson for modern influencers is that the competition is always watching and ready to exploit your successes and mistakes.

The question remains: how did Von Braun know that a government-backed propaganda campaign was necessary to persuade each American family to invest \$1,534 in 1960s currency into the Apollo Program? The answer came from a U.S. Air Force Intelligence Study on the V-2 Rocket Program (Holdforth, 2020). The costs and resources of the V-2 Rocket Program matched those of building an additional 25,000 fighter aircraft for the German Air Force. Considering this, Von Braun, who had thrived under Hitler's regime, would have known that compelling storytelling, through videos or high-quality content, was essential to engaging Congress and the American people in the mission to reach the moon.

## **Driving Social Influence by Target Audience Alignment**

Influencers bridge the social capital gap between companies and their digital tribes. They shape how their digital tribe perceives brands by showcasing brand awareness and helping followers align with the brand (Chang & Wu, 2024). Customer engagement and citizen behavior are crucial for connecting the digital tribe with the influencer (Farrokhy et al., 2024). Just as engagement and citizen behavior matter in the real world, in the digital realm human interactions happen much faster—especially with artificial intelligence, which makes them even faster. The key is that the simpler the product, the more rational and logical the argument; on the other hand, the more complex the product, the more metaphors and emotions are needed (Mikels et al., 2011).

### **Target Audience Alignment**

The relationship between the influencer and their digital tribe is straightforward: the better the alignment, the better the outcomes for everyone involved (Farrokhi et al., 2024). However, achieving this alignment is not easy. Most demographic variables depend on age, income, gender, and education level (Capiene et al., 2024); however, factors such as self-identity, motivation, emotions, and priorities primarily influence consumption behavior and consumer engagement (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2019). This requires a deep understanding of target audience alignment by analyzing the makeup of the digital tribe. For example, if the digital tribe focuses on neurosurgery, the ages, incomes, and education levels would generally match. While some exceptions are possible, such as a high school student aspiring to become a neurosurgeon, the primary motivations for group membership would mostly be similar.

Motivational arousal forms the basis of human emotion (Lang & Bradley, 2010), meaning the two motivational arousal systems, aversive and attractive, are triggered by

different stimuli. While this digital tribe would likely be the same demographic, their core arousal motivations would differ, leading members to exhibit different emotional states. This is explained by the arousal theory of motivation (Murray, 1938; Zuckerman, 1984), which suggests that people seek stimulation when under-stimulated and become disengaged or unmotivated when overly stimulated. For instance, people seeking stimulation tend to post more content, while those seeking less would post less; this also applies to influencers and their followers (Lang & Bradley, 2010).

### **Hijacking the Brain Through Conventional Metaphors**

Mon et al. (2021) found that the brain takes longer to process conventional metaphors than concrete and literal phrases, and this effect persists for several seconds after encountering the stimuli. Examples of conventional metaphors include "at the end of my wits" and "thinking outside the box," while concrete phrases are more literal, such as "push the door to open it" or "right on red after stop." The key difference is that conventional metaphors engage the amygdala's motivated attention (Schaefer & Gray, 2007). Mon et al.'s (2021) study used pupil dilation, or pupillometry, which reflects amygdala activity: the greater the pupil dilation, the more engaged the amygdala (Citron et al., 2019).

In Mon et al. (2021) experiments and in Citron and Goldberg's (2014) research, traditional metaphors involving the sense of taste were tested, and they were rated as taking longer for the amygdala to process than non-sensory-related conventional metaphors. Mon et al.'s (2021) research suggests that smell may also increase the amygdala's activity, which, if true, would align with findings from Meersman et al. (2022) and Palazova et al. (2013), indicating that the other senses—hearing, touch, sight, and smell—also engage the amygdala's motivated attention. Their research could further support the idea that it is

possible to influence an audience's emotions through conventional metaphors by triggering the amygdala's motivated attention. This may explain how Gorgias the Nihilist (circa 427 BCE) used metaphors to captivate people's souls (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). Science would suggest that Gorgias employed conventional metaphors to evoke the audience's emotions by activating the amygdala and hijacking their motivated attention.

### **Mechanisms that Help Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM) Marketing**

In 2018, nearly 75% of marketers used word-of-mouth marketing to expand their customer base (Hughes et al., 2019). Word of mouth is straightforward: leverage influencers to increase product or brand awareness; as awareness rises, more new customers will try the product or brand. If the product or brand is successful and satisfies consumer needs, those consumers will become loyal buyers. From the tester-to-buyer conversion, both the company and the influencer see increased profits and social capital. At the same time, consumers also gain social capital from these social-influencer-based interactions, as social capital is typically built through trust, faith, and relationships (Ruo-Fei et al., 2022). Influencers support consumers at every stage of the digital sales funnel, from awareness to interest, desire, and purchase, with the ultimate goal of fostering brand loyalty and re-engagement, as shown in Table 6: Digital Sales Funnel with Influencers Assisting in All Five Stages.

Influencers generally develop expertise, reputation, and popularity (Ladhari et al., 2020). Ladhari et al.'s (2020) research further breaks this concept into dimensions of value, attitude, and appearance, as well as emotional attachment to the vlogger or video blogger and their expertise in the subject they present.



**Figure 4 Digital Sales Funnel with Influencers Assisting in All Five Stages**

Additionally, Ladhari et al. (2020) examined the entertainment and engagement factors of beauty products for women compared to those of functional products such as computer hardware. The key takeaway is that product presentation must inspire or justify the video efforts to capture and hold the consumer's attention.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) reported that non-traditional influencers are more successful than traditional celebrities at shaping purchasing decisions because they are perceived as more credible and better relate to consumers. Personal engagement, or at least the perception of personal engagement, plays a crucial role in the decision to buy. This perception is reflected in the females in Djafarova and Rushworth's (2017) study, which showed that women are drawn to encouraging and positive posts (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). From a researcher's perspective, this makes sense, as most people prefer to feel uplifted rather than mentally or socially diminished. Rational individuals tend to avoid pain or try to minimize discomfort in their lives (Aldington & Eccleston, 2019), but in the digital world, pleasure or hedonism is always accessible.

The key link between engagement and purchases is the influencer's trustworthiness and appeal, which activate hedonic attitudes that boost the intention to buy (Park & Lin, 2020). Hedonic, from the Greek word *hedonikos*, relates to pleasure. Brickman and Campbell (1971) first introduced the idea of hedonic adaptation to explain how people adjust their pursuit of

pleasure amid daily life fluctuations, viewing it as a continuous cycle. This pleasure-seeking behavior eventually developed into the concept called the Hedonic Treadmill, which drives humans' pursuit of happiness. People seek happiness, and once they achieve it, they realize they want more; thus, the Hedonic treadmill (Ngulwiyah et al., 2023). In today's digital era, machine learning influences the Hedonic Treadmill (Suherman, 2024), further fueling our addiction to pleasure both online and offline.

### **Mentorship and Brain Trusts: A Shortcut to Success**

Mentorship is a recurring theme in this research study, as with Max Weber, who had Hermann Baumgarten, his uncle, a professor at the University of Strasbourg, and the famed jurist Levin Goldschmidt, who was Weber's dissertation chair (Kaelber, 2003). Hitler had a brain trust consisting of Eckart (Weber, 2007) and Hanussen (Langer, 1973). Langer's (1973) work was taken from the psychoanalysts assigned by "Wild Bill" Donovan at the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of today's Central Intelligence Agency, to analyze Hitler. and to a large part, Goebbels. Stouffer, a Yale professor, mentored Carl Hovland and hired him to study persuasion in the U.S. military, and Hovland, in turn, mentored Phillip Zimbardo, also from Yale. The logic of having a mentor or brain trust is simple: time is money, and sound advice is golden.

### **The Key to Virtual and Real Persuasion**

Fayyaz et al.'s (2025) research provides a comprehensive approach to understanding consumer behavior in the context of social media influencers (Masuda et al., 2022). From a business perspective, social media influencers primarily drive sales among millennials born between 1981 and 1996 and Generation Z born between 1997 and 2012, prompting more marketers to leverage them (Fayyaz et al., 2025). Koles et al. (2024) identify three types of

authenticity in avatars powered by artificial intelligence: true to self, accurate to fact, and true to ideal. This indicates that Aristotle's concepts of rhetoric or persuasion apply to both virtual and human influencers through ethos, goodwill, and virtue, consistent with Ohanian's (1990) research, which emphasizes attractiveness.

The link between reputation, perceived influence, customer influence, and trustworthiness in the digital influencer persuasion model is based on Hovland et al.'s (1953) persuasion theory (Fayyaz et al., 2025). Fayyaz et al. (2025) aimed to develop a digital influencer persuasion model that focuses on changing consumers' buying intentions and attitudes, similar to Hovland et al.'s (1953) persuasion model. The model introduces an additional factor: customer involvement. Customer involvement relates to how customers engage with a brand (Altinay & Taheri, 2019). This encourages customers to become loyal buyers, with repeat sales increasing the influencer's profitability and, in turn, boosting the company's profitability.

An interesting point from Koles et al.'s (2024) research is that virtual influencers or avatars can more effectively prevent follower fatigue by using advanced communication techniques. Follower fatigue occurs when people grow bored with the content and leave the influencer's digital community. The secret to the avatar's appeal is its team of specialists who create its content (Koles et al., 2024). In comparison, small-scale social influencers often work as one- or two-person teams, which can lead to outdated content appearing in their feeds as time, money, and resources—also known as the project triangle or iron triangle—overwhelm the influencer. The lesson for modern influencers is that building a tribe requires a team.

## **The Current State of Influencer Engagement**

Vrontis et al. (2021) argued that although social influencers have been studied quantitatively, there is a need for qualitative research to deepen understanding of the field. This is important because, while individual metrics can be analyzed, the overall influence of cultural trends, marketing, and ongoing technological changes (Backaler, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Trivedi, 2018) must be viewed from the influencer's perspective. Many now see influencers as opinion leaders (Harambasic & Share, 2024), and they are also described as social media users who create their own content (Kim & Kim, 2021). In many ways, influencers are comparable to advertising agencies, as they can generate content and shape narratives while positioning themselves alongside friends, celebrities (Wang, 2021), and the brands they represent. Even if social influencers do not officially represent a company, they can still earn income through affiliate marketing and other revenue streams. A downside for companies is that if an influencer disapproves of a product or brand, they can harm the brand's reputation, which may force the company to improve its product or rehabilitate the influencer into a loyal consumer.

By understanding their audience and needs, social media influencers are better positioned to boost engagement through trust and credibility (Harambasic & Share, 2024; Pelletier et al., 2020). While a single influencer can achieve this effectively, follower fatigue may set in as content becomes repetitive (Koles et al., 2024), because people often prefer simpler options. Starting as a one-person operation is best in non-professional settings, allowing the influencer to develop into an opinion leader. However, as they grow their digital community, it is important to build a team to support them (Koles et al., 2024). This strategy, with fresh content, will help expand their digital community and increase engagement.

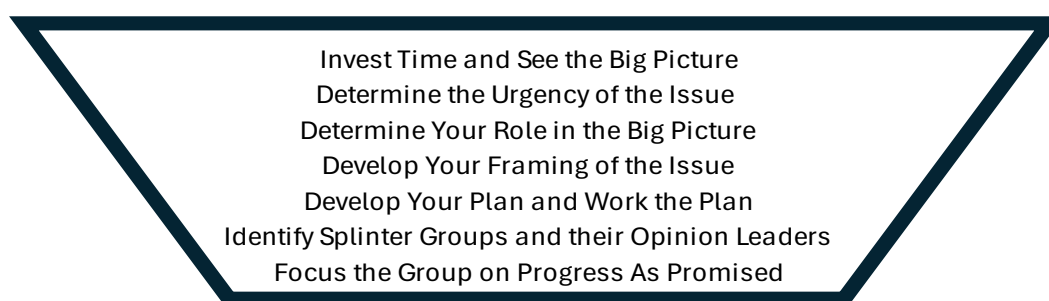
## **The Two Mindset Shifts at Work in Social Influencing**

The first mindset shift concerns how an influencer reacts to their initial failure. This relates to the implicit theory of intelligence (Dweck, 1986; Dweck, 2000). In summary, people either have a fixed mindset, which hinders learning, or a growth mindset, which promotes learning. During a literature review, Padir and Vangolu (2023) found that no studies had specifically examined the growth mindset. Their research aimed to understand why some resist change while others welcome it. This can be viewed as a self-limiting mindset, which, according to Padir and Vangolu (2023), can be changed through targeted intervention. When applied to low-performing students, this intervention includes three components: the educational phase about the brain's capacity to learn and develop, the metaphor of the brain as a muscle that needs exercise, and testimonials from individuals like them who have achieved success (Padir & Vangolu, 2023). These techniques resemble those used in successful life-improvement seminars, as this self-improvement approach has a proven track record in the coaching industry.

The second mindset shift involves the influencer's response to their digital tribe's needs and desires. Dainty's (2025) research on mindset shifts highlights three key components that explain why change is constant and unstoppable. According to Chima and Gutman (2020), change occurs in three dimensions: it is pervasive, affecting many areas of life continuously; it is exponential, increasing in speed due to technology adoption and the evolving wants and demands of consumers (Dainty, 2025); and it is perpetual, as it will always continue. In the digital environment, the adaptive leader's goal is to figure out how they will respond to this change in a way that the digital tribe approves of (Wale, 2023;

Dainty, 2025). Heifetz et al. (2009) saw this as a seven-step process that easily applies to the influencer's domain, as shown in Table 7.

Heifetz et al. (2009) studied adaptive leadership and identified seven action items for leaders to take. Logic would follow that if a social influencer built a digital tribe, they would become the de facto leader of that digital tribe. In addition to studying rhetoric, Aristotle, in his writings in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, wrote that leaders should be just but not overly tied to the organization, and that they should master both rhetoric and action (Huhn & Meyer, 2023). Not to get too deep into Aristotle's city-state concepts, but Aristotle's polis, a community of different classes of people, actually fits the virtual reality of a digital tribe. Overall, Table 7 looks like the job description for a social influencer.



**Figure 5 Heifetz et al. (2009). Effective Interventions for Social Influencing**

### **Summary**

Influencer marketing is expected to keep growing as a sales channel for the foreseeable future. It is partly driven by technology's rising demand for digital data (Giraldo-Luque et al., 2020). Simon's (1971) attention economy has expanded to cover all areas of life, and Tassi's (2018) focus on content has turned our digital activities into a monetized economy. Success for influencers heavily relies on trust or goodwill, which are essential in building relationships, especially in online interactions where personal contact is limited to the digital

world. As our attention is constantly pulled in different directions (Munsterberg, 1916) by both social influencers and virtual influencers, humans will adapt. Source credibility theory remains the primary driver of trust between influencers and their followers in the digital space.

Social capital refers to the trust built through bridging, bonding, or linking relationships. It originates in relationships (Bourdieu, 1986), and influencers cultivate them through interactions with their digital tribe. Influencers face two key mindset challenges: the internal one that helps them evolve into the best versions of themselves, and the external one that shapes how they engage with their digital tribe. The primary factor driving an influencer's success is their ability to adapt their mindset, often called mental resiliency in self-improvement psychology. This skill is taught to schoolchildren and applied in adult self-improvement seminars.

The amygdala's motivated attention function is crucial for capturing the audience's attention (Schaefer & Gray, 2007). Traditional metaphors that focus on sensory perception are the fastest way to engage the amygdala (Palazova et al., 2013; Meersman et al., 2022). These conventional metaphors cause the brain to spend more time processing words, increasing their impact. As a result, the amygdala uses this processing time to interpret sensory-based words in these metaphors, boosting their effect on the listener (Schaefer & Gray, 2007). The use of sensory-based conventional metaphors by social influencers and their digital audiences is widespread and varied, suggesting that strategic media influencer marketing plans should be built around common metaphors to better support both marketing efforts and influencers. Finally, all main concepts from the literature review will be combined into a qualitative

questionnaire, creating a template to help current and future social media influencers achieve greater success.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The problem to be addressed in this study is the need to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers. The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to determine whether a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, addressing issues related to credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment. This qualitative study aims to determine if a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, addressing issues related to credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment. The reason for examining these drivers is threefold: to help businesses better understand and utilize social influencers, to assist new social influencers in preparing for the challenges of growing their digital tribes, and to help struggling social influencers identify what went wrong and guide them toward profitability. Once the drivers are examined in relation to the social influencer's solutions, a road map for success can be developed.

The focus of this study is to understand the key drivers behind mindset shifts that lead to successful outcomes for social media influencers. Recognizing these drivers can offer valuable insights into how influencers craft strategies, adapt to evolving digital environments, and maintain audience engagement. The main drivers that require further exploration among social influencers are credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment (Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ye et al., 2021), which are essential for success as a social media influencer. From this research, a roadmap for success can be created for emerging and struggling social influencers, as well as companies aiming to leverage their services. This qualitative study seeks to identify the successful mindset shifts experienced by

nano-social influencers as they launch and grow their digital communities. This chapter will outline the research methodology and design in a clear, straightforward manner. It will start with examining the study's population and sampling ratio, followed by the materials and instruments, procedures, data analysis methods, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, concluding with ethical considerations (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

### **Research Methodology and Design**

The non-experimental qualitative research methodology is preferred for this research problem because it involves people's opinions, experiences, and recommendations while helping to explore their understandings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Using a non-experimental qualitative design allows social influencers to confirm the correlation between variables. This non-experimental research method aims to determine if there is a relationship between the crucial mindset shift after failure and the drivers of social influence. This research intends to understand the journey of social influencers as they build their digital tribes, drawing on Tassi's (2018) concept of contact with content. While the quantitative aspects of social influence metrics have been thoroughly studied (Bakaler, 2018), there is currently a research gap regarding human motivation and resilience in relation to social influencers.

The gap between failure and success can only be bridged by asking deep, meaningful questions that come from human experience, as generated by non-experimental qualitative research. By conducting such research on social influencer participants, their origin stories (Kolo et al., 2022), lessons learned, and recommendations (Enes et al., 2020) can be organized to explore commonalities in their stories, helping identify inner motivational alignment (Harambasic & Skare, 2024). This should yield the detailed, rich information for which qualitative research is known. The research questions and supporting interview questions are

designed to conduct a limited regression analysis to examine how different variables influence various outcomes. This is important because failure is often a common path that many follow.

The best metaphor to explain why non-experimental methodology is the most suitable approach to fill this research gap is to imagine interviewing 25 people involved in 25 different car accidents or who became successful social influencers. While physical evidence can provide valuable insights into what happened through data analysis, a research gap remains. This gap exists until the researcher asks the car drivers or influencers what they were focusing on and experiencing when the accidents, failures, or successes occurred. Qualitative research is crucial for determining the state of mind of the people involved. This shift in mindset or mental resilience is a key component of the research gap.

This research has numerous wide-reaching implications, and complete candor is necessary, as there are direct and indirect ties to Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison experiment, conducted in 1971 (Haney et al., 1973; Zimbardo, 2007; Zimbardo et al., 2000). Zimbardo was a graduate student of Hovland's Yale Attitude Change Program. Hovland's research into attitude change was a seminal milestone for this research study. Hovland, who developed the concept of source credibility, the conceptual framework for this research, was Zimbardo's mentor. Zimbardo would later expand his research into persuasion and then move on to the broader topic of mind control. Various forms of Zimbardo's research touched on credibility or charismatic rule, content quality or messaging, and target audience alignment or people susceptible as all three components surfaced during his work with the survivors of Jim Jones's People's Temple mass suicide (Zimbardo, 2005; Zimbardo, 2008; Zimbardo, 2020) as well as Zimbardo being an expert witness for one of the guards at Abu Ghraib in Iraq (Zimbardo, 2007). Therefore, the research gaps this research addresses could be used in ways not envisioned by the researcher.

Using the experimental method, the research team would first identify the variables and then observe how manipulating them affects car crashes or the failure of social influencers. The researcher would also observe how the participants recovered and whether the drivers then thrived in driving or social influencing. This would likely never pass the IRB, and recruiting volunteers would be challenging. In today's age, no social influencer would intentionally risk failure, which would also become an IRB issue, as no harm can befall participants. Using the quasi-experimental method could be an effective alternative, as the metaphorical car crash has already occurred, which aligns with the *ex post facto*, or after-the-fact, nature of quasi-experiments. The researcher has no control over what the participant did in the past; however, through regression analysis, the cause-and-effect relationship can still be examined, in this case, to understand how the driver was able to get back on the road after the accident. If the sample group cannot be randomly recruited, a quasi-experimental design would be an excellent approach to filling the research gap with actionable knowledge.

Employing a non-experimental method is the preferred approach because the drivers of change have not been adequately identified, making it challenging for researchers to comprehend the research gap. As a result, a correlation study is essential to initiate the research. The metaphor for this research gap is standing on the side of the road, wondering where all these crashed cars came from, without a reference point for what caused the crashes. Using a non-experimental method will help identify correlations among potential variables without subjecting participants to any real harm in an actual experiment.

The non-experimental research methodology is based on qualitative inquiry design (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), and information will be collected through semi-structured interviews. The rationale for semi-structured interviews is that the questions serve as a roadmap

for participants' storytelling while also allowing them to share more with the researcher. Employing this technique increases the likelihood of obtaining thick, rich data, which is why qualitative research methods were chosen in the first place. Participants were asked the same questions to determine whether a common pathway contributes to successful outcomes for social media influencers. This research aims to develop a timeline of key events in an influencer's journey and how the influencer reacted to each. The participants will be interviewed for about an hour on Zoom as they answer the survey questions and relate the drivers of their journey toward growing a larger digital tribe. The participants' personal stories added richer meaning, enhancing the narratives and research by using bridging, bonding, and linking social capital (Goldenberg et al., 2024).

### **Population and Sample**

This qualitative study targets nano-social media influencers who, by definition, have between 1,000 and 10,000 Facebook followers. Five niche markets have been identified as offering opportunities to observe social capital: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, and religious messaging. Five social influencers from these niches will be interviewed, totaling 25 participants. These niches represent the demographics of various social influencers and their digital communities, enabling the collection of a broader range of qualitative information. The goal in selecting participants is to achieve an equal mix of female and male influencers (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In several of these fields, female influencers dominate their niches, spanning a wide range of ages and geographic locations.

A 25-participant sample will be used to meet the National University's interviewing guidelines (National University, 2023). The sampling will consist of five social influencer niches, with five participants from each niche. Conducting 25 interviews will allow the

research to identify common themes from the rich data gathered. From these 25 interviews, the data gathered was reviewed, coded into central themes, and analyzed for further interpretation. Identifying the drivers of social influencers provides a straightforward roadmap to success for emerging and struggling influencers and the organizations that hire them. Human motivation, amplified by emotions, is the key to uncovering what truly drives successful social influencers.

### **Instrumentation**

This qualitative research is based on in-depth interviews with 25 active Facebook nano-social influencers. The interviews were designed to elicit honest answers and uncover the drivers of their success as nano-social influencers, using open-ended questions (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2022). Consistency (Hedge et al., 2020) supports reliability, so the questions were asked in the same order in every interview. Social influencers enjoy talking, so the best way to get them to open up is to discuss a topic they are passionate about and cannot stop talking about. Once rapport is established, the interview becomes structured and guided (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015) to uncover the drivers of their social influencing success. Using Zoom video calls, the social influencer is at home in a familiar environment, enhancing their honesty and introspection.

A small focus group developed the research questions based on the idea that if a group of people performs the same tasks, they are likely to face similar opportunities and obstacles. After the academic community approved the research questions, the next step was to create a methodology that would encourage participants to think deeply about the research topics. This interaction between the participant and the interviewer is where knowledge is built (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). The supporting questions were then designed with input from the academic group, considering credibility, content quality, and audience engagement, as well as the mindset shifts

most likely to occur during this process. Then, the modified Social Media Relationship Scale by Enes et al. (2022) was added to assess participants' feelings toward Facebook. The use of the Enes et al. (2022) scale is to determine if the research environment was contaminated with ill will toward Facebook, potentially tainting the study.

The Supporting Interview Questions (SIQ) are designed to maximize introspection as participants complete a comprehensive questionnaire, which will help build data points for the research questions. The SIQ questionnaire is also designed to build rapport with participants while pinpointing the drivers for success that nano-influencers must overcome in their journey. For example, ten people saw a car accident or were inside the car at the time of the accident. Each person has a different point of view, yet each will experience the key points of the crash in a before, during, and after journey, as the vehicle finally comes to a stop (Chlevickaite & Hola, 2016). The researcher's goal is to encourage witnesses to share their human or social experiences, thereby facilitating the acquisition of knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The benefits of qualitative analysis in this kind of setting are that it captures emotions, helping pinpoint and reinforce the drivers of success.

***Research Questions and Corresponding Supporting Interview Questions:***

1. **RQ1:** What drives social media influencers to put digital content on the World Wide Web?
  - a. SIQ: How did you get started being a social influencer?
  - b. SIQ: Did you have prior experience in the field that you are working in now?
  - c. SIQ: What was your inner motivation starting out?
  - d. SIQ: What is your inner motivation now?
  - e. SIQ: What was it like in the beginning for you as you began posting?

f. SIQ: How did you build credibility with your digital tribe?

**2. RQ2:** What mindset shift made the social media influencer successful within their digital tribe?

a. SIQ: Did you experience failure as a social influencer? If the answer is

NO...Then continue to RQ2.C.

b. SIQ: After you failed or had a setback and were struggling, what did you do differently?

c. SIQ: Did you pick a particular target audience, or did it come naturally to you?

d. SIQ: Are you familiar with the term social capital, and if so, can you describe how it works for you?

e. SIQ: Do you intentionally reach out to similar groups with similar interests?

f. SIQ: Do you have a group of highly trusted people you keep in contact with?

g. SIQ: Do you use a script or talking points to keep your videos on track?

h. SIQ: Were there any particular thoughts or themes running through your mind as you were working to rebound?

i. SQI: Enes et al. (2022) Modified Social Media Relationship Scale questions.

Item	Likert Scale
My experiences with this social media meet my expectations of use in general.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I identify with this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media has a positive image for me.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media gives me a sense of belonging.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I say good things about this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I intend to continue being a user of this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I intend to use this social media more often.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

I trust this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media allows reporting inappropriate and offensive content.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media has a variety of content.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I like the layout of this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
In this social media, I can configure the visibility of my actions to guarantee my privacy.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media makes me feel closer to people who matter to me.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I use this social media to communicate with people from work.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I use this social media to communicate with friends and family.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

**3. RQ3:** What would the social media influencer do differently if they had to start over?

- a. SIQ: If you had to start over tomorrow with zero followers and no revenue stream, how would you do it?
- b. SIQ: In a perfect world, how big would your digital tribe be?
- c. SIQ: What is your ideal size for a digital tribe?
- d. SIQ: Do you have a team or staff to help you?
- e. SIQ: How do you prepare content?
- f. SIQ: At what point did you realize that you needed help?
- g. SIQ: Did you take or recommend any special training or schooling?
- h. SIQ: If you are a one-person operation, what position would you pay people to work in? If you are part of a team, what is the most important position to grow your digital tribe in the beginning?
- i. SIQ: What would you do or not do while starting over?
- j. SIQ: What helped you the most when starting?

- k. SIQ: What hurt you the most when starting?
- l. SIQ: What should you avoid when starting up?
- 4. **RQ4:** What are the biggest pitfalls to becoming a social media influencer?
  - a. SIQ: What do you hate about being a social influencer?
  - b. SIQ: Where do you see yourself in two years? Four years?
  - c. SIQ: Knowing what you know now, do you have any regrets?
  - d. SIQ: How do you keep your content fresh?
- 5. **RQ5:** What is the social media influencer's most successful cash revenue funnel?
  - a. SIQ: What is your most successful revenue stream?
  - b. SIQ: What is your second most successful revenue stream?
  - c. SIQ: As a social influencer, what would help you make more money?

**Did they mention:**

- Investing time and see the big picture?
- Determining the urgency of the issue?
- Determining your role in the big picture?
- Developing your framing of the issue?
- Developing your plan and working the plan?
- Identifying splinter groups and their opinion leaders?
- Focusing the group on progress as promised?

**Study Procedures**

After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application is submitted and approved, the researcher will contact and recruit participants for the study. The eligibility criteria will be active nano-influencers on Facebook, over 21, with 1,000-10,000 followers. The 25 participants will be

divided into five niches: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, and religious messaging. The interviews will be conducted over Zoom and Facebook Messenger using an unstructured interview questionnaire to elicit as much information as possible. At all times, the safety and well-being of the participants will be maximized.

The interview data will initially be collected in an Excel spreadsheet and then transferred into NVivo following open coding, categorization, and the identification of themes related to the social influencer's success. The researcher reserves the right to recontact the influencer for clarification or to address any relevant follow-up questions. The data will be coded to identify themes, milestones, mindset shifts, and other indicators that may signal important findings in the research. Once these elements are coded, they will be analyzed and summarized. Like any research, observations often extend beyond the study's scope (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). These observations can create future research opportunities for scholars aiming to address the research gap identified in this study.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing data collection from the survey instruments, the data will be imported into Excel to identify themes, milestones, mindset shifts, and other indicators that may signify important aspects of the study or suggest areas for further research. Data gathered from the interviews will subsequently be imported into NVivo. Once in NVivo, comparative and similarity analyses can be conducted to uncover additional themes, milestones, mindset shifts, and other indicators that may reveal significant insights. NVivo software specializes in unstructured qualitative research and can import various file types for processing. NVivo was chosen because it is a leading market research tool for identifying trends and preferences within the consumer community and is accessible to National University students.

The supporting interview questions will be aligned with their respective research questions, enabling direct comparison of participants' responses and facilitating the identification of correlations. The researcher's vision is to track the social influencer's progress through milestones related to the research questions as they develop and monetize their interactions with their digital tribe. Once the data is analyzed and interpreted, the researcher can then publish the results. The results will be a series of graphics and analytics designed to tell the story of possible failure and success in the social influencer world.

### **Assumptions**

The study hypothesizes that when individuals attempt the same task, they will encounter similar challenges. Furthermore, successful influencers will face and navigate these obstacles and milestones. While the techniques they use to achieve success may differ, the pathway to success remains consistent. Some nano-influencers aim to keep their follower count under 10,000, while others strive to grow their digital tribe. With various motivations behind each goal, influencers will need to be questioned about their intentions for growth and development.

The central assumption of this study is that a roadmap for success can be charted by identifying the themes, milestones, mindset shifts, and other indicators of successful nano-influencers. Beyond this central assumption, all other concepts are metaphorically open to further exploration. A minor assumption exists that building a successful digital tribe requires a team. However, at the nano-influencer level, a team may be irrelevant or essential for effective influencers; only research will reveal the answer. The primary goal of this research is to maintain an open mind, as the truth is rarely what we believe it to be.

## **Limitations**

This research study is limited to active nano-influencers aged 21 or older; therefore, the results may not apply to macro, mega, or micro-influencers. Limited to 25 participants across the five most popular specialty niches. The time constraints for conducting the interviews, learning NVivo, entering the results, analyzing them, and submitting them for academic review will be challenging. While research bias can occur in any research effort, it is particularly concerning in qualitative studies, where the researcher is involved in both recording interview results and analyzing them, thereby inadvertently introducing bias. Participant bias can also occur, as no one wants to appear unfavorable during an interview with a stranger; this is why building rapport with the participant is so crucial. Additionally, the Hawthorne effect may come into play when the participant suddenly realizes they are being observed; again, establishing rapport can help mitigate this effect by putting the participant at ease, but it will still be present. The scope is limited in size, so as the data universe expands, the results could change, which is normal. Typically, a research effort like this is very resource-intensive, involving focus groups to test questions, and the scope of the research is broader; however, as this is dissertation-level research, the resources are severely constrained.

## **Delimitations**

The intentional boundaries of this study aim to generate the most accurate information possible. The target population will consist of active nano-influencers with 1,000-10,000 followers who are over 21 years old. These influencers will utilize the Facebook platform and will operate within one of the following five growing social media niches: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, or religious messaging. This study will employ the concept of source credibility theory as a framework to examine the success of nano-influencers.

In addition to the research questions focused on discovering Aristotle's persuasion, credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment, the Modified Social Media Relationship Scale by Enes et al. (2022) will be used to further delimit the scope of the collected information.

### **Ethical Assurances**

This qualitative study received IRB approval from National University before data collection, ensuring that the study is designed to protect participants throughout the entire research process. Nothing gained in this study is worth harming the participants or their reputations; keeping this in mind, the researcher will take utmost care to protect and safeguard the participants' reputations and dignity (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Following the IRB's steps, the data will be stored in an offline environment on write-once, read-many (WORM) compact disks, which will be stored in a locked safe until they can be destroyed. All identifying information will be removed, and participants will be assigned a number from the outset of the study. As an additional precaution to prevent accidental exposure of the study participants, the researcher will maintain the participant list with contact information offline and in a separate, safe location, in case the researcher needs to contact the participants in the future.

Participant confidentiality can be maintained by following proper operational security protocols, such as not storing identifiers alongside survey information from the outset. The names and contact information will be stored in a separate safe, accessible only to the researcher and their next of kin, with the next of kin instructed to burn the sealed manila envelope marked "burn upon death." While the internet will be used to transfer data between the researcher, dissertation team, and National University, cloud storage will not be utilized. Any finished work products will be created locally, rather than using Office 360, Google Docs, or other online platforms.

## Summary

This chapter begins by restating the research goals: to determine whether a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they build and expand their digital tribes. The main drivers of social influencers include credibility, content quality, and alignment with their target audience. The research methodology for this study is a non-experimental qualitative design. Since the information product focuses on people's opinions, experiences, and recommendations, it helps explore individuals' understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). There is a notable research gap in understanding what makes social influencers successful. The first logical step is to interview successful influencers to learn how they achieved success and to start confirming whether there is a correlation between their journey and their success.

The study population will consist of 25 social influencers from five segments of the social influencer landscape: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, and religious messaging. These influencers will be screened, recruited, and interviewed in accordance with National University's interview guidelines (National University, 2023). The researcher will focus on human motivation, amplified by emotions, to identify what genuinely drives successful social influencers. The tools used align with the research questions and supportive interview questions to generate data points for further analysis and correlation studies. Interviews will be conducted via unrecorded video calls on Zoom and Facebook Messenger. The interview questions are designed to build rapport and encourage participants to share information. Afterwards, the drivers of success will be identified for further research and application.

Data analysis will take place after all interviews are finished. The raw data will first be loaded into Excel, then transferred to NVivo for comparative and similarity analyses. Between these two software programs, additional themes, milestones, mindset shifts, and other success indicators should be easily identified. The results will include a series of graphics and analytics to illustrate how to succeed in the social influencer world. Ethical assurances will include participant confidentiality, with operational security best practices enforced. Nothing in the study will be permitted to harm the participants, their livelihoods, or their reputations. In the next chapter, the survey instrument will be used to gather information from successful nano-influencers to build a working template for other social influencers to follow.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This research study examined the key drivers of mindset shifts that lead to successful outcomes for social media influencers. The purpose of this non-experimental, qualitative study was to identify a possible formula for success by analyzing factors influencing social influencers as they build and expand their digital communities, with a focus on credibility, content quality, and audience alignment. The reason for studying these drivers is threefold: to help businesses better understand and leverage social influencers, to prepare new influencers for the challenges of growing their digital tribes, and to assist struggling influencers in identifying what went wrong and guiding them toward profitability. This study, through its research questions and supporting inquiries, helps create a roadmap for success that other social influencers can follow by using thematic categories based on Aristotle's rhetoric, Weber's (1947) charismatic rule, French and Raven's bases of power (1959), and Hanifan's (1916) social capital.

The data was collected through a fifty-question interview conducted via Zoom (1), Facebook Messenger (1), and, due to internet issues, telephone (23). Each participant was asked the same questions in the same way. To enhance trustworthiness in the study, the building blocks of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were incorporated into the supporting questions, which were designed to align with the research questions. Several questions were phrased differently to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study while encouraging in-depth responses from participants. For example, where do you see yourself in two years and in four years? In theory, the influencer's actions over two years would support the actions planned four years in the future. The purpose of the five research questions and the Modified Social Media Relationship Scale (Enes et al., 2022) is to chart a path to success for social influencers who have failed or are just entering the field.

## **Trustworthiness of the Data**

### ***Credibility***

Credibility was established through consistency in responses or data saturation, as shown by different participants giving the same answers to the same questions. The participants were recruited from five fields of social influencers: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, and religious messaging. Engaging social media influencers in the religious messaging niche was very difficult because of the assassination of Charlie Kirk on September 10, 2025, at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah. This event occurred during the first week of the participant study, necessitating the establishment of mutual centers of influence to effectively approach social influencers who were initially hesitant to engage with strangers. Poor internet connections across Oklahoma hampered successful video conferencing, so after two interviews with technical difficulties, all remaining interviews were conducted by telephone.

Data triangulation was carried out in three stages. First, a literature review examined the history of social influence, covering Aristotle's rhetoric, Hitler's impact on persuasion and propaganda, Hovland's (1953) research on source credibility and charisma, Weber's (1947) types of power, and the forms of social capital. French and Raven's six bases of power —the tools of a modern social influencer or charismatic leader — were discussed. Second, recent studies on emotions (Laundry et al., 2022), the hijacking of the amygdala through metaphor (Talamas et al., 2016), the effect of first impressions on decision-making (Talamas et al., 2016), and Zhang et al. (2024) on social influencers as charismatic leaders, all add to this understanding.

In addition, several historic propaganda examples from World War II and the American Moon Race are included. The third stage involved conducting qualitative interviews with 25 participants across five social influence niches to explore their paths to success, how they

overcame challenges as they navigated their different yet similar journeys, and whether commonalities existed.

### ***Transferability***

This research study was based on the idea that a pathway to success could be identified from successful social influencers and then replicated or transferred to others to help them build their own digital tribes. In this qualitative research, transferability is demonstrated in two ways: first, through the consistent responses to the same questions across five different niches of social influencers. For example, all the social influencers took the same basic actions, especially after experiencing a major setback while building their digital tribes. Second, the study's results can be easily applied or transferred to various spheres or niches of social influence, including those who have struggled as social influencers and those aiming to establish themselves in this field. These two aspects align with Schofield's (1990) goal of producing a detailed and coherent description that serves as the foundation for transferability.

### ***Dependability***

When interviewed, participants across the five niches expressed similar themes as they started and developed their digital tribes. Using a semi-structured interview format with the same questions asked in the same order increased the study's reliability. There is a high likelihood that other researchers could reproduce these results if they asked the same questions during their semi-structured interviews with other niches in the social media landscape. Participants provided almost identical responses to most questions, thereby improving the data's trustworthiness (Singh et al., 2021). Data were manually coded into limited categories, such as “mentor” or “copied from more successful influencers,” to better focus on the actions participants took as they worked toward becoming nano-influencers. The research questions guided the study, while the

supporting questions were designed to gather detailed, rich data characteristic of qualitative research.

### ***Confirmability***

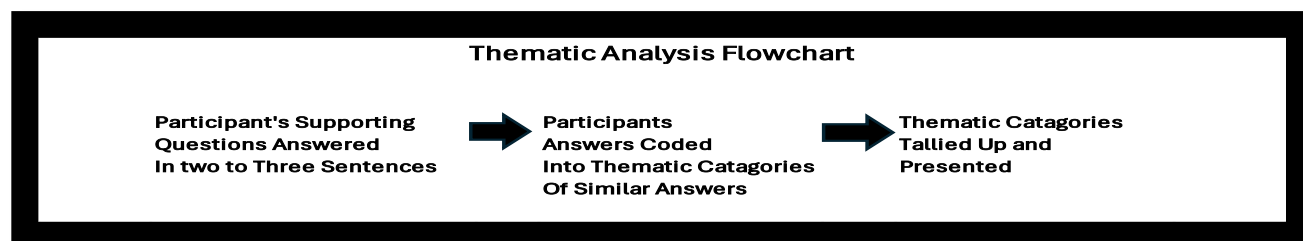
At the start of each participant interview, participants were reminded that the study was not being recorded. They were also assured that anything they shared with the researcher would remain anonymous, no personal demographics would be collected, and they could skip any question at any time. Participants were asked to consider each question and respond in two to three sentences as the interviewer typed their answers into an Excel spreadsheet. The interviewer remained quiet during the participant's responses to avoid disrupting their thought process and asked follow-up questions only when the response was unclear or needed further clarification. With fifty questions, the semi-structured interview was quite lengthy, so participants were not asked to verify their answers; this is why concise, two- to three-sentence responses were important to capture.

### **Results**

After gathering the raw data from the 25 interviews, the next step was to organize it into theme categories. The study focused on nano-influencers aged 21 or older who actively use Facebook and have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers. If the literature review is on target, then the participants' answers should be reflected in the percentages of the supporting questions. The results are divided into two groups: the first addresses the research questions by answering the supporting questions, and comparing those results with the literature review. The second section covers the themes from Aristotle's, Weber's, and Hovland's work. Specifically, the theme categories were based on Aristotle's five parts of rhetoric, mentorship, mental resilience, and social capital, under Max Weber's (1947) charismatic rule, constrained by Munsterberg (1916)

and Simon's (1971) attention economy. The research questions aimed to trace the journey of successful influencers as they overcome common milestones.

***Research Questions and Corresponding Supporting Interview Questions:***



**Figure 6 Thematic Analysis Flowchart**

Factors	Title of Theory and Relevant Works
1	Simon's Attention Economy (1971)
2	Weber's Charismatic Rule (1947)
3	Hijacking the amygdala through metaphor (Talamas et al., 2016)
4	Invest Time and See the Big Picture (Heifetz et al., 2009)
5	Determine the Urgency of the Issue (Heifetz et al., 2009)
6	Determine Your Role in the Big Picture (Heifetz et al., 2009)
7	Develop Your Framing of the Issue (Heifetz et al., 2009)
8	Develop Your Plan and Work the Plan (Heifetz et al., 2009)
9	Identify Splinter Groups and their Opinion Leaders (Heifetz et al., 2009)
10	Focus the Group on Progress as Promised (Heifetz et al., 2009)
11	Aristotle's Principles (Rapp, 2023)
12	Source Credibility, later the Yale Attitude Change Model (Lasswell, 1948; Hovland et al., 1953)
13	Six Bases of Power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1962; Raven, 1992)
14	The Theme of the Message or Thematics (Larson, 2012)
15	Concrete Words Experienced Through a Person's Five Senses (Larson, 2012)
16	Munsterberg's Human Attention as a Human Function (1916)
17	Social Capital (Hanifan, 1916; Bourdieu, 1985)
18	Rebroadcasting Throughout the Global or Digital Village or Through Weak Ties (McLuhan & Powers, 1964; Granovetter, 1973)
19	Mental Resiliency (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018)
20	Mentorship & Brain Trust (Eby et al., 2009)
21	Using Emotions (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Damasio, 1994). Not studied, but its presence is noted in the Literature Review
22	Bilateral Activation, both sides of the brain (Feng et al., 2023; Amano & Toichi, 2016). Not studied, but its presence is noted in the Literature Review
23	Target Audience Alignment (Farrokhi et al., 2024)
24	Focus on Content (Tassi, 2018)

**Table 9. List of the 24 Drivers Identified in this Research Study.**

## 1. RQ1: What drives social media influencers to put digital content on the World Wide Web?

Research question one has six supporting questions and was designed to elicit participants' inner motivation and to discover their core values—for example, honesty and authenticity—as they began their journey toward becoming social influencers. As these were the first questions asked of the participants, they were intentionally easy to encourage participants to begin talking about themselves in a non-judgmental environment. This methodology of asking people these types of questions is designed to get people to talk about the most important thing on the planet, themselves. Then, as the interview progressed, the questions dove deeper into what made the nano-influencers successful. Finally, the interview questions focused on what the nano-influencers would do in the future.

### Key to understanding the following tables presenting the research study findings

Percentage of Participants with Similar Responses	Thematic Category Response Groupings
%	Thematic Grouping

### Supporting Questions for Research Question 1.

%	a. How did you get started being a social influencer?
56%	Wanted to grow their business
24%	Wanted to help people
16%	Inspired by others
4%	Selected career path

This is a core value question: These answers demonstrated Aristotle's goodwill toward the audience and the speaker's virtue (Rapp, 2023), as, in one way or another, all participants were involved in helping people in their niches. 56% participants saw social media as a way to grow their business brand, and 24% wanted to share their knowledge to help others. Other social influencers inspired 16%, and 4% selected communications as a career path. These are

the root causes of why these people entered the digital landscape of social media. This lens will determine everything else the participant does or will do as a social influencer with the potential to reach millions of prospective clients.

Participant 10 began using social media during COVID-19 and, with a group of other counselors, likely an early form of a brain trust, began presenting classes to each other. Participant 3 noticed others presenting videos on sustainable living and felt he had something to offer as well. Participant 5 had a childhood fascination with hypnosis, and his social influencing efforts were to reach out and help more people. The need to help others is compelling for some people (Damasio, 1994).

%	<b>b. Did you have prior experience in the field that you are working in now?</b>
56%	Yes
44%	No

This question refers to Aristotle’s speaker’s credibility. A slim majority had prior experience before entering the field that they are in now, while the rest had none. This indicates that anyone with the inner drive and mental resilience can change career fields. This question might also reflect the mindset of a failed social influencer, who begins to see experience as an unattainable milestone. An example of this is remembering what it was like searching for your first job: “We want one year of experience,” but you have to have a job to gain that one year of experience; it is a vicious cycle. Successful social media influencers often say, “I am brand new to the field, so I do not have any bad habits.” This demonstrates a growth mindset.

Two participants — participant 9 in mental wellness and participant 21 in sustainable living — mentioned taking classes with Tony Robbins, the motivational speaker and master neurolinguistic practitioner. He was credited with helping them find their passion

in life. Robbins is currently distributing 30 billion free meals out of a planned 100 billion worldwide, doing so through local partnerships (Mackey & Rudy, 2024).

<b>%</b>	<b>c. What Was Your Inner Motivation Starting Out?</b>
48%	Wanted to add value to myself or my business
44%	Wanted to help others
8%	Wanted to support my family

This is a core belief question rooted in Aristotle's goodwill toward the audience (Rapp, 2023). The majority of participants wanted to grow their businesses in response to supporting question 4.a. When participants were asked about their inner motivation, 48% wanted to add value to themselves or the business, 44% wanted to help others, and two were honest about providing for their families. All three thematic groupings reflect Aristotle's goodwill.

Participant 1, a gamer, stated she wanted to help her community out by reallocating resources, for example, children's clothing and furniture to people in need. She runs both a gaming feed and a community giving-freely feed, totaling 3,000 followers. She was coded as a gamer because that is her main influencing activity now. Participant 8 likes helping people develop their social media presence. Participant 24 enjoyed working with animals and began by going through a series of training courses.

<b>%</b>	<b>d. What is Your Inner Motivation Now?</b>
68%	Want to keep helping people
24%	Add value to myself or my business
8%	Not really motivated right now

A participant's current motivation is again equated with Aristotle's goodwill toward the audience (Rapp, 2023), as this is what drives them to put themselves out there in the virtual world. The more altruistic or love for others the participant has, the more goodwill they will exhibit and the greater the risks they will take in putting themselves out there. Most

influencers started out using social media to grow their businesses, but now, their current core motivation is to help more people. After everything the participants have been through 68% want to keep helping people. Again, this is Aristotle's goodwill manifesting itself. 8% or two participants stated they were not really motivated right now in their influencing.

Participant 2, a wellness coach, is using social media to grow his network. He has also been an extra in several movies and appeared in two television shows. Participant 6 uses social media to grow his digital tribe and stay in touch with his family. Participant 12 works to increase her organization's market share by conducting training and seminars. Participant 16 works very hard to get out the message that she can help people. Participant 24 still enjoys working with animals, just as she did when she began.

<b>%</b>	<b>e. What was it like in the beginning for you as you began posting?</b>
40%	Very slow going
36%	Lots of learning
16%	Already had prior exposure
4%	It was easy
4%	It has gotten more complicated

This supporting question was used to demonstrate the participant's early mental resiliency and growth attitude (Ng, 2018) as they worked to become a social influencer. Together, 40% participants said that starting on social media was slow because there was a lot to learn to become a successful social influencer. 36% had prior exposure or believed posting content was easy, with one mentioning it had become more complicated. This is common with any new venture, especially in the digital world. In theory, anything that can speed up the process and reduce the learning curve, such as a mentor or a support network, would be beneficial for new social influencers. As with any business, good practices improve over time through the influencer's growth mindset.

Participant 9 mentioned that it was initially challenging because Facebook kept changing its analytics, mainly because it needed to make money from people's postings. Participant 10 said, "In the beginning, I was learning how to communicate with my digital tribe." Participant 11, the most successful among all the participants, commented that it was very generic and awkward, and that a lot of money was wasted. Participant 19 acknowledged that his posting was very inconsistent at first, as he did not realize how poor he was at becoming an influencer; he now has a mentor. Participant 21 said that people were surprised by what they did; their passion in life was teaching canine CPR and first aid.

%	<b>f. How Did You Build Credibility with Your Digital Tribe?</b>
68%	By building a reputation for honesty
28%	Focused on content
4%	Started building a tribe with friends and family first

This is a core value question, based on Aristotle's credibility, with honesty being the number one answer; this question also showed a glimpse into the thinking process of the participants. 68% or seventeen participants said they built their online reputation on honesty, while seven focused on content, and one focused on building their tribe through friends and family. This participant, or participant 1, also created one of the largest charity sites in her geographic region, where people can donate clothes, baby formula, and furniture to others in need.

Participant 3 said, "Being real and actually showing them everything, we showed the good and the bad, and did not hide the hard work." Participant 9 stated, 'What you post becomes who you are.' Moreover, writing articles that draw people to interact with you. Participant 14 stated credibility comes from being honest and being forthright. Participant 17 stated that he worked hard at being honest and authentic. Participant 11 summed this

supporting question up best: “Once I became real, I was able to deliver real results to my tribe.”

**RQ2: What mindset shift made the social media influencer successful within their digital tribe?**

This research question explored how the participant stayed engaged with their digital tribe and how they needed to shift their mindset to boost top-of-mind awareness (TOMA). All participants faced failures in various forms—from personal decisions to unhelpful technical support at Facebook and encounters with both internal and external bad actors. Additionally, all participants demonstrated strong mental resilience as they navigated the common challenges of growing a business.

%	a. Did You Experience Failure as a Social Influencer?
100%	Yes

All participants experienced failure in one form or another, demonstrating that they were doing new things and thus subject to setbacks and complete failures; this also highlighted their mental resilience (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018). This was also an honesty-based question, as most people, when telling their own story, want to present themselves as the hero. An honest person tells the truth and shows themselves making mistakes, and a resilient person explains what they did to correct their mistakes. Whatever failures they experienced as social influencers, these participants carried on and thrived afterward.

While supporting question 2.a. was a yes-or-no question, several participants shared what they failed at. Participant 2 was very poor at marketing and tried selling towels and t-shirts to grow his mental wellness brand. Participant 5 said that he keeps reinventing himself. Participant 13 stated he was afraid of being seen and afraid of what people would think.

Participant 20 stated she struggled with technology, and that created all sorts of obstacles for her. Participant 22 stated she has been disappointed by the lack of engagement with some of her posts.

%	<b>b. After you failed or had a setback and were struggling, what did you do differently?</b>
76%	Changed perspective and/or brought in outside help/mentorship
8%	Copied what others were doing
8%	Changed the direction of my work
8%	Continued posting content

This is also a question of mental resilience: after the social influencer hit the proverbial brick wall of failure, what did they do to move forward? This question also raised the concepts of mentorship (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018) and outside help, as well as changes in the social influencer's perspective to better align with their digital tribe. Nineteen participants either changed their perspective or sought outside help and mentorship. This supports Eby et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis of mentorship, which reviewed 15,000 articles and reports. Ultimately, mentorship matters because it is linked to positive outcomes in youth, academic settings, and, more importantly, in the workplace. The value of having a mentor or brain trust is reflected in likes and engagement, both of which capture economic attention (Simon, 1971) and Munsterberg's (1916) most valuable human resource, human attention.

Participant 7 stated she learned from her mistakes and learned to stay out of the bad areas. Participant 14 stated he would talk to people who were smarter than he was, especially those who understood algorithms. Participant 15 stated he had a mentor and that he would review the analytics to determine what went wrong. He would also focus on future successes while remembering past successes. Participant 16 said she just kept posting to build audience engagement.

%	<b>c. Did you pick a particular target audience, or did it come naturally to you?</b>
100%	It evolved from my efforts

At the beginning, none of the participants had a target audience; their followers became their target audience. In this research study, the demographics of the participants' target audience were not discussed, just that the participants had followers. However, it is likely their digital tribe was composed of people similar to the participants (Farrokhi et al., 2024), with factors such as self-identity, motivation, emotions, priorities, and consumption behavior added to the mix (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2019). None of these participants had a target audience in mind when they began, as most only wanted to get their message out to build their own business.

Much of the target audience came through a variation of Nash's (1950) game theory of equilibrium, in which people seek to maximize their outcomes in the game, or, in this case, social influence. Imagine the game as the ability to reach potential consumers on social media; these potential consumers can choose how to spend their time, while social influencers seek to influence those choices. However, social influence involves an infinite number of influencers or players, an infinite number of potential consumers, and an infinite number of potential rewards at stake. This also goes back to social influencers being the ringmasters of Munsterberg's (1916) limited attention of a human being and Simon's (1970) attention economy.

Participant 14 stated he was targeting 21- to 55-year-olds but ended up targeting 30- to 60-year-olds. However, he benefits financially from it. Initially, I started with a specific demographic, but now most of my audience is female, safety and security-conscious, between 45 and 65, and they seem to trust my advice. Participant 16 said she had no clue about

demographics, and her audience seemed to come to her naturally. Participant 17 said he picked a target audience but did not reach them; he blamed Facebook analytics for this. Participant 18 said his audience came to him naturally, but he had also worked on several projects targeting specific demographics.

%	<b>d. Are you familiar with the term 'social capital,' and if so, how does it work for you?</b>
76%	No
24%	Yes – Social capital equals trust

Hanifan's (1916) observations, based on a schoolhouse and the community that supported it, still hold true in today's digital world: influencers, like teachers at the turn of the century, must foster goodwill and mutual understanding among the many different groups that make up a community, whether physical or virtual. This aligns perfectly with Aristotle's principles of rhetoric, where goodwill is the most vital principle (Rapp, 2023). In today's digital landscape, these connections happen around the clock at lightning speed. A side note: while one video can go viral and reach millions, one mistake can spread just as quickly and cause untold damage, as in the case of the Coldplay concert couple incident, where the now-former CEO of Astronomer was caught on the Kiss Cam with the head of their human resources department.

While 19 participants stated they did not know what social capital was, all 19 were using some form of it. For example, participant 4 had no clue what social capital was, but also reached out to other similar groups—an example of bridging social capital—while continuing to post content to his existing digital tribe to deepen his relationship with them—an example of bonding social capital. Participant 4 also stated that he had done a couple of podcasts with a mega influencer or an influencer with 500,000 to one million followers, which is a good

example of linking social capital. A good metaphor for social capital is the air we breathe: people do not know what it is, but when they do not have it, they want it. Thomas et al. (2023) found that influencers who collaborated with lower-level influencers were perceived as more altruistic and less self-serving. However, when they collaborated with a lower-status brand, the influencers were perceived as more self-serving.

The odd remarks about social capital were as follows. Participant 19; he said he did not know what social capital was, but he felt like he needed to preserve it for the time being. Participant 20 did not know what social capital was and worked only with select people. Participant 21 stated that he knew what it was, as he had someone who handles their social media. Participant 22 asked whether that was what people called trust today, and said that her tribe trusts her because she does what she says she will do. Participant 23 had never heard of social capital.

<b>%</b>	<b>e. Do you intentionally reach out to similar groups with similar interests?</b>
76%	Yes
24%	No

In any business situation, growth occurs only when a business reaches out to new untapped markets, and bridging social capital helps it do so (Kim & Kim, 2023). This supporting question caused participant 11, with the largest digital tribe in the research study, to pause, as he remarked, “I never thought of that.” So, even when you are highly successful in everything else you do, there is always room for improvement. When marketing a product, the business owner needs to ask themselves, “What else can people use this for, and who else can use it?” In participant 11’s case, his entire skillset as a business coach could easily transfer to many other niches, as business coaching skills, like aspirin, can be used in many different settings.

Participant 23 stated that he did reach out to similar groups but could have done a better job, and thanked me for the reminder. Participant 24 stated she actively searched out new groups and joined them. Participant 25 said that he focused on connecting with other active social influencers. While participant 1 said she did not reach out to similar groups. Participant 2 stated he did reach out to other groups, asking questions and building rapport with them.

%	<b>f. Do you have a group of highly trusted people you keep in contact with?</b>
92%	Yes
8%	No

Twenty-three participants have mentors or a brain trust to turn to for help, demonstrating that Eby et al.'s (2009) concepts influence success, as most successful people do. A brain trust is a group of advisors or subject-matter experts who offer advice or guidance when asked, similar to a company's board of directors. For example, a good board of directors knows how to secure resources, including social capital, for its company. Knowing that the influencer can get help when needed also allows them to move forward more quickly, knowing they have a safety net if they make a mistake or need support. This is a powerful work tool.

The value of mentorship cannot be overstated for successful workplace outcomes (Eby et al., 2009). While this supporting question was a yes-or-no question, several participants made comments that were captured during the interview because of their noteworthiness. Participant 6 said he did not have a brain trust but was working to build one. Participant, 14, said no, which conflicts with his answer on 2.b., when asking about how he dealt with failure, and he stated he “talked to people smarter than him”. In some way, everybody is influenced by someone else, whether through communicating with their digital tribe, peer-to-peer, or mentor-to-student.

Participant 2 stated he did not have a mentor and mentioned that he was doing poorly financially, working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Participant 14 claimed not to have a mentor, but in question 2 b., he said that when he failed, he talked to more intelligent people, which could be considered mentoring or a brain trust. However, his answer still stands as 'no' to this question. Participant 3 said he spoke with local community members to help build his chicken-farming-based nano-influencing operation. Participant 4 stated that he spoke with the bigger names in his business, and they helped him grow.

<b>%</b>	<b>g. Do you use a script or talking points to keep your videos on track?</b>
60%	Yes
24%	No
16%	I do not make videos

This question relates to Aristotle's principles (Rapp, 2023) of rhetoric—logos, pathos, metaphor, and brevity—among 15 participants using scripts. Its presence indicates that, through feedback and personal reflection, participants have learned to use brevity to better communicate with their audience. A prepared speaker is more direct, uses better metaphors, and gets to the core of the issue. Six participants did not use a script and preferred speaking off the cuff, while four did not make videos. The same idea applies to a professional production team, where each member works in their field to create a product that is eye-catching and rich in content. However, for success, the influencer or their team must have an end goal in mind, or they risk getting sidetracked and violating Aristotle's principles of rhetoric—namely, metaphor and brevity—which are crucial in the attention economy. Research shows that metaphors hijack or influence the brain more than mere words (Meersman et al., 2022), especially words like 'fire'.

Participant 6 stated he did not create videos, but he has written out talking points for seminars and speeches he has delivered. Participant 7 mentioned that she uses talking points, especially for higher-end content she produces. Participant 17 said he uses bullet points but mostly speaks off the cuff, particularly when making YouTube shorts. Participant 21 described a hybrid approach to making videos, combining off-the-cuff speaking with bullet points when his ideas are too vague. Participant 25 explained that his video content is usually free-flowing, drawing on decades of experience as a disc jockey and on television.

In this context, talking points contribute to brevity, which aligns with one of Aristotle's principles of rhetoric. Capturing people's attention takes planning and practice, just as in a movie, a circus, a concert, and especially a magic show. Every aspect has to be designed to keep eyes on the action and to make the audience more than just spectators in the show. P.T. Barnum, the famous showman, worked to make the audience part of the con (Feuerherd, 2017). Barnum first gained attention by stitching a dead fish and monkey together, calling it the Fiji or Feejee mermaid and charging admission to see it (Harvard University, 2025).

%	<b>h. Were there any particular thoughts or themes running through your mind as you were working to rebound?</b>
40%	Keep trying
24%	Change my perspective to the customer's perspective
20%	What did I learn
12%	Focus on the goal
4%	Failing forward

This question explored the participants' mental resilience. All participants were active social influencers on Facebook, demonstrating a resilient mindset that helped them overcome challenges (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018). While their reactions to failure varied, they had been taught or had developed a mindset that enabled them to analyze problems and focus on solutions. This trait is likely missing in many other failed social influencers who gave up and

moved on. Several participants who asked themselves, “What did I learn from the experience?” were neurolinguistics practitioners, and they also stated that there is no failure, only feedback. While all participants showed a high level of resilience, these two exhibited an even higher level of mental resilience during the interviews.

After failing, participant 8 worked to get his mind into the target consumer’s frame of mind. After participant 10’s biggest failure, he became intensely focused on predicting how a project would go, and the crazier the project, the more he focused on the people. Participant 11, with the largest following, is an analyzer who worked to make things right with his digital tribe. Participant 14 just laughed and said not to do that again; he said he tries to learn from his mistakes. Participant 16 stated that she just wanted to get my message out there that I could help people. Again, this speaks to mental resilience; having a strong mental resilience makes one successful.

**i. SQI: Enes et al. (2022) Modified Social Media Relationship Scale questions.**

The surprising insight from this supporting question was Facebook's low score on the “I trust this social media” question, with a median answer of 4 out of 5. Facebook either does not know or does not care about how social influencers who are active business owners view their platform. If Facebook does not know, it should, since Meta, Facebook's new name, is a publicly traded company and is answerable to its stockholders. If Meta does not care about its business owners, then, as usual, a competitor will find a way to fill that service gap in Meta’s customer support. This is an excellent application for AI, in that AI could easily assist Facebook users, thereby keeping them happy and loyal.

**Legend: Number 1 is the best, and number 5 is the worst.**

Participate #	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25																									MEAN (AVERAGE)	STANDARD DEVIATION	MEDIAN
My experiences with this social media meet my expectations of use in general.	4	3	2	2	3	3	1	2	4	3	5	3	3	3	4	3	3	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	2.6	1.04	3
I identify with this social media.	5	2	1	1	5	3	1	1	2	4	5	3	4	2	3	4	4	4	1	2	5	1	3	3	2	2.8	1.43	3
This social media has a positive image for me.	1	1	1	3	3	1	2	1	1	1	3	5	2	1	2	5	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1.8	1.21	1
This social media gives me a sense of belonging.	4	1	1	1	5	2	2	1	2	4	3	2	4	4	4	5	4	3	1	1	5	4	4	3	3	2.9	1.41	3
I say good things about this social media.	5	3	1	1	5	2	3	3	4	2	3	4	3	2	2	4	3	5	2	3	5	1	2	4	3	3.0	1.26	3
I intend to continue being a user of this social media.	3	1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	5	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.6	1.00	1
I intend to use this social media more often.	4	1	1	1	5	4	3	5	1	3	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	3	1	1	1	1	4	2	2.4	1.38	2
I trust this social media.	4	4	2	3	5	2	3	5	5	2	5	5	5	2	4	3	4	4	3	1	5	3	5	5	4	3.7	1.24	4
This social media allows reporting inappropriate and offensive content.	1	1	1	1	3	1	3	1	2	1	3	1	3	1	1	2	3	1	1	3	1	1	1	3	1	1.6	0.91	1
This social media has a variety of content.	1	1	1	1	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	3	5	1	2	1	3	1	1	1	1	3	1.7	1.25	1
I like the layout of this social media.	2	3	1	2	3	3	2	1	3	1	2	2	3	1	4	4	3	3	2	2	3	3	1	3	4	2.4	0.96	3
In this social media, I can configure the visibility of my actions to guarantee my privacy.	2	1	2	1	5	2	3	1	2	1	3	2	5	1	3	3	3	2	2	3	5	3	1	2	3	2.4	1.23	2
This social media makes me feel closer to people who matter to me.	3	4	1	4	1	2	1	1	4	2	2	5	4	4	3	5	4	2	1	2	4	3	1	4	3	2.8	1.35	3
I use this social media to communicate with people from work.	5	2	1	3	5	5	4	1	2	5	3	2	1	5	3	4	4	5	1	1	1	1	1	3	2	2.8	1.61	3
I use this social media to communicate with friends and family.	2	3	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	3	5	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	2.1	1.17	2

While Enes et al.'s (2022) modified social media scale was discussed in the literature review, it is not directly related to how participants became successful. However, participants' ratings of Facebook reflect their perceptions of the medium. McLuhan (1967) famously said, "The Medium is the Message," which speaks volumes to the perceptions of Facebook influencers. Logic would dictate that people who hate using something will eventually move away from it, as the Hedonic treadmill (Ngulwiyah et al., 2023), traditionally for pleasure seekers, also works in reverse: people naturally avoid pain.

Several participants complained that their Facebook ads were intentionally sent to the wrong audience. Completely missing the influencer's target demographic, leaving the social influencer financially poorer and angrier for trusting Facebook with their advertising. Meta is currently facing a \$7 billion lawsuit for overestimating the number of people who use its services by up to 400% (Love, 2025). So there is some validity to the participants' complaints

about low returns on their advertising dollars. For any other rational, functioning business, these scores would cost CEOs their jobs—but not at Meta.

**RQ3: What would the social media influencer do differently if they had to start over?**

Research question 3 explored whether a social influencer would need to start over and what they should focus on to become more successful faster. This led participants to reevaluate their current journey as social influencers and consider what had truly worked for them. Several mentioned they had never thought about losing everything and having to restart. In today's digital age, filled with malicious programming and bad actors—some state-sponsored, such as Russia, China, Iran, and Korea (Akoto, 2024; Butler et al., 2025)—this could easily happen. Although disaster mitigation plans were outside the scope of the study, it would have been interesting to examine, since it is very doubtful that any participants had conducted risk mitigation planning. Three participants had to restart their Facebook accounts and lost their entire digital following.

%	<b>a. If you had to start over tomorrow with zero followers and no revenue stream, how would you do it?</b>
80%	Focus only on my niche
8%	Go out and take pictures or video first
4%	Go straight to YouTube for the money and bypass Facebook
4%	Focus on TikTok and Instagram only
4%	Maybe not do it – Do not like all the competition now

Question 3a's supporting question should act as a warning and a testament to successful influencers' mental resiliency (Ng, 2018). Out of 25 participants, three had to restart their social media marketing efforts (12%) due to the following issues: a Vietnamese cyber gang taking control of their Facebook account, a business partner stealing control of the social media account, and a lost password that locked them out. The business partner then failed as

they were unable to provide the services of the other two partners. In all three cases, Facebook's technical support was nonexistent, and the social influencers had to restart their Facebook marketing activities. This should serve as a warning to all social media influencers, as it has already happened to 12% of the participants in the research study. In an instant, you can lose your entire digital tribe.

Participant 12 stated she had lost the password to both her Facebook and backup accounts. She tried on and off for several days but could not reach either Facebook or the email account's technical support. Participant 24 went to log in to Facebook and found herself locked out of her own account. A friend called her to ask about the washers and dryers she was selling at wholesale prices, which the Vietnamese cyber gang was pretending to sell as part of their scam. Participant 24 specializes in sustainable living, working with horses, and their care and training. She never could get through to Facebook technical support, and in desperation, she had to restart her entire Facebook influencer activities.

<b>%</b>	<b>b. In a perfect world, how big would your digital tribe be?</b>
32%	1 to 2 Million
4%	1 Million on Twitter, as Twitter is easier to monetize
16%	100,000
4%	50,000
12%	10,000 to 30,000
12%	Under 5,000
8%	Around 1,000
8%	Did not know
4%	Engaged followers of any amount

None of the participants mentioned any sales funnels or top-of-the-funnel (TOFU) ratios. While not addressed in the literature review, this is a digital marketing staple; sales conversions matter. Typically, websites have a sales conversion rate of around 3.5%, with 96% of all digital traffic not resulting in sales or conversions (McDowell et al., 2016).

Facebook reports an 8.95% conversion rate to sales from its ads. For the entrepreneur, this kind of information presents many opportunities for growth and revenue as people leverage social influence, and this is one of the seven different classes he teaches a year.

While supporting question 3.b. was a number-based question, several participants volunteered additional information that was captured. Participant 22, who also worked with Olympic-level swimmers, stated she would like to have all 400,000 USA competitive-ranked swimmers in her digital tribe. Participant 1 stated it would take one million followers to make money on Twitter, as Twitter is the place to monetize your digital operation. Participant 5 stated that he just wanted their digital tribe to be large enough to support him. Participant 7 had an odd response: 450 followers, which was how many licensed providers there are in her area; she wanted to be able to reach out directly to them. Participant 15 stated that, for all intents and purposes, he is just a salesman, with people's email information being warm or hot leads.

<b>%</b>	<b>c. What is your ideal size for a digital tribe?</b>
32%	10,000 to 30,000
20%	1 Million to 2 Million
16%	Engaged followers
12%	100,000
12%	5,000 or less
4%	Did not know

Audience engagement was discussed in the literature review in several areas, two examples are: social capital is generated by engagement (Beichert et al., 2024) and engagement as a connection mechanism (Farrokhi et al., 2024). The interesting comment in this supporting question was that 16% of participants, or 4 participants, wanted engaged followers. Followers are more likely to interact when framing generates engagement (Breves et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2019). Framing is how the post, video, or overall content is

presented to the digital tribe. For example, remember the torchlight parade for Hitler, as if Hitler were leading Germany out of the darkness. This was done to portray Hitler in a positive light, no pun intended. In the world of propaganda or persuasion, framing is the go-to tool of the trade. The goal of a social influencer is to engage their followers through a call to action or, at a minimum, a rebroadcasting effort.

This was a number-based answer, but several participants volunteered information that was captured during the interviews. Participant 9 stated that the definition of a tribe was different for him, as his tribe is actually his friends and their degrees of friendship, and he has a handful of trusted people; his goal with his tribe was to promote growth within it.

Participant 10 had no idea how to convert friends into followers; he was also surprised to learn he was a nano-influencer in the initial part of the interview, as he had 1,300 followers. He mostly posts videos of himself chopping wood, doing work around his farmhouse, and traveling to the mainland; his real job is as a small-team leader at a marketing company. He lives on a small island in the Great Lakes area and rides a lake ferry to work every day, with occasional float-plane trips.

<b>%</b>	<b>d. Do you have a team or staff to help you?</b>
60%	No
32%	Yes
8%	Sometimes

This supporting question arose from the literature review, which observed that AI-created social influencers generally have a team of production assistants (Koles et al., 2024). With a team, the content stays fresher and stays top of mind for digital followers (Koles et al., 2024). A current example is a team of professionals who recently created a fake persona, Tilly Norwood, a social influencer, sparking concerns in Hollywood. Tilly, developed by Xicoia,

the AI production company of Particle6, has attracted significant attention in Hollywood (GMA Team, 2025). Using a design team helps keep content fresh, attracting more views than content made by an individual.

With AI-generated content, avatars will look attractive and behave flawlessly, drawing more attention and supporting Ohanian's view of goodwill (Corina, 2010). Although only eight participants had a team or different parts of a team, this suggests they understood the challenges of being a solo social influencer and wanted to grow their operations. Participant 17 said he used AI to assist with administrative tasks, a trend rising among small businesses. Participant 22 mentioned she had a growing staff to help her focus on influencing and working with clients.

<b>%</b>	<b>e. How do you prepare content?</b>
60%	Thought out and planned
16%	Spur of the moment
16%	Used AI to research and build
8%	Follower directed

This supporting question referenced Aristotle's rhetoric, specifically brevity, which is also central to Simon's (1971) attention economy. In that, 60% of 25 participants recognized the need to prepare content, compared with the four who made spur-of-the-moment videos. Four more participants used AI to prepare their content based on current events, with two being prompted by their digital followers. As AI becomes a more readily available tool in the digital age, more influencers will use it. As one participant mentioned, they have to use every tool in the toolbox to stay ahead of the competition, and AI is a potent, fairly easy-to-use tool, especially for beginners. AI can also assist their digital tribe as they work through the sales funnel created by the social influencer, as more sales funnels are now automated with many built-in AI features.

Participant 8 explained that when he encountered a problem, he would break it down and then build his video from scratch while explaining the solution. Participant 16 mentioned she did not produce many videos, but when she did, she used ChatGPT to flesh out her ideas. Imagine using AI to storyboard the ideas and then help fill in the details. Participant 17 said he used AI to automate his marketing, making it easy for him to share new ideas with his digital tribe. Participant 18 said he typically has what he calls a lightning-strike idea, then writes bullet points and builds his script. Participant 19 said he either creates content on his own or uses AI to help generate it.

<b>%</b>	<b>f. At what point did you realize that you needed help?</b>
32%	At that point now
28%	I already have help because of the workload
20%	I do not want help
12%	I would like to get to that point.
8%	Will need help soon

While this question was not directly addressed in the literature review, it served as a thought-provoker, prompting participants to realize they might need more help to gain market share. Twenty participants recognized that they already needed or would soon need help, while 20% (5 participants) were content to operate alone. Participant 1 stated she was considering turning her operation into a value reseller, taking a little off the top, and operating for profit. Participant 2 stated that he was strictly a solo operation as he needed every penny of income that he could get his hands on. Participant 3 said he could use professional help now, as the video and editing for content posting were taking up all his time. Participant 4 stated he would be good for another year before he started paying people to help him post content. Participant 5 stated that he would never again hire help, as the last several times it cost him revenue and left him very frustrated.

Participant 5 related that small business employees and their business owners did not share the same priorities and goals, which hampered the business owners' progress.

Participant 5 stated he lost a significant opportunity because his employee chose to stay in bed at home that day.

**g. Did you take or recommend any special training or schooling?**

Participants	Udemy	Facebook	YouTube	SM Marketing	Video	Communications	Psychology	Mentor	Didn't Recommend
1	1	1	1						
2				1					
3				1	1				
4			1		1				
5									1
6									1
7	1	1	1	1	1	1			
8	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		
9	1	1	1	1	1				
10					1				
11									1
12	1	1	1	1	1				
13				1					
14									1
15							1		
16									1
17			1	1	1				
18				1					
19				1					
20									1
21				1					
22								1	
23				1					
24	1	1	1	1	1			1	
25								1	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>

Thirteen participants participated in or recommended social media marketing training, and 9 participants took or recommended video training. The six participants who did not recommend any training all said it was best to learn on their own; the research study did not capture how successful their social influence efforts were compared with those who took

some form of training. Based on the answers to the supporting questions, a great deal of mental effort is devoted to building content that engages the influencer’s digital followers.

The six participants who did not recommend taking any additional training had a combined total of 22,900 Facebook followers. However, when analyzing the answers to their previous supporting questions, participant 11—a business coach who teaches advanced social media marketing at a premium rate—did not recommend additional training. This is probably a change in participant 11's perspective. This is common when asking people to shift back and forth in their thinking during an interview. The other participants who recommended training had a total of 53,800 followers, so additional training helps.

%	<b>h. If you are a one-person operation, what position would you pay people to work in? If you are part of a team, what is the most important position to grow your digital tribe in the beginning?</b>
48%	Social media marketing
12%	Administrative
8%	Video production
8%	Edit videos
4%	Run errands
4%	Content creation
4%	Build YouTube content to expand following
4%	Accountant and artist for book covers
4%	Additional life coach to expand counseling services
4%	Technology specialists

While this question was not directly addressed in the literature review, it did reflect on the Hedonic treadmill reversal, in which people avoid certain tasks because they are not pleasurable (Ngulwiyah et al., 2023). Participant 12 stated that creating genuine conversations with genuine people was the most important aspect of bringing in the next person to their team. She also said they would help her with the advertising as they grow their business. Participant 13 said that his first hire would be someone to help him with his social media, as he wants to grow his digital tribe. Participant 14 stated that it would be someone to help with

his marketing so he could grow his brand. Participant 15 said it would be someone to help with his advertising. Participant 16 said that she needed help with marketing and promoting herself.

**i. What would you do or not do while starting over?**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>SIQ: What would you do or not do while starting over?</b>
1	Researching other people successful in my niche
2	Reaching out and getting advice
3	Watching others
4	Understood presentation and content packaging
5	Me getting better
6	Being retired, I had the time and resources
7	I understood the big picture and had good writing skills
8	Personal and business relationships
9	Being motivated to learn
10	I was forced to get out and grow my network
11	My ability to grind it out and not quit as it is very overwhelming
12	It was the wild west, there is no right or wrong
13	Just being open and honest about helping people
14	Friends and other people involved in social media
15	Having a mentor
16	I didn't really have a motive when I started using social media
17	Mentorship
18	The novelty of it all, in the beginning of Facebook, it was fun
19	Not knowing how bad I was in my profession
20	Courage and bravery
21	Having several mentors
22	Word of mouth and rebroadcasting
23	My circle of trusted colleagues
24	Watching what other people did
25	Just taking messy action

This is strictly a shortcut-to-success question, designed to elicit the drivers and obstacles to success. These are interesting answers and heartfelt reminders of what went right and wrong at the start of their social-influencing efforts. While many of these responses are typical startup-cycle issues — such as spending too much money or trusting the wrong people — some answers delve deeper into building a digital community — for instance, do not

procrastinate or do not stress on the small stuff. Other answers emphasize branding, which is very important for a social influencer. Unfortunately, most new influencers lack an established brand, so they have to build one through trial and error. As with any human effort, motivation tends to make everything else seem more manageable.

Participant 22 mentioned rebroadcasting, which is a significant part of being in an electronic village (McLuhan & Powers, 1964). Several theories abound about the makeup of digital tribes in the Internet of Things (IoT) (Grant, 2020). Namely, that Burlacu's (2014) definition of the four types of digital tribes —purposes, protocols, technology, and people — applies to Hanifan's (1916) social capital as well, especially in the rebroadcasting of content in McLuhan and Power's (1916) global village.

%	<b>j. What helped you the most when starting?</b>
64%	Did it on my own
24%	Had a mentor
12%	Followed what other more successful influencers were doing

Again, this question was designed to elicit a shortcut-to-success answer, while identifying the drivers of success. The lack of mentorship and braintrusts (Elby et al., 2009), which was present in the other questions, is more from the participant's perspective. While 64% or sixteen participants started their social influencing efforts on their own, nineteen later said they had to either change their perspective or bring in a mentor, as stated in question 2.b. Mentorship is a recurring theme in this research study, with successful influencers recognizing that time is still money and that good advice is golden. The troubling part of social influencing is that one misstep can damage your brand and the company for years. The six who had a mentor when they started on social media definitely started from a stronger position.

Participant 7 said she understood the concept of social influence and had strong writing skills. Participant 9 stated that becoming a social influencer forced him to learn and stretch himself. Participant 10 stated he would have stayed out of the branding alignment mess and made his topics broader. Participant 11 said he had to grind it out and not quit because, at the beginning, it was very overwhelming. Participant 14 stated he had a group of friends in the industry, which helped him understand what he needed to do to be successful.

%	<b>k. What hurt you the most when starting?</b>
60%	Lacked digital experience
24%	Inner emotional turmoil (Examples: Fear of Failure, Procrastination)
16%	Bad actors

Even in 2025, the digital divide persists, as 15 of the 25 participants can attest, due to their lack of social media experience. Early in the digital age, the divide was between companies and families without access to computers. Later, it shifted to the gap between those with internet access and those without, or internet diffusion among Americans (NTIA, 1995). Subsequently, the divide shifted to owning a smartphone and, later, to encompassing access, digital skills, and digital devices (GovFacts, 2025). The next digital divide will be between companies and individuals who use AI and those who do not (United Nations, 2024).

The six participants who struggled with self-doubt were interesting because they overcame it to achieve success. The four participants who faced malicious or intentional harm from bad actors survived the adversity and went on to succeed, demonstrating their mental resilience. Participant 5 said he did not know what he did not know, so it was a very fresh start, which was the right attitude to have in a new operating continuum. Participant 9 said his most significant obstacle was the learning curve at the beginning. Participant 15 stated that not having a mentor really hurt his efforts in the beginning, but once he found a mentor he

seemed to thrive. Participant 15 in a previous question also went into great detail about how he found and booked the products he offered, and how he advertised his seminars. Meanwhile, participant 17 said his inner dialogue hurt him more at the start. For participant 18, it was hunting for original content, pictures, and graphic designs; he also admitted to investing too much in equipment.

%	I. What should you avoid when starting up?
56%	Lost focus on my goal
16%	Listening to too many people
8%	Spent money on expensive bots, equipment, and services
8%	Avoid people that do not have your passion
8%	Not having a mentor
4%	Could not recall anything bad happening

While the literature review did not cover what to avoid, aside from Adolf Hitler and the Reverend Jim Jones, this is still relevant to the topic of success. Fourteen participants emphasized that maintaining focus on their goals is crucial when starting on social media. In any business, especially in today's digital age of instant access, time is money, and losing focus can cost both time and money while potentially harming the company's reputation with its target audience. Two participants noted that hanging out with naysayers or people who do not share their passion is a significant obstacle to success. The one participant who could not recall any adverse incidents mentioned that she also lost focus early on when she started posting, but chose to ignore the negativity. Instead, she adopted a 'just do it' attitude and carried on.

#### **RQ4: What are the biggest pitfalls to becoming a social media influencer?**

Research question 4 aimed to prompt participants to reflect on their journey as social influencers. It begins with what they disliked about being a social influencer, then considers where they see themselves in 2 and 4 years. The results were somewhat unexpected because

most participants lacked a clear plan for their future or for their social influencer efforts. In many ways, this is a failure of influencers to have a cohesive strategic marketing plan. This section ended with a question about how influencers keep their content fresh, which highlights their main perspective on what social influencers must do to stay relevant.

%	<b>a. What do you hate about being a social influencer?</b>
44%	The time and work it takes to be a social influencer
24%	Criticism and trolls
24%	Enjoying being a social influencer
4%	Lack of privacy and digital security
4%	Ever-changing Facebook algorithms

This is a Hedonic treadmill reversal question covered in the literature review (Ngulwiyah et al., 2023), as people avoid what they hate. 44% or 11 participants expressed frustration with the time and effort required to become a nano-influencer, likely due to the challenges of creating and producing content. Content creation can be very demanding, even for experienced influencers. In some ways, the larger the digital audience, the more effort it takes to capture and hold their attention, since attention is a limited human resource (Munsterberg, 1916). Facebook's algorithms are constantly changing and remain hidden, which is an unusual business model for a company, especially given its reliance on paying business owners.

Several participants also complained that Facebook did not honor their demographic preferences when placing ads. Now that Meta, the new name for Facebook subject to a \$7 billion lawsuit for over-inflating their users by 400% Meta will finally start following standard business practices, for example, improving customer support and honoring agreements with their business owner users.

**c. Where do you see yourself in two years? Four years?**

Participant	In 2 Years	In 4 Years
1	Out of student loan debt	Financially Independent
2	Still busy and learning	Hadn't thought of it
3	Be more focused on job	Retired
4	Still building my tribe	YouTube channel equal to my 9-5 job
5	Still working	Becoming an Industry Ambassador
6	Still working	Retired
7	Moving into YouTube Videos	Regional and State Wide Presentations
8	Still Working	Still Working
9	Still working	Still Working
10	Sold our business	Thinking of my next venture
11	100K in Followers	1 Million Followers
12	Have a Social Media Team	1 Million Followers
13	More engaged followers	Expand into Europe
14	Still building my tribe	The revenue is self generated
15	Touring nationally with a support team	Working on a team that trains people
16	Touring nationally	Touring nationally
17	Be referral driven	Doing more group work at higher prices
18	Getting my Ph.D.	Achieving tenure in my position
19	Social media taking care of itself, by being the R.C. Cola of my industry	Debt free
20	Doing podcasts	Doing a TED talk
21	Selling our company	Doing seminars
22	Delegating more	Having more content
23	Still working	Growing my digital tribe
24	Doing seminars and classes	Doing seminars and classes
25	Still working	Have another business

This is a fundamental question that any businessperson should be able to answer, as it should be top of mind (TOMA) for them, as this is the goal they are working toward. The two-year question should be a two-year goal for the social influencer—for example, achieving 20% more revenue or increasing their digital tribe by 10%. The interesting thing is that most two-year goals can be accomplished sooner if the influencer has complete emotional buy-in for themselves and their staff. Goals are a necessary part of growth, as they give purpose to direction. Logically, two-year goals would support four-year goals; however, the participant's goals did not support this logical progression.

Although this data was not collected, most participants reported they had not considered where they would like to be in 2 to 4 years, so these important strategic marketing questions were answered on the spur of the moment. From a strategic marketing standpoint,

this is like wandering in the woods without a destination, a map, or a compass. It has significant implications for guiding both successful and unsuccessful social influencers since most lack a plan. Listening to the participants, those with a plan appeared more focused on working toward and achieving their goals. As with any strategic marketing effort, setting milestones and goals is crucial to developing a solid plan.

%	<b>c. Knowing what you know now, do you have any regrets?</b>
32%	Saw it as a learning experience or had a positive mental attitude
24%	Regretted delaying entry or action as a social influencer
20%	General regret
12%	Problems finding or marketing to my niche
8%	Misplaced trust in others
4%	Wasted efforts, such as trying to monetize TikTok

All participants demonstrated strong mental resilience, with eight describing the experience as a valuable learning opportunity, which demonstrated Ng's (2018) growth attitude. Six expressed regret about delaying their entry into the field, and five shared overall regrets about their entire journey. Three reported difficulty in finding their target audience. Everyone faced challenges, as noted earlier. Ahmadi et al. (2024) categorize audience targeting into five segments: potential consumers' habits and interests, life milestone events, purchase history, similar consumer segments, and harvested demographics. These data points are important; however, most of these commercially harvested demographics are out of reach for the average nano-influencer.

Participant 10 stated that he should have spent more time climbing the social ladder in his field of sustainable living, as his core motivation was to help people and not focus on himself or his brand. Participant 12 stated she should have stayed on top of social media more than she was. Participant 13 regretted waiting so long to take action and for not taking social

media as seriously as I should have; it hurt watching newbies get more traffic than I did.

Participant 14 said that it all worked out for the best and that he had no regrets.

<b>%</b>	<b>d. How do you keep your content fresh?</b>
40%	Working to keep the content fresh
32%	Keep up with current events
12%	Followers inspire me
8%	My content has gotten stale
4%	I use AI
4%	My content is event based to support my outreach efforts

This is the driving force of Tassi's (2018) contact with the content discussed in the literature review. Keeping content fresh is essential for any social influencer's success, but this requires hard work and valuable time. This is the heart of staying employed as a ringmaster in Simon's (1971) attention economy. Staying current with events is a common tactic; however, when a newsworthy event occurs, it can take a day or more to produce the content. Afterward, influencers find themselves competing with others who are trying to capitalize on the same news, especially within the same niches. AI could offer a more efficient way to find relevant content. With AI, the content can resonate more deeply with the target audience (Lomas et al., 2024), leading to greater impact, but again, there has to be human intervention in one form or another.

Participant 1 mentioned that her content felt quite stale and expressed the need to re-energize her niche. Participant 2 said he had not been posting meaningful content, which was hurting his marketing efforts. Participant 3 said that to keep content fresh, he would switch roles with his wife: she would do the talking while he operated the camera. Participant 5, the most content-savvy participant, said that he kept his interests varied so that the content stayed fresh. Participant 5 just looked for funny content to repost or rebroadcast to his digital tribe. There were three interesting takeaways from what the participants said: that creating fresh

content was work they avoided; that a good influencer should always be on the prowl for fresh content; and that AI was beginning to factor into nano-influencer-level content creation.

Regardless, the effort starts with the social influencer.

**RQ5: What is the social media influencer’s most successful cash revenue funnel?**

<b>%</b>	<b>a. What is your most successful revenue stream?</b>
40%	Seminars
36%	Work with clients (Sustainable Living, Mental Wellness, Business Coaching)
8%	Monetization on YouTube
4%	Monetization on Twitch
4%	Monetization from Facebook ads
4%	I have no revenue stream

In the nano-influencing world, revenue streams are vital, especially when participants use social media to expand their businesses. As discussed in the literature review, companies are typically motivated by profits, and in today’s digital marketplace, they use social influence to expand into new markets (Fairchild, 2007; Tian et al., 2024). Ideally, everything a business owner does should add value to their products and services. Interestingly, one participant had no revenue stream; however, the study protocols prevented asking follow-up questions unless they kept talking, and the data was captured. Nine participants mentioned working with clients, indicating that social influence was somewhat effective for them. Four participants were monetizing their social media accounts, meaning they were creating content that social media platforms deemed worth paying for.

Participant 6 stated his practice was his most successful revenue stream. Participant 7 did not have a revenue stream, but she did use her digital tribe to promote her work, so in a way, that was her revenue stream. Participant 8 builds websites and works on marketing campaigns. During the last election cycle, he served as the marketing director for a district judge's successful campaign; he also held a master’s degree in communication and worked in his chosen field.

Participant 11's most successful revenue stream was speaking at conferences and conducting follow-on training. Participants 14 and 15 both did live events, which accounted for the majority of their income. Participant 17 stated his most successful revenue stream was in letting Facebook place ads in his posted content.

<b>%</b>	<b>b. What is your second most successful revenue stream?</b>
32%	Do not have a secondary source of income
32%	Selling products like books, chickens, and other merchandise
16%	Training and seminars
16%	Working with clients
4%	Retirement income

Eight participants reported having no secondary income, meaning they relied solely on the results of their social influence. Eight other participants sold products, most notably chicken and baby chicks. Four participants worked in seminar and training circuits within their niche, which are very popular and, if done correctly, can generate a significant income for a weekend of classroom teaching. One participant mentioned that a speaker they know charges \$1,000 per seat for a day of training, with more than 60 seats typically sold, while another mid-level trainer averages about \$28,000 for two days of training. Based on these examples, using social influence to grow your business is definitely worth the effort.

<b>%</b>	<b>c. As a social influencer, what would help you make more money?</b>
52%	More exposure
12%	Engaged followers
12%	Have not monetized yet
12%	More awareness of the social marketing landscape
4%	More money to hire marketing staff
4%	More education to understand digital media
4%	More time in the day

This supporting question went to the very heart of social influence, engagement matters (Beichert et al., 2024). The wrong answer to this question was "more followers"; the correct

answer was "more engaged followers," with only 12% saying they wanted more engaged followers. Most said more exposure would help build their digital tribe; however, two small groups disagreed. One group of participants said they would need more engaged followers. The other group of three participants wanted greater awareness of the social media landscape. These two answers are more realistic about what would lead to genuine digital tribe growth, as both would increase exposure by understanding how marketing works in the digital age. Again, a strategic marketing plan would have created a better outcome for the participants.

### **The Houdini Code and the Theme Categories for the Influencer Success Template**

The concept of the Houdini Code drew from how a magic trick works: weeks and even months are spent designing, building, framing (Bagienski & Kuhn, 2023), and marketing the show where the magic trick will be performed, and that trick will be one of many such tricks performed that night. There is significant planning in magic shows, just as in social influencing, since many magic tricks involve priming (Kuhn et al., 2020), forcing (Geoff, 2020; Kuhn et al., 2020), or covertly influencing the audience (Pailhes et al., 2020; Pailhes, 2021). The Houdini Code concept followed the formula of magic, aiming to astonish the masses through research, design, execution, and the overlooked task of rebroadcasting (McLuhan & Powers, 1964), and it could easily apply in today's digital world or the Internet of Things (Grant, 2020).

The theme categories are based on research gathered during the literature review. An often-overlooked theme that emerged is that nearly everyone profiled had a mentor—an overlooked task, similar to rebroadcasting. This was mentioned in the literature review, but the full significance of having a mentor was not fully appreciated. For example, Hitler was mentored in politics by Dietrich Eckart and in public speaking by Erik Jan Hanussen. Goebbels had Max Freiherr von Waldberg as his doctoral advisor and Gregor Strasser as his mentor in the

nationalist movement. Samuel Stouffer mentored Carl Hovland, who later mentored Philip Zimbardo, the Stanford Prison Experiment. Since many participants mentioned mentorship at different times, both mentorship and brain trusts were included in the theme categories. An interesting side note is that Munsterberg later mentored William Marston, creator of Wonder Woman (Prieto, 2012). The idea that participants might have a brain trust or specialists in various fields to consult is simply an extension of the traditional concept of a mentor.

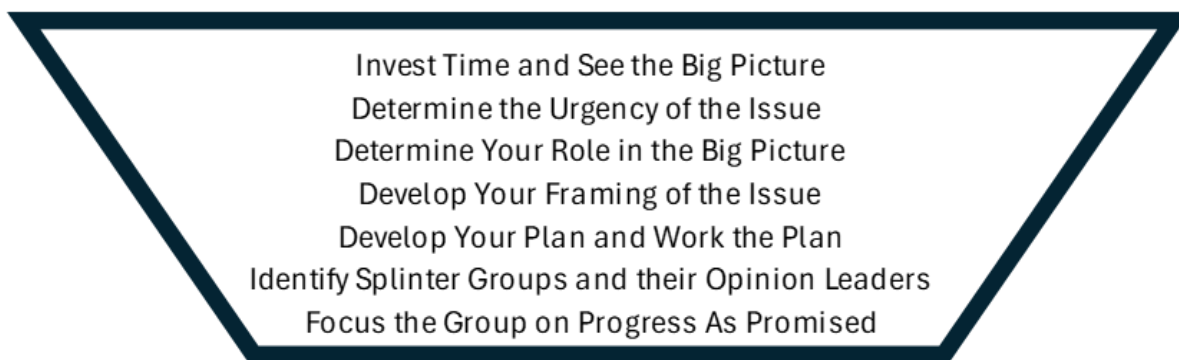
Participants also highlighted different forms of mental resilience, emphasizing the need to explore this topic more thoroughly across various theme categories. Mental resilience is a combination of pure energy—willpower — and core beliefs that turn supporting tasks into achievable milestones. Mental resilience is the spark that helps humans succeed even when the odds are clearly stacked against them. Going back to the motivation of a magician, think of the time spent in meticulously planning a magic trick, then building up an entire magic show around that one trick.

Social capital — including trust and bridging social capital, such as reaching out to other groups — also deserves attention, as it is a strong indicator of an influencer's success. Social capital equals trust, so in everything an influencer does, the key question is: Will this post help or hurt the social capital or trust they have built with their digital tribe? Also, what is the influencer doing to promote bonding and linking social capital within their digital tribe, as people like to feel wanted and respected?

All of the theme categories fall, in one way or another, under Weber's (1947) notion of charismatic rule, since none of the social influencers were elected or appointed; instead, the influencers worked their way into becoming a nana-influencer. In most niches, the higher the success score—the total of the eleven categories examined—the better participants are doing in

their respective niche. The exception is in religious messaging, where the participant with the most followers in the niche did not post any digital content. Truth be told, the little old lady is most likely in her seventies; she understands very little about social influence, and she was the third-highest performer in the entire study.

Leadership was studied by examining how the participants expressed themselves in their comments, for example, “I take time to study what is current” is worth 1 point in the leadership column. Another example is using bridging to reach other groups, counted as a point in the social capital column, and as a way to identify splinter groups and their opinion leaders, which earned a point in the leadership column. The most important concept of leadership in this study is that, as a social influencer, the person is also considered a charismatic leader under both Weber (1947) and Aristotle’s polis concept (Huhn & Meyer, 2023). In all, there are seven points possible, and all the influencers either touched on all of them or none of them. In today’s attention economy, leadership remains a much-desired skill set, especially among mid-aged and older people, who know they have something to offer but lack the skills to present and act on it.



**Figure 7 Heifetz et al. (2009). Effective Interventions for Social Influencing**

Legend		Weber's (1947) Charismatic Rule													
1 = YES		Aristotle's Rhetoric Principles								BRAIN TRUST	RESILIENCY	SOCIAL CAPITAL		EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS	
0 = NO		ETHOS - Credibility of the Speaker			LOGOS PATHOS METAPHOR BREVITY				Mentor or Brain Trust	Did Not Quit Mental Resiliency	Linking Bonding Equals Trust	Bridging Reaching Out To Other Groups	HEIFETZ et al		
Participant		Goodwill	Goodwill	Skills-Wisdom	Emotions		The Ending is the Ending	Urgency Role Framing Plan Work Groups/Leaders Progress					Big Picture		
		1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	1 Point	7 Points		
		GOODWILL	HONESTY	EXPERIENCE	LOGOS	PATHOS	METAPHOR	BREVITY	MENTOR	RESILIENCY	SOCIAL CAPITAL	BRIDGING	Leadership	Success Rating	
NICHE	Number	Followers													
Sustainable Living	24	3,000	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	5	
Sustainable Living	3	2,200	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	13	
Sustainable Living	25	4,300	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	18	
Sustainable Living	10	1,300	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	10	
Sustainable Living	21	1,100	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	18	
<b>Total Followers</b>		<b>11,900</b>												<b>68</b>	
Mental Wellness	23	3,100	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	8	
Mental Wellness	2	2,900	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	7	
Mental Wellness	16	2,300	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	5	
Mental Wellness	6	2,000	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	
Mental Wellness	9	1,900	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	17	
<b>Total Followers</b>		<b>12,200</b>												<b>42</b>	
Gaming	18	5,100	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	7	13	
Gaming	1	3,000	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	5	
Gaming	19	2,200	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	
Gaming	14	1,800	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	4	
Gaming	17	1,000	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	7	15	
<b>Total Followers</b>		<b>13,100</b>												<b>41</b>	
Religious Messaging	20	5,400	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	5	
Religious Messaging	4	3,000	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	7	17	
Religious Messaging	7	2,400	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	7	17	
Religious Messaging	13	2,100	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	5	
Religious Messaging	15	1,000	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	7	16	
<b>Total Followers</b>		<b>13,900</b>												<b>60</b>	
Business Coaching	11	6,900	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	17	
Business Coaching	12	6,700	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	18	
Business Coaching	5	5,900	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	17	
Business Coaching	22	5,100	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	7	17	
Business Coaching	8	2,400	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7	17	
<b>Total Followers</b>		<b>27,000</b>												<b>86</b>	
<b>Number of Influencers</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>98</b>		
<b>Percentage of Compliance</b>		<b>84%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>56%</b>		

**Table 3 Graphic Representation of the Social Influencer Success Score**

**The Participants and the 24 Factors of Social Influencing**

The influencers in the business coaching niche all scored at least 17 out of 24 factors in practice, with 22,300 followers, clearly outperforming the other groups. The business coaches followed the majority of the research from the literature review. The business coaches also had higher levels of mentorship, mental resilience, and social capital, which led to a larger follower

base. The presence of all of these attributes helped the business coaches achieve higher scores. Logic would dictate that these areas are critical to becoming a successful influencer.

In order to receive a 1 for Yes, the participant had to thematically mention the topic in the column, for example, that they like helping people, which would be scored as a 1 in the Goodwill toward Audience column of Aristotle's Rhetoric Principles. With no mention of Goodwill toward the Audience, receiving a 0. Although the research study was qualitative, the influencer success model is best represented graphically. Although the influencer's posted content was not analyzed, the participants' comments were analyzed using the brevity component of Aristotle's rhetorical principles to determine whether they created a script or used bullet points. A success rating was introduced to compare the participants' scores with the literature review.

### *Evaluation of the Findings*

This study aimed to identify the key factors driving mindset shifts that lead to successful outcomes for social media influencers. Understanding these factors can reveal how influencers develop strategies, adapt to changing digital environments, and keep their audiences engaged—this research on nano-influencers sought to capture their journey to success. Hyland's (1988) motivational control theory explains this process by positing that everyone seeks success, but achieves it differently because of their varying ideas about how to reach it.

This research study explored the origins of Hovland and Weiss's (1951) theory of source credibility. It started with Aristotle's rhetoric, then analyzed Hitler and Goebbels' persuasion and propaganda during World War II, followed by NASA's moon missions, and finished with current research on charisma, emotions, and the human mind. Max Weber's (1947) idea of charismatic leadership serves as the basis for this study, since charisma is powerful and can be artificially created, as in Hitler's case. As an artificially created charismatic leader, Hitler lacked

goodwill toward others, leading to disastrous consequences for the world. Although charisma was not directly examined here, it likely appeared in the content produced by more successful Facebook social influencers.

By applying Aristotle's rhetoric and current research on how the brain processes information, a social influencer can grow their digital tribe. While most influencers rely on expertise, reputation, and popularity (Ladhari et al., 2020), this approach can be recreated using Aristotle's formula combined with modern research on mentorship, mental resilience, and social capital. Although Aristotle's rhetoric was not directly applied to posted content, logic suggests it would also be effective, especially considering Munsterberg's (1916) attention scarcity, Simon's (1971) attention economy, and recent studies on how emotions can hijack brain processes (Meersman et al., 2022). For social influencers, metaphors are a simple yet powerful tool for engaging their digital tribe and moving them to action.

Leadership is essential for a social influencer's success in recruiting and developing their digital tribe. Weber's (1947) charismatic leadership describes leaders who are in the public eye and build their own followers, which is exactly what a social influencer aims to do behind a keyboard and/or camera. Leadership involves looking beyond the present (Drucker, 2025) and into the future. Reflecting on two statements by Drucker (2002), the first is that the purpose of a business is not profit but customer creation, aligning with Simon's (1971) attention economy and Giraldo-Luque et al. (2020) collection of digital data. The second Drucker statement is that leadership is a form of strategic marketing (Drucker, 2002) that provides direction and purpose for influencers to follow. Leadership in the social-influencing realm can consist of Heifetz et al.'s (2009) seven factors of effective social influence interventions, when used correctly, better position an influencer to lead their digital tribe.

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Title of Theory and Relevant Works</b>
1	Simon's Attention Economy (1971)
2	Weber's Charismatic Rule (1947)
3	Hijacking the amygdala through metaphor (Talamas et al., 2016)
4	Invest Time and See the Big Picture (Heifetz et al., 2009)
5	Determine the Urgency of the Issue (Heifetz et al., 2009)
6	Determine Your Role in the Big Picture (Heifetz et al., 2009)
7	Develop Your Framing of the Issue (Heifetz et al., 2009)
8	Develop Your Plan and Work the Plan (Heifetz et al., 2009)
9	Identify Splinter Groups and their Opinion Leaders (Heifetz et al., 2009)
10	Focus the Group on Progress as Promised (Heifetz et al., 2009)
11	Aristotle's Principles (Rapp, 2023)
12	Source Credibility, later the Yale Attitude Change Model (Lasswell, 1948; Hovland et al., 1953)
13	Six Bases of Power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1962; Raven, 1992)
14	The Theme of the Message or Thematics (Larson, 2012)
15	Concrete Words Experienced Through a Person's Five Senses (Larson, 2012)
16	Munsterberg's Human Attention as a Human Function (1916)
17	Social Capital (Hanifan, 1916; Bourdieu, 1985)
18	Rebroadcasting Throughout the Global or Digital Village or Through Weak Ties (McLuhan & Powers, 1964; Granovetter, 1973)
19	Mental Resiliency (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018)
20	Mentorship & Brain Trust (Eby et al., 2009)
21	Using Emotions (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Damasio, 1994). Not studied, but its presence is noted in the Literature Review
22	Bilateral Activation, both sides of the brain (Feng et al., 2023; Amano & Toichi, 2016). Not studied, but its presence is noted in the Literature Review
23	Target Audience Alignment (Farrokhi et al., 2024)
24	Focus on Content (Tassi, 2018)

**Table 4 List of the 24 Factors Identified in this Research Study**

Something the participants understated was their leadership within their digital tribe, which should have been top of mind for all of them. Helping others is the guiding north star for nearly all participants, as good influencers understand their followers' lives and motivations as thought leaders for their digital tribe. It is essential that they, as leaders in their respective self-help industries, seek out success opportunities for their followers, at least in their digital realm. Being proactive is the hallmark of a good leader, especially in a dynamic

24/7/365 digital environment, where domestic and international events can shape the average person's life in ways that can not be imagined.

The roadmap to success (see Figure 8) for social influencers is based on the literature review and is broken down into 24 factors, as the participants mentioned. Influencers who used the majority of these 24 factors had larger digital tribes than those who did not. While using the 24 factors does not guarantee success, there is strong evidence that successful influencers naturally gravitate toward them because they have seen success with their use. While credibility is the single most important factor in dealing with people, mental resiliency is the single most important inner trait a social influencer can possess, as it drives them to success. The roadmap to success (see Figure 8) concept makes it easier for social influencers to achieve success and build their digital tribe.

It was interesting to note the many factors participants used, but no one understood why they worked or where they came from. Most participants lacked the time, energy, or expertise to conduct in-depth research into digital marketing approaches, leading to a follow-the-leader mentality. This mimicry of larger influencers, while it may add followers in the short term, did not really help the participants in the long term, as everybody's business model is different. This is where having a mentor or brain trust is vital to business success.

Some of the 24 factors have a greater impact on social influencing, such as credibility, goodwill, mental resiliency, and mentorship, and brain trusts seem to be the most important factors in forecasting success. Temporary shortcuts can yield momentary gains, such as bilateral activation through metaphor use (Talamas et al., 2016), within the digital tribe. But in the end, credibility, goodwill, mental resiliency, mentorship, or a solid brain trust will have the most impact on expanding a social influencer's digital tribe.

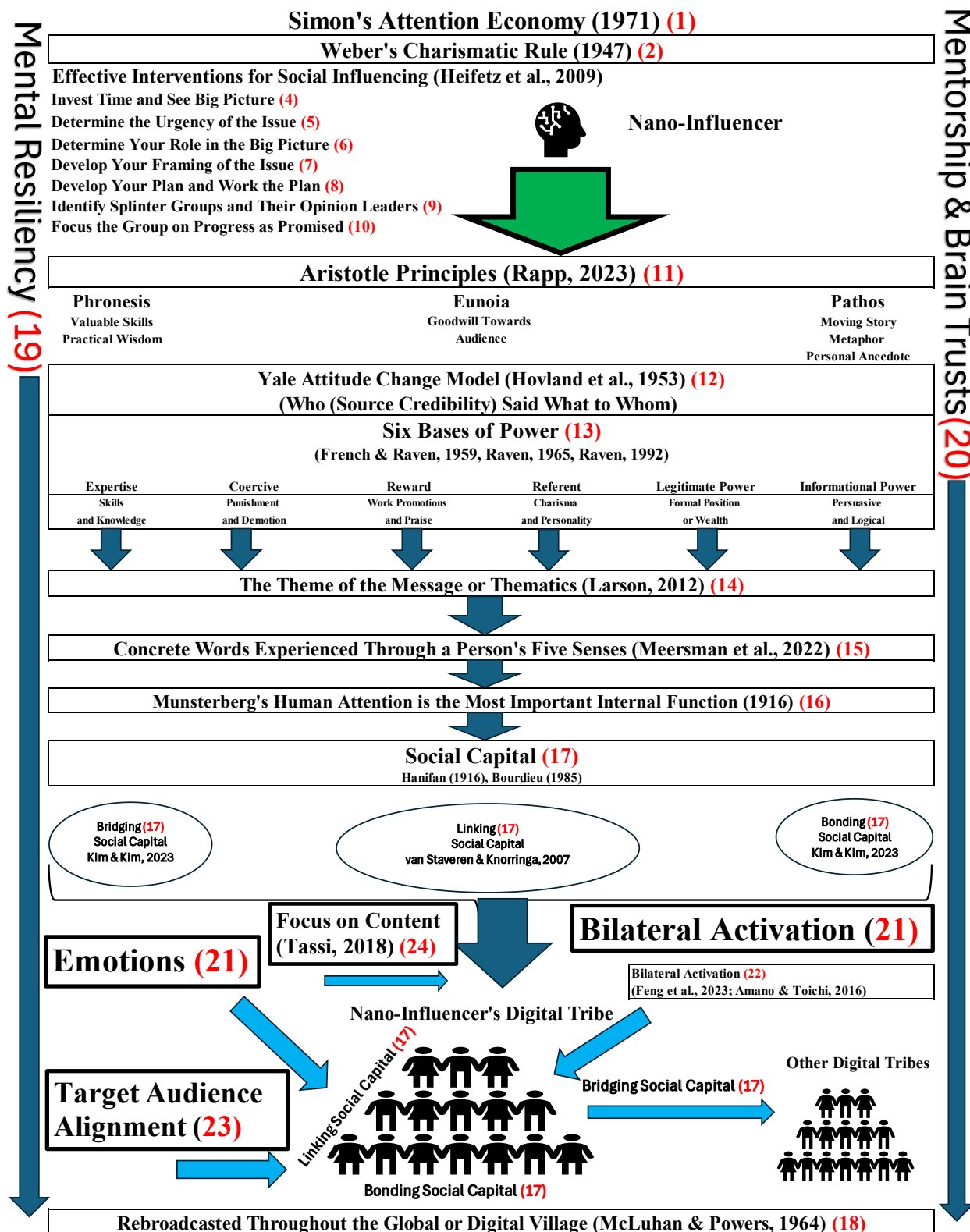


Figure 8 The Road Map for Successful Social Influencers

## Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

**RQ1:** What are the building blocks for a credible social influencer?

1. Aristotle's principles of rhetoric (Rapp, 2023) are evident in the comments on credibility, goodwill, brevity, character, skill, and discourse.
2. Weber's (1947) charismatic rule was observed as the participants told stories of how they gained market share by building influence in their digital tribe. The charismatic concepts of being in touch with their members and helping them solve problems support Zhang et al.'s (2024) research on social media influencers as charismatic leaders.
3. Hanifan's (1916) and Bourdieu's (1985) social capital is the glue that binds or bonds digital tribe members together, linking social capital, which strengthens ties between thought leaders, and bridging social capital, which expands rebroadcasting between tribes. Coleman's (1988) research indicates that social capital is a resource used by both the influencer and their followers in many forms.

**RQ2:** What mindset shift led to improving the content quality?

1. Failure was the main driver of the participant's mindset shifts. Duffy et al. (2021) introduced this concept as precarity or insecurity among digital creators. Fear of failure and all that it entails is a powerful driving force and can serve as a bonding and linking experience for the small digital tribe (Sztompka, 2016) where there is less social distance between members.
2. Mental resiliency was also apparent as participants related stories of how they found a way to move forward after failure, which was in line with Dweck's

(1986; 2000) implicit theory of intelligence and Padir and Vangolu's (2023) research on self-limiting mindset.

3. The next mindset shift involved the influencer's response to the ever-changing needs (Dainty, 2025) and desires of their digital tribe, as change is constant, increasing in speed due to technology, and is perpetual (Chima & Gutman, 2020).

**RQ3:** What would the social media influencer do differently if they had to start over?

1. Tassi's (2018) focus on content to turn digital activities into monetized success was prevalent in the comments of the participants; they knew the quickest path to monetization.
2. Personal engagement or the perception of personal engagement is very important to both the tribe and the influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).
3. Redeveloping expertise, reputation, and popularity, which is in line with Ladhari et al. (2020). Also, trustworthiness and appeal activate hedonic attitudes, which in turn boost the intention to buy (Park & Lin, 2020).

**RQ4:** What are the biggest pitfalls of target audience alignment within digital tribes?

1. Zimbardo's (2005, 2008, 2020) research on persuasion touched on charismatic rule with examples of Jim Jones' People's Temple and Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.
2. Most of the target audience has evolved (Farrokhi et al., 2024) through people similar to the influencer, through self-identity, motivations, emotions, priorities, and consumption behaviour (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2019).

3. Nash's (1950) game theory of equilibrium was also evident as influencers sought to maximize their target market or their outcome of the game.

**RQ5:** What is the social media influencer's most successful cash revenue funnel?

1. None of the participants mentioned top-of-the-funnel (TOFU) ratios, which was surprising, or sales or sales conversions (McDowell et al., 2016).
2. Revenue generation through influencer marketing (Beicher et al., 2024) mainly looked at what influencers could do for the businesses, not the financial gains of the social influencer.
3. Goodwill needs to be addressed as it is an intangible asset (Fisher, 1906; Canning, 1929) and plays a role both monetarily and psychologically in the digital realm of influencing.

## Summary

This chapter analyzed the research study's results to identify the main drivers of mindset shifts that lead to successful outcomes for social influencers. Participants' responses were kept brief and meaningful to aid thematic categorization, limiting the full use of NVivo. If the participants' answers had been longer—for example, as in a standard interview or video—then analyzing the data with NVivo would have been possible; however, the research design did not support this, and NVivo could not be used effectively.

Aristotle was right. When a social influencer follows Aristotle's Rhetoric Principles, they typically perform better than their peers, as shown in the study. Adding mentorship, mental resilience, social capital, and Granööveter's (1973) weak ties, or bridging social capital used between groups, clearly enhanced their performance. This research shows that a path forward was discovered in Aristotle's writings about 2,305 years before the internet was even created. It

was then further refined through modern science and peer-reviewed studies on how the human mind processes metaphors, balanced against Munsterberg's (1916) scarcity of human attention and Simon's (1971) attention economy.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary**

The problem to be addressed in this study is the need to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers. The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to determine whether a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, addressing issues related to credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment.

The methodology was a non-experimental qualitative research design. It is preferred for this research problem because it involves gathering and analyzing people's opinions, experiences, and recommendations while exploring their understandings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The gap between human failure and success can only be bridged by asking deep, meaningful questions, as generated by non-experimental qualitative research. The non-experimental qualitative design also aided in analyzing the participants' backstories, as several supporting questions referenced events before and after in their journey toward success.

The research design involved recruiting participants aged 21 or older who were active influencers with 1,000-10,000 Facebook followers. The top five influencer niches from Influencer Marketing Hub (Molenaar, 2025) were selected for the study. The niches studied were sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, and religious messaging, with five influencers from each niche participating in the study. A total of 25 nano influencers volunteered for the research study. After the interviews, their responses were sorted into thematic categories for further analysis. The thematic categories identified twenty-four factors that influence a social influencer's success.

## **Discussion**

The end goal of this research was to determine whether a template could be built for new and failed influencers, as well as for businesses seeking to enter social influencing to expand their digital footprint. Much was discussed about Simon's (1971) attention economy and, in some forms, Munsterberg's (1916) view of human attention as the scarcest commodity. Weber's (1947) view of charismatic power and French and Raven's (1959) six bases of power (Raven, 1992) also played substantial roles in determining the success of a social influencer. Aristotle's (Rapp, 2023) use of metaphors and Talamas et al.'s (2016) subsequent research on amygdala activation during metaphor use further reinforced the power of metaphors.

### ***Major Findings***

Twenty-four factors were identified after the thematic categories were built (see Table 12), supported by the literature review, indicating growth in the digital tribe's size. While some of these factors, for example, Aristotle's principles of rhetoric, have been around for thousands of years, others have only been around for a few years. The more an influencer adheres to these twenty-four factors, the greater the likelihood of their success. The significant findings from the five research questions, along with their 50 supporting questions, enabled the development of a roadmap to success. The study was built on 24 interrelated factors that emerged from a comprehensive literature review spanning thousands of years and over 255 studies and books. When reverse-engineered into a graphical representation (see Table 13), the study's findings reveal a pathway to success for social influencers, as measured by the success score. The higher the score, the more likely the influencer has a larger digital tribe, unadjusted for the time a social influencer has been influencing. The business coaches scored highest across all

niches and had the largest market share among influencers studied, averaging 17-18 of the possible 24 success points.

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Title of Theory and Relevant Works</b>
1	Simon's Attention Economy (1971)
2	Weber's Charismatic Rule (1947)
3	Hijacking the amygdala through metaphor (Talamas et al., 2016)
4	Invest Time and See the Big Picture
5	Determine the Urgency of the Issue
6	Determine Your Role in the Big Picture
7	Develop Your Framing of the Issue
8	Develop Your Plan and Work the Plan
9	Identify Splinter Groups and their Opinion Leaders
10	Focus the Group on Progress as Promised
11	Aristotle's Principles (Rapp, 2023)
12	Source Credibility, later the Yale Attitude Change Model (Lasswell, 1948; Hovland et al., 1953)
13	Six Bases of Power (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1962; Raven, 1992)
14	The Theme of the Message or Thematics (Larson, 2012)
15	Concrete Words Experienced Through a Person's Five Senses (Larson, 2012)
16	Munsterberg's Human Attention as a Human Function (1916)
17	Social Capital (Hanifan, 1916; Bourdieu, 1985)
18	Rebroadcasting Throughout the Global or Digital Village or Through Weak Ties (McLuhan & Powers, 1964; Granovetter, 1973)
19	Mental Resiliency (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018)
20	Mentorship & Brain Trust (Eby et al., 2009)
21	Using Emotions (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Damasio, 1994). Not studied, but its presence is noted in the Literature Review
22	Bilateral Activation, both sides of the brain (Feng et al., 2023; Amano & Toichi, 2016). Not studied, but its presence is noted in the Literature Review
23	Target Audience Alignment (Farrokhi et al., 2024)
24	Focus on Content (Tassi, 2018)

**Table 5 List of the 24 Factors Identified in this Research Study**

The major findings of this research study are that commonalities exist among successful nano-influencers and that a mindset shift is key to the influencer's success. The significant points of commonality are outlined in the research questions, which were based on what the

average nano-influencer would have experienced on their journey to success. While 50 questions were asked, the significant findings are as follows:

A quick overview begins with Simon's (1971) attention economy through French and Raven's (1959) six bases of power to Tassi's (2018) focus on content. The influencer's expertise, charisma, and personality are reflected in their legitimate and charismatic (Weber, 1947) rule within their digital tribe—whether from a formal position or their actual or perceived position of wealth—to their informational power in persuasion and logic. A savvy influencer can even exercise coercive power through punishment and demotion, as well as reward power — like promotion and praise — to keep their digital tribe engaged. Using concrete words helps keep both sides of the brain engaged (Meersman et al., 2022). This aligns with Weber's (1947) charismatic power, Aristotle's principles of rhetoric, and Hovland's (1963) source credibility theory.

### ***Influencing Factors***

The limitations of this research study were its narrow focus on nano-influencers rather than other-sized influencer groups. In comparison, this was a small study with only 25 participants, among the millions of active influencers worldwide. The time spent with each participant averaged about 35 minutes per interview. While research bias can occur in any research effort, it is particularly concerning in qualitative studies, where the researcher is involved in both collecting and analyzing interview data, thereby inadvertently introducing bias. Participant bias can also occur, as no one wants to appear unfavorable during an interview with a stranger; this is why building rapport with the participant is so crucial. Additionally, the Hawthorne effect may come into play when the participant suddenly realizes they are being observed; again, establishing rapport can help mitigate this effect by putting the participant at

ease, but it will still be present. Another unexpected bias emerged during the volunteering process: non-helpful influencers did not volunteer, while helpful influencers were glad to donate their time and share their experiences.

### ***Results of the Study***

This research study began from the need to identify and examine the mindset shifts and their drivers of successful nano-influencers. The benefits from this research study are threefold: to help businesses better understand and utilize social influencers, to assist new social influencers in preparing for the challenges of growing their digital tribes, and to help struggling social influencers identify what went wrong and guide them toward profitability. Twenty-four drivers of success were identified and examined in relation to the social influencer's solutions, and a roadmap for success was developed.

Another way to think of these principles (see Table 6) is to consider the digital world we live in now, which is ruled by Simon's (1971) attention economy and governed by Munsterberg's (1916) scarcity of human attention. Max Weber's (1947) concept of charismatic rule explains how social influencers become thought leaders who govern their digital tribes, using French and Raven's (1959) six bases of power. Hovland et al. (1953) describe source credibility as how an influencer builds their digital tribe and becomes a leader. Social capital acts as the glue that binds, strengthens, and expands a digital tribe through bridging, linking, and bonding (Hanifan, 1916; Bourdieu, 1985). While target audience alignment is crucial for success (Farrokhi et al., 2024), very few influencers start with the audience they currently have.

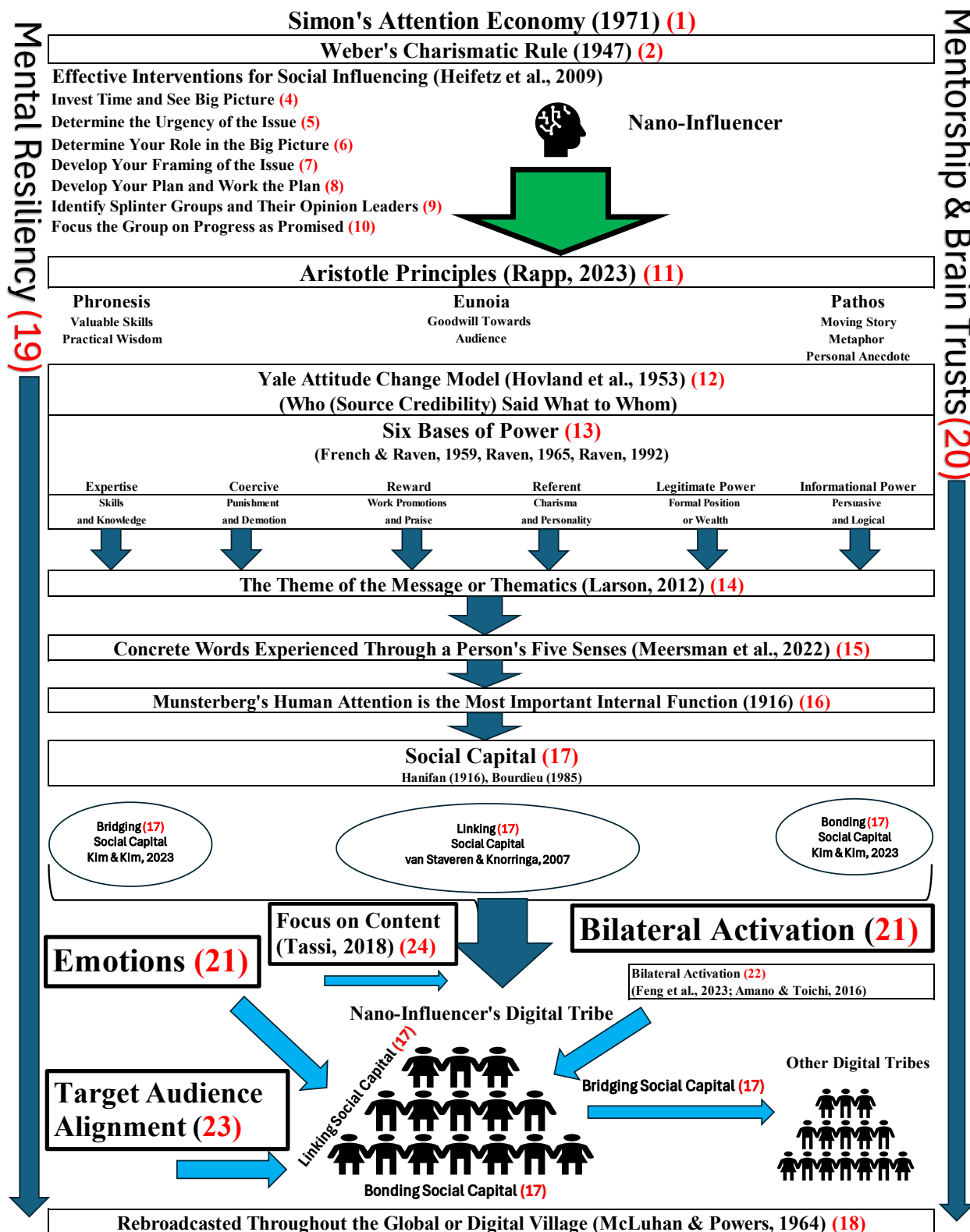


Figure 9 The Road Map for Successful Social Influencers

### *Comparing Existing Research and Theory with the Study's Results*

The existing research, both new and ancient, as evidenced by Aristotle's teachings, is very accurate, and the academic world has gained considerable knowledge in the fields of persuasion, propaganda, and social media influencing over the last several thousand years. While some theories have been put together, for example, Goldhaber (1997) suggests linking Simon's attention economy to the digital world with social media influencers (Kubler, 2023). It is this researcher's opinion that, after Goldhaber's research, Zimbardo and McLuhan came closest to recognizing that many of these theories are related, as they build on one another.

Mentorships and brain trusts are vital to achieving successful outcomes for nano-influencers (Eby et al., 2009). Influencer. Mentorship and brain trusts bring experience to the table or serve as Nash's (1959) agent of change. Mental resiliency is the fuel that powers the nano-influencer engine toward success, while a growth mindset (Ng, 2018) is the spark that ignites it. Mental resiliency without a growth mindset is just a person who likes taking beatings; the growth mindset helps people learn from their mistakes, adapt, and prosper.

Research question 1 was designed to determine whether Aristotle's principles of rhetoric (Rapp, 2023) remain applicable to digital crowds two thousand years later. The study demonstrated that Aristotle's goodwill, honesty, experience, credibility, a moving story, the use of metaphors, and brevity still work. 68% of participants were motivated to help others, indicating substantial goodwill toward others in action, which is compelling in some people (Damasio, 1994). Another 68% wanted to build a reputation for honesty with their digital tribe, a core Aristotle principle.

Research question 2 sought to explore the mindset shifts that social influencers make as they work to define their own version of success (Hyland, 1988). The goal of social

influencers is to boost top-of-mind awareness (TOMA), and that requires mental resilience, as TOMA with a digital tribe does not happen overnight. 100% of the participants experienced failure in some form, and their mental resilience carried them through the rough times (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018). 76% changed their perspective, and/or brought in outside help or mentorship. Eby et al. (2009) showed that having a mentor is associated with positive outcomes. Going back to Nash's (1950) game theory, a change agent would logically be a more experienced player or mentor/brain trust who can help the influencer find a path to success.

Research question 3 was designed to help identify shortcuts influencers took and rough patches they tried to avoid. 80% said they would focus only on their niche. Three of the twenty-five influencers lost their original following due to bad actors, which is very scary for any influencer, as even with their best efforts, followers can disappear overnight. The surprising finding in research question 3 was that none of the participants mentioned sales funnels or top-of-the-funnel (TOFU) ratios, which leads one to wonder how much revenue is generated from each member of an influencer's digital tribe, if any.

Research question 4 was designed to prompt participants to reflect on their daily struggles as influencers. 44% complained about the time and effort it took to maintain their status as influencers, while 24% hated dealing with criticism and trolls. Several voiced complaints about Facebook's ever-changing algorithms, which push their content further down their tribe's walls. While several participants had workable two- and four-year business plans, most had not given them much thought. 32% saw being a social influencer as a positive experience, while 24% regretted delaying their entry into digital influencing, highlighting the Hedonic treadmill (Ngulwiyah et al., 2023) of people doing things they enjoy. Keeping

content fresh is a constant challenge, according to 44%, with 32% saying they keep up with current events and then quickly post their spin, which is an excellent example from the production side of Tassi's (2018) contact with content.

Research question 5 was designed to examine the participants from a strategic marketing and operational standpoint. Topics included revenue funnels and strategies to increase revenue. 40% of participants generated most of their revenue from the seminar circuit, while 36% worked with clients. In research question 1. a, 56% of the participants originally became influencers to grow their existing businesses; however, the participants were unable to articulate any sales funnel information. When asked what would help the participants make more money, 52% said more exposure and 12% said more engagement.

Several factors could be at play, beginning with the fact that all five niches are focused on helping members of their digital tribes, so influencers enjoy helping others. Most people only want to be seen in a favorable light, so they tend not to admit to the bad things or mistakes they have made. The Hawthorne effect may be at play, as participants know the researcher is observing them and is taking notes on what they say. Recall bias may have occurred because participants were overly focused on the supporting questions. Finally, as in any interview, reporting bias could have occurred, in which the participant chose to reveal or conceal certain information.

### ***Significant Implications and Consequences of the Dissertation***

The problem to be addressed in this study is the need to understand the key drivers of mindset shifts that contribute to successful outcomes for social media influencers. The ten major mindset shifts were:

1. Aristotle's Principles of Rhetoric apply in the digital realm

2. Recognizing failure in their own actions
3. Realizing that mentorship or a brain trust was needed
4. Influencing means leading
5. Understanding that influencing takes time and energy
6. The influencer needs to stay up on current events
7. Messaging needs to be concise
8. Social capital equals trust within the tribe
9. Credibility is key to success
10. Once the target audience is discovered, it can be grown

The purpose of this non-experimental qualitative study is to determine whether a formula for success can be identified by examining the drivers of social influencers as they establish and grow their digital tribes, addressing issues related to credibility, content quality, and target audience alignment. The research study enabled a roadmap to be built, see Table 13. Using the roadmap, the strengths and weaknesses of new, current, and failed influencers can be analyzed to help build action plans that help the influencer succeed.

The consequences for this dissertation are that, with this line of research, which leans heavily on persuasion and propaganda, knowledge can lead to destruction and ruin. History is full of people like Hitler and Jim Jones, who used manufactured public sentiment for their own means, and the world will continue to produce Hitlers and Jim Jones. Zimbardo and McLuhan both ended their careers delving into how people are motivated and led. Stropka's last published work was on trust in 1999. As a culture, we are already seeing flash mobs, paid agitators, and people so emotionally triggered that they cannot be reasoned with.

### ***Previous Research and Practice***

Previous practice consisted of various practitioners instructing people to support the digital metrics without being able to explain to social influencers what they were doing wrong in growing their digital tribe. This was the research gap worthy of academic study. In alignment with current research, the main drivers of success for a social influencer remain credibility, content quality, and alignment with the target audience (Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ye et al., 2021). However, these are just a few factors that influence social influencers' success. This research identified 24 factors present in successful nano-influencers. Additionally, by visually representing all the factors involved (see Table 13), a success score can be calculated to measure the success of social influencers. While an influencer can have a low success score and still be successful, and someone with a high score can still be unsuccessful, overall, the business coaches—who all demonstrated leadership—performed better collectively. Business coaches generally had higher follower counts, and all five scored at least 17 points, with one coach scoring 18 points with 6,700 followers.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

After interviewing participant 5, this researcher asked this top-of-his-profession participant, who was new to influencing, what the most important thing to remember was. He said, “Do it from a place of love and make it entertaining.” This sums up Aristotle’s rhetoric quite well, as goodwill towards the audience and a moving story are designed to entertain. The success of nano-influencers with their digital tribes and the organizations that hire them lies in their ability to be helpful. Something for organizations to consider: sometimes it takes helpful people to share information about an organization’s products and services—think of this as

expert coaching from a customer's trusted friend, with source credibility as the key to success (Hovland et al., 1953).

In the research study, Weber's (1947) charismatic rule was evident: none of the participants held traditional or legal power, yet all built charismatic followings. So new or struggling influencers should seek to help others first through French and Raven's (1959) bases of power: expertise (skills and knowledge), referent (charisma and personality), and informational (persuasive and logical). All content should be appropriately themed and framed (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) to reach the target audience, whether it is a moving story, a metaphor, or a personal anecdote (Rapp, 2023). Concrete words to engage the audience's five senses should be used to hijack the viewer's precious attention (Munsterberg, 1916; Meersman et al., 2022). Above all, we live in a virtual world in Simon's attention economy, just keeping people's eyes on posted content has extreme value in the digital economy, because in the attention economy, the only real currency is the ability to hold people's attention.

Mentorship and brain trusts can not be understated (Eby et al., 2009). Time and money rule the business world, so to save both, mentors and brain trusts are needed. If an influencer wants to be successful, they have to have one or the other, but both are preferred. While an influencer mentors their digital tribe, they should also work with lesser influencers, as this act of kindness pays enormous dividends in social capital (Thomas et al., 2023). Also, by working with smaller-level influencers, more digital tribes are opened up to the mentor-influencer, creating a win-win situation for the mentor and the smaller-level influencer.

Hanifan's (1916) and Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social capital, coupled with Granovetter's (1973) weak ties between groups, explain why it is so important for influencers to invest time in building bonding and linking social capital within their digital tribe. Then, to

further expand their digital presence, the influencer must also invest time in connecting with other groups and building bridging social capital. The key to remember about social capital is that social capital equals trust, and trust is essential to an influencer.

In all, 24 factors were identified as impacting a social media influencer's success with their digital tribe. Beginning with Simon's (1971) attention economy, down to Hanifan's (1916) and Bourdieu's (1986) social capital, which includes bridging social capital as a growth tool for social influencers. Finally, bounded by the glue of mental resilience and guided by mentorship and possibly a brain trust (Luthans et al., 2006; Ng, 2018), a social influencer can survive and learn to thrive in the digital landscape.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

These twenty-five participants represent only a small fraction of the millions of people working to become social influencers, so the results may be skewed in unexpected ways, as can happen with small samples. Building on this research, other niches and digital ecosystems can be studied, since not all niches are the same. Additionally, a large-scale study involving several hundred nano-influencers could help understand influencer success. An in-depth look at the range of emotions nano-influencers experience as they build their digital tribes would also benefit nano-influencer research. The time and effort it took to gain 1,000 followers would also be interesting to study, as much could be learned from nano-influencers' efforts. Similarly, scaled studies of the success factors for micro and mega influencers would be valuable, as larger social influencers might share standard drivers.

Social influencers should be studied in terms of business fundamentals, such as risk management practices and advertising strategies. Both short- and long-term strategic marketing approaches also warrant examination. Developing an effective conversion rate model to turn a

digital tribe into a buying tribe is essential, as it would advance the marketing field and better support the digital economy. Content posted by nano-influencers also needs analysis, since understanding how social influencers interact with their digital tribes is a valuable topic. Additionally, studying what micro- and mega-influencers broadcast to their audiences would be worth academic inquiry. Exploring the impact of mentorship and brain trusts on micro- and mega-influencers could reveal a link between mentorship, collaboration groups, and influencer success. Finally, an interesting study would examine how the digital tribe views a social influencer's leadership, thereby making a significant contribution to the field.

### **Study Summary**

This study focused on understanding the key factors that drive mindset change and lead to successful outcomes for social media influencers. Its purpose was to identify whether a successful formula and pathway could be determined through a non-experimental qualitative approach. The study also explored the drivers behind how social influencers build and expand their digital communities, addressing credibility, content quality, and target-audience alignment. Conducting a non-experimental qualitative study provided valuable insights into how influencers develop strategies, adapt to changing digital environments, and keep their audience engaged.

Any scientific research can be used for good or evil; it depends on the intent of its users. The same concepts that helped Hitler and Jim Jones rise to power are also the same concepts that enabled man to go to the moon. In the end, the goal of scientific research should be to improve life, not to seek its destruction. The concepts identified in this research can both help and hurt mankind, a thought that was always foremost in the researcher's mind. Metaphorically, medicine can save lives, but too much medicine can end them.

### *The Take-Home Message*

The take-home message of this study is straightforward: anyone can become a social influencer. For those who are new or struggling to find their way, this study highlights 24 factors that can assist them on their journey. As more organizations adopt or become social influencers themselves, competition will increase in the marketplace, paving the way for more AI-generated social influencers created by teams of design and production experts. Throughout all of this, strategic marketing must be considered because, without a solid marketing plan, the influencer is just wandering aimlessly, unsure of where to go or how to get there. Strategic marketing provides purpose to direction—helping build a roadmap for the social influencer to follow.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### *Research Questions and Corresponding Supporting Interview Questions:*

**RQ1:** What drives social media influencers to put digital content on the World Wide Web?

1. SIQ: How did you get started being a social influencer?
2. SIQ: Did you have prior experience in the field that you are working in now?
3. SIQ: What was your inner motivation starting out?
4. SIQ: What is your inner motivation now?
5. SIQ: What was it like in the beginning for you as you began posting?
6. SIQ: How did you build credibility with your digital tribe?

**RQ2:** What mindset shift made the social media influencer successful within their digital tribe?

1. SIQ: Did you experience failure as a social influencer? If the answer is NO...Then continue to RQ2.C.
2. SIQ: After you failed or had a setback and were struggling, what did you do differently?
3. SIQ: Did you pick a particular target audience, or did it come naturally to you?
4. SIQ: Are you familiar with the term social capital, and if so, can you describe how it works for you?
5. SIQ: Do you intentionally reach out to similar groups with similar interests?
6. SIQ: Do you have a group of highly trusted people you keep in contact with?
7. SIQ: Do you use a script or talking points to keep your videos on track?

8. SIQ: Were there any particular thoughts or themes running through your mind as you were working to rebound?

9. SQI: Enes et al. (2022) Modified Social Media Relationship Scale questions.

Item	Likert Scale
My experiences with this social media meet my expectations of use in general.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I identify with this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media has a positive image for me.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media gives me a sense of belonging.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I say good things about this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I intend to continue being a user of this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I intend to continue being a user of this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I intend to use this social media more often.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I trust this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media allows reporting inappropriate and offensive content.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media has a variety of content.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I like the layout of this social media.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
In this social media, I can configure the visibility of my actions to guarantee my privacy.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
This social media makes me feel closer to people who matter to me.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I use this social media to communicate with people from work.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
I use this social media to communicate with friends and family.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

**RQ3:** What would the social media influencer do differently if they had to start over?

1. SIQ: If you had to start over tomorrow with zero followers and no revenue stream, how would you do it?
2. SIQ: In a perfect world, how big would your digital tribe be?
3. SIQ: What is your ideal size for a digital tribe?
4. SIQ: Do you have a team or staff to help you?
5. SIQ: How do you prepare content?
6. SIQ: At what point did you realize that you needed help?
7. SIQ: Did you take or recommend any special training or schooling?
8. SIQ: If you are a one-person operation, what position would you pay people to work in? If you are part of a team, what is the most important position to grow your digital tribe in the beginning?
9. SIQ: What would you do or not do while starting over?
10. SIQ: What helped you the most when starting?
11. SIQ: What hurt you the most when starting?
12. SIQ: What should you avoid when starting up?

**RQ4:** What are the biggest pitfalls to becoming a social media influencer?

1. SIQ: What do you hate about being a social influencer?
2. SIQ: Where do you see yourself in two years? Four years?
3. SIQ: Knowing what you know now, do you have any regrets?
4. SIQ: How do you keep your content fresh?

**RQ5:** What is the social media influencer's most successful cash revenue funnel?

1. SIQ: What is your most successful revenue stream?

2. SIQ: What is your second most successful revenue stream?
3. SIQ: As a social influencer, what would help you make more money?

**Did they mention:**

Investing time and see the big picture?

Determining the urgency of the issue?

Determining your role in the big picture?

Developing your framing of the issue?

Developing your plan and working the plan?

Identifying splinter groups and their opinion leaders?

Focusing the group on progress as promised?

## Appendix B: Recruiting Materials

### Recruitment Email/Letter

My name is Danny Snow, and I am a doctoral candidate at National University. I am conducting a research study to determine what factors contribute to the success of social influencers.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. Be an active nano-influencer with between 1,000 and 10,000 followers.
2. Over 21 years old.
3. Using Facebook as a platform.
4. Operate within one of the following five growing social media niches: sustainable living, mental wellness, gaming, business coaching, or religious messaging.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activity:

- Participate in a 1:1 online interview over Zoom for 45-60 minutes.

During the interview, you will be asked questions about:

- What drove you to become a social influencer?
- What mindset shift made you successful, or were you always successful?
- What would you do if you had to start over?
- What are the biggest pitfalls to becoming a social media influencer?
- What is your most successful cash revenue funnel?

Participants in this study will receive a wave therapy focusing MP3 called Swirling Coffee for Your Brain with Extra Focus via email after the interview.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at [dannysnowcht@gmail.com](mailto:dannysnowcht@gmail.com) or text or call me at 918-857-2459.

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Danny L. Snow

Doctoral Candidate