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How Influencers Construct Entrepreneurial Identity: A Qualitative Study of the Transition from Influencer to Entrepreneur

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Abstract

Social media has transformed influencers from content creators into entrepreneurs who build brands, monetize audiences, and create businesses. Although research on influencers and digital entrepreneurship is growing, less is known about how influencers themselves experience this transition and construct an entrepreneurial identity. Applying narrative analysis, this study explains how digital influencers understand and describe their identity while shifting from influencers to entrepreneurs. The research is based on 9 semi-structured interviews with influencer-entrepreneurs active on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, and X. The findings show that becoming an entrepreneur is usually a gradual process rather than a single moment of change. Participants often carry multiple roles simultaneously, including influencers, creators, and entrepreneurs. Audience trust, authenticity, and external recognition were important in shaping how they see themselves, while many also experience tensions between staying relatable and pursuing commercial goals. The study shows that influencer entrepreneurship is an ongoing process shaped by business activities, audience interaction, and digital platforms. The research findings contribute to the literature on digital labour and legitimacy by showing how external validation, platform engagement, and commercial opportunities influence the way influencers move towards entrepreneurship. Practically, the research offers insights for influencers on how to navigate identity change, make use of digital resources, and manage the demands that come with platform-based entrepreneurial work.

Keywords: digital influencers, entrepreneurial identity, digital entrepreneurship, identity construction, influencer-entrepreneur, narrative study.

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1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the study and details its overall focus on how influencers identify themselves during the transition from influencer to entrepreneur. Section 1.1 presents the study's motivation by placing influencer-based work within the wider growth of digital and platform-mediated careers and by explaining its relevance for entrepreneurship research. Section 1.2 reviews the main theoretical debates related to digital entrepreneurship, role transitions, influencer identity, and identifies the key research gaps the study considers. Building on this, Section 1.3 presents the research aims and research question. Section 1.4 provides a brief review of the research design and methodological approach. Section 1.5 outlines the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. Finally, Section 1.6 presents the thesis's structure.

1.1 Motivation of the Research

The fast expansion of social media has changed influencers from content creators into economic actors (Abidin et al., 2016), who obtain earnings through brand collaborations, digital product sales, and the development of their commercial ventures. What often starts as a hobby, or side activity can slowly evolve into a primary source of income. Many influencers enter entrepreneurship with very little business knowledge or formal managerial experience (Khamis et al., 2017). At the same time, the concept of “influencer” itself remains broad and often overlaps with other forms of digital entrepreneurship, for example some individuals may primarily identify as content creators, while others actively commercialise their online presence through business activities and entrepreneurial ventures. This overlap itself creates difficulties in separating when influencer activity becomes entrepreneurial activity and how individuals themselves perceive these changing professional roles. Furthermore, influencers may simultaneously occupy multiple identities, for example, creator, entrepreneur, or business owner, making identity construction in digital environments increasingly complex (Abidin et al., 2016)

An influencer-entrepreneur is a digital influencer who moves beyond content creation to develop and manage business activities by leveraging their personal brand and audiences, while simultaneously reinterpreting their influencer identity and actively constructing an entrepreneurial

identity within platform-based social media environments (Cheng et al., 2024). According to Nambisan et al. (2017), the growing popularity of virtual platforms has enabled the emergence of social media entrepreneurs, whose business models are developed through ongoing interactions with followers and the combination of personal and business identities. The research shows that these entrepreneurs regularly operate in ways that differ from traditional entrepreneurs, as their businesses are formed in digitally mediated situations where opportunity recognition, resource procurement, and venture creation are often compressed or combined (Nambisan et al., 2017; Sussan et al., 2017). At the same time, research on digital entrepreneurship (Duffy et al., 2015; Elshaer et al., 2022; Khamis et al., 2017) has largely focused on personality traits, attitudes, marketing mechanisms, and content-related activities rather than on career transitions or identity transformation processes. This creates a practical and academic need to better understand how individuals emerging from platform roles construct their entrepreneurial identity.

In addition, platform dynamics may shape the construction of entrepreneurial identity distinctly across social media environments. The dynamics of developing an identity through identity work change as they are “mediated” by digital media platforms (Baldauf et al., 2017). This becomes important for entrepreneurs’ communication on digital media and their identity work because, as Lindgren et al. (2017) argue, identity development is no longer manifested with reference to something natural. Instead, digital identities are rather partial, contradictory, and impermanent, because mediated communication enables us to construct potentially multiple digital selves or identities (Lindgren et al., 2017). Different platforms encourage different forms of visibility, audience interaction, authenticity, and monetisation strategies, which may influence how influencers perceive themselves professionally and how entrepreneurial identities are constructed and communicated. Despite this, limited research has studied how platform-specific contexts contribute to identity negotiation during entrepreneurial transitions. Khamis et al. (2017) propose that social media entrepreneurs often merge their personal and business identities and continually reshape them in response to feedback from followers. Furthermore, previous literature confirms that social media entrepreneurs engage in continuous transformation and identity fusion, and that digital entrepreneurial intention is determined by attitudinal mechanisms (Khamis et al., 2017). However, it does not clearly explain how individuals reinterpret their existing platform-based identities when entering entrepreneurship, nor how they actively construct an entrepreneurial

identity in this process. The lack of attention to the development of entrepreneur identity among influencers further stresses the need for intensive research.

1.2 Key Theoretical Debates and Research Gaps

Research on social media entrepreneurs demonstrates that they operate differently from traditional entrepreneurs because their business models evolve through continuous interaction with followers and through the combination of personal and business identities (Stephens et al., 2024). The current literature provides an important basis of understanding digital entrepreneurship and career transitions, but it only partially addresses the process by which individuals engaged in influencer activities transition into entrepreneurship and construct entrepreneurial identities (Burton et al., 2016; Leitch et al., 2016). In addition, the distinction between influencers, content creators, and digital entrepreneurs remains conceptually unclear in existing literature, as these roles frequently overlap within platform-based environments (Horst et al., 2020; Stryker et al., 2000). Scholars agree that entrepreneurial processes in cyberspaces are often compressed or combined, and that ventures may emerge through both deliberate planning and accidental, follower-driven pathways (Stephens et al., 2024). The work illustrates the centrality of identity merging and continuous reinvention in digital entrepreneurship. However, while these studies acknowledge identity dynamics, they primarily describe platform practices and venture formation instead of systematically examining how entrepreneurial identity is constructed and negotiated across multiple professional roles (Stephens et al., 2024).

Furthermore, existing studies do not address how platform-specific dynamics may shape entrepreneurial identity construction differently. Social media platforms vary in their norms, visibility mechanisms, audience interaction styles, and monetisation opportunities, which impact how individuals present themselves and negotiate entrepreneurial roles (Baldauf et al., 2017; Lindgren et al., 2017; Khamis et al., 2017). Despite this, limited research examines how different platform contexts contribute to identity construction. Parallel research on digital entrepreneurship intention focuses on the role of individual characteristics. Evidence shows that Big Five personality traits strongly shape personal attitudes toward digital entrepreneurship and that these attitudes strongly predict entrepreneurial intention (Sobaih et al., 2022). The findings correspond with previous work that emphasises the importance of attitudinal mechanisms in entrepreneurial

decision-making. At the same time, the results show inconsistencies regarding the direct effects of personality traits on entrepreneurial intention, suggesting that the relationship is more complex and mediated than earlier assumed. Despite these contributions, this stream of literature concentrates primarily on intention formation among students and does not examine how individuals transition into entrepreneurship, how they perceive themselves during this process, or how they construct entrepreneurial identities in practice (Sobaih et al., 2022).

Research on career transitions into entrepreneurship gives more insight into identity change processes. Career transition is understood as a movement between professional roles that involves reconfiguration of skills, responsibilities, and self-conception (O'Neill et al., 2011). Studies show that transitions into entrepreneurship frequently stem from perceived identity deficits and a search for authenticity, with entrepreneurship providing autonomy that allows people to harmonise personal values with professional activity (O'Neill et al., 2011). Similarly, work on entrepreneurship research emphasises the role of career capital, social capital, and iterative identity adjustment in empowering effective transitions (de Klerk et al., 2025). These studies jointly highlight that entrepreneurial entry is embedded within wider career trajectories and entails considerable identity work. At the same time, individuals may simultaneously hold multiple identities during transitional processes, such as influencers, creators, entrepreneurs, or business owners.

However, these studies primarily examine individuals moving from structured employment contexts and therefore provide limited insight into platform-based, visibility-driven, or identity-centred careers. Across these streams, several important gaps emerge regarding research questions. First, although social media entrepreneurship research recognises the merging of personal and business identities, it does not explain how digital influencers reinterpret their existing influencer identity when transitioning into entrepreneurial roles (Stephens et al., 2024). Second, while identity-driven career transition research explains how people seek authenticity through entrepreneurship, it does not address how the process develops when the starting point is already a public, platform-mediated identity (O'Neill et al., 2011). Third, studies of digital entrepreneurship intention identify attitudinal mechanisms but do not examine how individuals see themselves professionally during the transition process or what concrete strategies they use to

construct and communicate entrepreneurial identities (Sobaih et al., 2022). Moreover, the literature on career-related entrepreneurship transitions acknowledges that contemporary career pathways are becoming more protean and boundaryless, yet it explicitly notes that emerging occupational forms of personal branding, digital engagement, and entrepreneurship are still underexplored (de Klerk et al., 2025). This omission is especially important regarding grasping digital influencers, whose careers are inherently platform-based and identity-centred. Furthermore, existing research on social media entrepreneurship remains descriptive and lacks theoretical development capable of explaining how social and role-based identities are negotiated and constructed within digitally mediated entrepreneurial environments (Stephens et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, scholars have made progress in explaining the dynamics of digital entrepreneurship, personality-based intentions, and identity-driven career transitions. However, the intersection between these domains is still insufficiently understood. There is limited knowledge of how individuals involved in influencer activities perceive themselves professionally, reinterpret existing platform-based identities, and construct entrepreneurial identities during the transition process. Filling this gap is key to advancing theories on entrepreneurial careers (Burton et al., 2016), multiple role identities (Stryker et al., 2000), and digitally mediated identity construction processes (Baldauf et al., 2017).

1.3 Research Aims and Question

The aims of this study are to examine how digital influencers construct and define their identity as they proceed towards entrepreneurial roles. While current research has studied entrepreneurship and digital labour as distinct domains, little attention has been paid to how influencers themselves perceive and define their roles as entrepreneurs (Horst et al., 2020). There is limited understanding of how these roles are constructed, combined, and redefined throughout this transition. More specifically, the study seeks to explore how influencers perceive changing professional roles and combine influencer and entrepreneur identities. Given this study's empirical focus, particular attention is given to individuals who already engage in business activities or approach content creation with clear monetisation intentions. The study also considers how this process is determined by the structural conditions of social media platforms and audience expectations, as well as how individuals handle the tension between retaining visibility as relatable online

personalities and managing business-related activities. Therefore, the study tackles the following research question: How do influencers identify themselves during the transition to entrepreneurs?

1.4 Research Contributions and Implications

The study delivers a new perspective on influencer entrepreneurs through foregrounding identity construction rather than monetary performance or monetisation outcomes. While much of the existing literature on influencers focuses on branding strategies, monetisation, and market placement, this study takes a unique perspective by examining how influencers interpret their roles and begin to identify themselves as entrepreneurs (Abidin et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2015; Khamis et al., 2017). The study adds to research on entrepreneurial identity by showing that this transition isn't immediate but develops over time through ongoing interpretation. Drawing on work on identity construction and identity work (Gioia et al., 2013; Ibarra et al., 1999), as well as on entrepreneurial identity (Navis et al., 2011), the findings illustrate how influencers gradually reconceptualise what they do and who they are. The findings also indicate that individuals may simultaneously hold and negotiate multiple identities, such as influencers and entrepreneurs, in the course of the process.

Furthermore, the study adds to the literature on digital labour and influencer culture by moving beyond the view of influencing as purely cultural or aspirational work (Abidin et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2017). Instead, it shows that influencers can evolve into a form of entrepreneurship, thus connecting two bodies of literature that are often treated separately. It also highlights that this evolution is not linear but varies depending on how people engage with platform activities and commercial opportunities over time. Moreover, the study adds to research on legitimacy in entrepreneurship, illuminating the role of external validation in forming this identity shift. According to Suchman et al. (1995), data show that viewer responses, platform metrics, and brand collaborations play an important role in whether influencers begin to view themselves as entrepreneurs and present themselves as such. These external signals are interpreted and internalised differently by individuals, hence influencing how entrepreneurial identity is constructed and reinforced.

This research also delivers practical knowledge of how digital influencers transition into entrepreneurship through identity construction. Digital influencers can benefit by learning how to strategically reinterpret their personal and business identities, manage the demands of intensive engagement, and reduce the risk of burnout (Stephens et al., 2024). Aspiring digital entrepreneurs can learn how to leverage existing skills, networks, and social capital to support effective transitions (de Klerk et al., 2025). Additionally, incubators, accelerators, and professional networks can better support platform-based entrepreneurs through tailoring assistance and advice to their particular career paths (de Klerk et al., 2025). Hence, the research translates insights into digital entrepreneurship, career transitions, and identity work into useful guidance for influencers, and stakeholders.

1.5 Layout of the Thesis

This thesis is structured across six chapters. Following this Introductory Chapter 1, Chapter 2 reviews the key literature on digital influencers and entrepreneurship, career transitions, and entrepreneurial identity construction, clarifies key concepts such as influencer, digital entrepreneur, and influencer-entrepreneur, and integrates role identity theory to frame identity construction processes. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, including research design, empirical setting, sampling strategy, and data collection, with purposive sampling of individuals with influencer and entrepreneurial experience. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, which are then discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to the conceptual framework that examines identity construction in the transition from influencer to entrepreneur. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by providing a brief summary of the study.

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the main bodies of literature relevant to the study. Section 2.1 discusses digital influencers, platform-based work and digital entrepreneurship and addresses the conceptual overlap between influencers, content creators and digital entrepreneurs. Section 2.2 reviews literature on entrepreneurial career transitions and identity-related changes during professional transitions. Section 2.3 examines entrepreneurial identity construction and role identity theory, with particular attention to how individuals negotiate multiple professional identities inside digitally mediated environments. Across these sections, the chapter identifies the main research gaps concerning how influencers perceive and construct entrepreneurial identities throughout the transition into entrepreneurship, and Section 2.4 provides a summary of the chapter.

2.1 Digital Influencers and Entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship differs significantly from traditional entrepreneurship because entrepreneurial activity is highly visible, relational, and continuously shaped through interaction with online audiences. Influencers, as opposed to traditional entrepreneurs, whose professional identities may develop primarily within organisational or industry settings, construct their careers in public digital spaces where self-presentation, audience engagement and personal branding are central to economic activity. As a result, the boundaries between personal identity and professional identity become progressively blurred. Influencers are understood in this study as individuals who create and share content on social media platforms and build audiences that interact with both their content and their personal identities. The study does not define influencers solely by follower count or monetisation, but rather by sustained content creation, audience interaction, and visibility on digital channels. Influencers are not only expected to promote products or services but also to present an authentic, relatable version of themselves that audiences can emotionally connect with over time. This creates a distinctive entrepreneurial environment in which identity becomes part of the business model (Khamis et al., 2017). Consequently, entrepreneurial success in digital environments frequently depends not only on business performance as well as on the preservation of audience trust, visibility and perceived authenticity.

This dynamic may be better comprehended through Role Identity Theory, which proposes that individuals hold multiple identities associated with the different social roles they occupy, and that

these identities guide behaviour, self-perception, and interaction with others (Stryker et al., 2000). According to the theory, individuals continuously negotiate between different role expectations depending on the social context and the audience; certain identities become more central than others, determining how individuals prioritise behaviours and interpret experiences. In the context of digital entrepreneurship, influencers rarely occupy a single stable role (Stryker et al., 2000). Instead, they often perform multiple identities simultaneously, including content creator, entertainer, lifestyle figure, educator, brand ambassador, and entrepreneur. These overlapping identities may complement each other, but they may also create tensions when expectations attached to one role conflict with those attached to another (Stryker et al., 2000). For example, audiences may expect influencers to remain authentic, relatable, and personally accessible, while entrepreneurial activities often require more strategic branding, monetisation, authority, and commercial decision-making. As influencers increasingly transition into entrepreneurial roles by launching businesses, products, or personal brands, they may experience identity negotiation processes in which they attempt to reconcile audience expectations for authenticity with the professional demands of entrepreneurship. This aligns with Hoang et al. (2010), who argue that entrepreneurial transition involves not only behavioural change but also the internalisation of a new role identity. Becoming an entrepreneur requires individuals to see themselves as entrepreneurs and to integrate this role into their broader self-concept.

The complexity of these identity negotiations is further intensified by the structure of digital platforms themselves. Influencers perform identity continuously across multiple social media platforms, each characterised by different norms, audiences, and forms of self-presentation. For example, Instagram as well as TikTok may encourage highly personal and lifestyle content, while LinkedIn may reinforce more professional and entrepreneurial identities. Platform X may encourage analytical commentary or expert positioning. Hence, influencers often adapt their identity performances depending on platform expectations while attempting to maintain consistency across their overall personal brand. This fragmented yet interconnected identity performance reflects the increasingly hybrid nature of digital entrepreneurial careers. In this context, audience perception becomes central to entrepreneurial legitimacy. Social Identity Theory suggests that identity is shaped not only internally but also through social recognition and group membership (Tajfel et al., 1979). Digital audiences play an active role in validating or challenging entrepreneurial identities. Followers may support entrepreneurial activities when they perceive

them as authentic and aligned with the influencer's established persona, but they may also react negatively when commercialisation appears excessive or inconsistent with prior self-presentation. Authenticity consequently becomes an important asset within digital entrepreneurship, because economic success depends heavily on preserving trust, relatability and audience connection (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Influencers are not only expected to promote products or services but also to present an authentic, relatable version of themselves that audiences can emotionally connect with over time. This creates a distinctive entrepreneurial environment in which identity itself becomes part of the business model (Khamis et al., 2017). The importance of legitimacy within influencer entrepreneurship can also be linked to Social Role Theory and Role Congruity Theory. Anglin et al. (2022) argue that individuals are evaluated according to socially constructed expectations associated with particular professional and social roles. Influencers entering entrepreneurship may therefore face legitimacy challenges because the influencer role is often associated with entertainment, visibility, and self-promotion, whereas entrepreneurship is associated with competence, leadership, expertise, and authority. These differing expectations may create role incongruity, particularly when audiences or external stakeholders perceive influencer identity as incompatible with entrepreneurial legitimacy. Influencers may therefore engage in continuous identity work to balance commercial ambitions with audience expectations for authenticity and relatability.

These conceptual perspectives suggest that entrepreneurial identity construction in digital environments is not only an individual or economic process, but also a deeply social and relational one. Entrepreneurial identities are continuously formed by interactions with communities, platform cultures, and wider societal expectations regarding authenticity, professionalism, and legitimacy. Despite the growing importance of influencer entrepreneurship, limited research has examined how influencers negotiate multiple identities during transitions into entrepreneurship or how audience interaction shapes the development of entrepreneurial identity over time. As a result, the identity-based processes underlying influencer-to-entrepreneur transitions remain insufficiently theorised within current entrepreneurship literature. Despite growing scholarly attention, important gaps remain. For example, the findings of Sobaih et al. (2022) are based on senior university students in Saudi Arabia, raising questions about generalizability across other populations, career stages, and cultural settings. The study does not examine long-term

engagement in digital entrepreneurship or actual venture outcomes. The reliance on self-reported data also limits insight into actual entrepreneurial behaviour.

Moreover, this research focuses primarily on entrepreneurial intention rather than on lived experience, identity formation, or role transition processes. The literature does not directly examine the career transitions of digital influencers into entrepreneurship or the detailed identity processes underlying these transitions (de Klerk et al., 2025). While Stephens et al. (2024) highlight identity merging and follower-shaped development, Sobaih et al. (2022) explain attitudinal mechanisms behind digital entrepreneurial intention, neither study explicitly analyses how influencers move from content creation or platform-based careers into formal entrepreneurial roles. The role of multiple simultaneous identities (e.g., influencer, creator, entrepreneur) and how they are negotiated during this transition remains underexplored. The career transition pathways and identity negotiations specific to influencers, hence, remain insufficiently theorised and empirically examined in the current research.

2.2 Career Transition in Entrepreneurial Contexts

Career transition in entrepreneurial contexts is increasingly conceptualised as a complex, dynamic, and multi-layered process rather than a single, discrete occupational shift. Burton et al. (2016) reconceptualise entrepreneurship not as a destination but as a stage within a broader, evolving career trajectory. Within this view, career transitions are movements embedded in longer professional paths that provide them with meaning and direction. Becoming an entrepreneur is hence not an isolated or sudden act. Instead, it reflects a sequence of prior experiences combined with expectations about possible future moves. Entrepreneurship is described as more like marriage than death because entry and exit are both possible and common. Individuals frequently move into entrepreneurship after periods of wage employment, and many later return to paid work (Burton et al., 2016). Even serial entrepreneurs do not remain permanently in entrepreneurial roles instead; they experience distinct entrepreneurial spells with identifiable beginnings and endings. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from the narrow question of who becomes an entrepreneur and toward a broader understanding of how entrepreneurship fits into dynamic career patterns, how long individuals remain in entrepreneurial roles, and what career outcomes follow afterwards (Burton et al., 2016).

While Burton et al. (2016) emphasise structural and career-pattern explanations, de Klerk et al. (2025) highlight the agentic and capability-driven dimensions of work-to-entrepreneurship transitions. Their study of military veterans demonstrates that career transitions are formed not only by structural conditions, but also by how people actively leverage their prior experiences, skills and networks to create new ventures. Career capital acts as a central enabling mechanism. This includes technical, managerial, analytical and interpersonal skills developed during earlier employment. Veterans in the study applied service abilities such as leadership, planning, problem solving and operational competence to navigate the uncertainty associated with entrepreneurship. Importantly, the transition into entrepreneurship is not portrayed as a one-time shift but as an ongoing developmental process that requires continued skill acquisition.

According to Klerk et al. (2025), career capital does not operate in isolation. It interacts closely with social capital, as these networks provide guidance, legitimacy, and emotional support during the transition. Access to supportive social structures helps individuals adjust their professional identities and navigate the uncertainties associated with new entrepreneurial roles. Identity transformation is another central theme in the work of de Klerk et al. (2025). Veterans reported questioning their functions and contributions as they moved from highly structured military careers to self-directed entrepreneurial paths. This process illustrates the protean and boundaryless nature of contemporary careers in which individuals proactively shape their vocational trajectories and gain meaning through self-directed growth. Transitions to entrepreneurship were shown to be iterative and adaptive. Importantly, the perceived value of entrepreneurship reached beyond the monetary results. Participants stressed improvements in well-being, autonomy, personal satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment. Financial rewards were not the primary motivation. Instead, subjective benefits such as flexibility and fulfilment played a central role in motivating the transition. This reinforces the view that entrepreneurial career transitions are multidimensional processes encompassing both tangible and intangible outcomes (de Klerk et al., 2025).

An identity-centred lens further deepens understanding of entrepreneurial transitions. From a Role Identity Theory perspective, career transitions involve the reorganisation and reprioritisation of multiple role identities within an individual's broader self-concept (Stryker et al., 2000). Transition into entrepreneurship, therefore, requires individuals not only to adopt new professional responsibilities but also to internalise entrepreneurial meanings, behaviours, and expectations as

part of their identity. For influencers, entrepreneurial transitions are not solely occupational or financial changes but also public and socially negotiated identity transformations. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs, influencers often undergo career transitions while continuously observing their audience. Followers may therefore actively validate, question, or resist emerging entrepreneurial identities depending on whether these changes are perceived as authentic and consistent with the influencer's established persona. This is consistent with Social Identity Theory, which suggests that identity is formed not only internally, but also through social recognition, group membership and interaction with others (Tajfel et al. 1979). Entrepreneurial legitimacy in digital environments consequently depends not only on business performance, but also on audience view and social acceptance.

Moreover, O'Neill et al. (2011) conceptualize career transition as movement from one professional role or identity to another that involves reconfiguration of skills, responsibilities, and self-conception. In entrepreneurial contexts, this shift reflects not only a change in employment status but also a deeper transformation in how individuals understand their autonomy and their capacity to enact social impact. Sustainable entrepreneurs often leave conventional employment due to perceived constraints on authenticity or misalignment between personal values and prior professional roles. Entrepreneurship becomes a strategic mechanism for aligning identity with work purposes and for pursuing activities perceived as meaningful and socially impactful.

Across these streams of literature, there is strong convergence around several core insights. Entrepreneurial career transitions are path dependent and embedded in prior experience (Burton et al., 2016). They involve substantial identity work and role redefinition (Stryker et al., 2000). They are both determined by structural conditions and individual agency (Berger et al., 1966). Entrepreneurship itself is widely understood as a reversible and iterative career stage, rather than a permanent endpoint (O'Neill et al., 2011). There is also shared recognition that autonomy seeking, meaning-making and the desire for greater control over work are powerful drivers of movement into venture creation. At the same time, several gaps remain (Fauchart et al., 2011). Contemporary digitally mediated career paths that combine personal branding, digital engagement, and entrepreneurial activity remain insufficiently examined. As a result, the processes through which digital influencers transition into influencer-entrepreneurs, negotiate identity shifts, and leverage their distinctive forms of career and social capital remain poorly understood. Addressing

this gap is essential for advancing theoretical understanding of career transitions in entrepreneurship.

2.3 Entrepreneurial Identity and Identity Construction

Over the past two decades, entrepreneurship research has gradually moved away from viewing entrepreneurs as individuals defined primarily by stable personality traits or purely economic motivations. Earlier approaches attempted to identify characteristics that distinguish entrepreneurs from non-entrepreneurs, however, these efforts produced inconsistent findings and failed to account for the diversity of entrepreneurial behaviours. As a result, scholars have increasingly adopted identity-based perspectives, conceptualising entrepreneurship as a process closely tied to how individuals understand who they are and who they aspire to become (Mmbaga et al., 2020). From this perspective, entrepreneurship extends beyond opportunity recognition and value creation to include processes of self-expression and role transformation.

Hoang et al. (2010) developed a role identity perspective that integrates entrepreneurship with the career transition theory. They argue that founding a venture is not simply a behavioural decision but entails adopting and internalising a new professional identity. Prior research has largely explained the entrepreneurial entry through factors such as human capital and social networks (Burton et al., 2016). However, these explanations do not fully account for why individuals in similar circumstances differ in their ability to transition into entrepreneurship. Hoang et al. (2010) suggest that successful transition depends on how individuals construct and priorities the founder role within their broader self-concept. They identify two key dimensions: identity centrality, the importance of the founder role for one's sense of self, and identity complexity, the degree to which individuals understand what being a founder entails. These dimensions shape how individuals respond to problems such as uncertainty, conflict of roles and negative feedback. Individuals with strong and complex founder identities are more likely to persist and adapt, whereas those with weaker identities are more likely to disengage from entrepreneurial activity (Hoang et al., 2010). This perspective highlights that becoming an entrepreneur involves psychological adjustment and identity reconstruction, not simply economic decision-making.

Building on this, Shepherd et al. (2018) define entrepreneurial identity as the meanings individuals attach to themselves when interpreting their activities through an entrepreneurial lens. Individuals do not simply perform entrepreneurial tasks; they develop a sense of self alignment with the entrepreneurial role. This identity influences how opportunities are perceived, how risks are evaluated, and how uncertainty is managed. Similarly, Leitch et al. (2016) emphasise that identity is dynamic, socially constructed, and continuously evolving. They conceptualise identity as a bridge between the individual and the social environment, shaping how entrepreneurs interpret situations and engage in organisational activity. Rather than viewing identity as a stable attribute, they argue that it emerges through ongoing processes of identity work. Entrepreneurial identity construction in digital environments can therefore be understood as a dynamic, socially negotiated process rather than the adoption of a single, stable professional role.

Drawing on Role Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, and identity work perspectives, entrepreneurial transition involves the continuous negotiation and prioritisation of multiple identities within an individual's broader self-concept (Stryker et al. 2000; Tajfel et al., 1979). Influencers transitioning into entrepreneurship may simultaneously assume identities as content creators, public figures, community members, experts, and entrepreneurs. Rather than completely replacing influencer identity with entrepreneurial identity, individuals may reinterpret and strategically extend existing identity resources toward entrepreneurial purposes. Entrepreneurial identity may therefore emerge through processes of integration and hybridisation rather than identity substitution.

However, several gaps in the literature remain. Much research focuses on categorising identity types rather than examining how identities are formed and negotiated. Moreover, entrepreneurship research often adopts identity theories from other disciplines without fully integrating them. This perspective reinforces the view of entrepreneurship as a process of continuous self-construction rather than static role performance. These limitations highlight the need for research that conceptualises entrepreneurial identity as an integrated, dynamic, and contextually embedded process. Understanding entrepreneurship necessitates examining how individuals construct, negotiate and act identities and roles across multiple levels. Greater attention to identity development processes in digital environments may contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the entrepreneurial identity construction.

2.4 Conclusion

In summary, this literature suggests that digital influencers who transition into entrepreneurship are not merely content creators expanding their activities, but rather emerging entrepreneurial actors who must navigate the overlap among personal branding, platform visibility, and business development (Susan et al., 2017). Existing research further indicates that entrepreneurial identity is central to this transition, as influencers must move beyond audience-oriented self-presentation and establish legitimacy as business actors within digitally mediated environments (Tajfel et al., 1979). At the same time, this transformation is not achieved automatically through online popularity or platform success, but depends on how influencers understand, construct, and negotiate their evolving identities across social and commercial contexts (Tajfel et al., 1979). This makes entrepreneurial identity construction and role negotiation essential for explaining how influencers manage tensions between authenticity, commercialisation, and entrepreneurship (Stryker et al., 2000). Within rapidly evolving digital environments, where career boundaries are increasingly fluid and hybrid, these issues become especially significant. Therefore, the study focuses on how influencers identify themselves during their transition to entrepreneurs.

3. Method

This chapter explains how the study was carried out to answer the research question. It describes the research design, the study's context, the selection of participants, and the collection of the data. It also outlines how the data was analysed. Then, the chapter addresses ethical considerations and the research's overall quality.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how digital influencers transition into entrepreneurs through entrepreneurial identity construction. The choice of a qualitative approach is closely related to the nature of the research question, which focuses on understanding subjective experiences, interpretations, and identity-related processes. Instead of examining measurable outcomes or testing predefined relationships between variables, the study aims to understand how influencers interpret their roles as entrepreneurs and actively construct and negotiate their professional identities. The transition from an influencer to an entrepreneur is not a clearly defined or standardised process. It unfolds differently across individuals, depending on their personal motivations, audience relationships, and strategic decisions. For this reason, a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate, as it allows for the exploration of complexity, nuance, and context (Creswell et al., 2018). It enables the researcher to access participants' own narratives and to understand how they interpret their experiences, rather than imposing externally defined categories.

3.2 Empirical Setting

This study is situated within the global digital content economy, focusing on influencer entrepreneurs operating across major social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. Rather than being geographically bounded, the empirical setting is defined by a transnational, platform-based environment in which individuals combine content creation with entrepreneurial activities, including brand partnerships and the development of their own ventures. The empirical setting is therefore anchored in a specific type of actor (influencer entrepreneurs) and a specific type of environment (the social media platform ecosystem).

3.3 Sampling and Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, as the study aimed to interview individuals with direct experience of transitioning from influencer activities toward entrepreneurial roles. The primary selection criterion is that participants must have experience both as digital influencers and in having their venture established. This means they have moved beyond creating content alone and engaged in activities that can be considered entrepreneurial, such as launching a product, offering services, building a personal brand into a business, or establishing a company. Therefore, participants represented different geographic and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the global nature of social media entrepreneurship. Potential participants were contacted primarily through social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, X and TikTok, where they publicly presented both influencer-related and business-related activities. Initial contact was made through direct messages or email invitations explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality procedures. This recruitment strategy enabled the researcher to access participants whose professional experiences were directly relevant to the research objectives. Although participants operated in different geographical contexts, the focus of the study was not on cross-cultural comparison, but rather on shared experiences associated with platform-based entrepreneurship and influencer activity.

At the same time, the purposive sampling strategy allows for variation between participants. Some participants may be at an early stage of transition, experimenting with monetisation and business ideas, while others may have already established more structured companies. This variation is important for identifying both common patterns and divergent pathways in the transition process. The number of participants is guided by the aim to capture rich insights into how influencers transition into entrepreneurial roles. The focus is on selecting individuals who can provide detailed accounts of their transition towards influencer-entrepreneur, audience engagement, and business development beyond the platform. The value of the study, therefore, lies in understanding these nuanced transition processes, rather than in the number of participants. An overview of all the informants is presented in **Table 3.1**.

Table 3.1 Overview of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Primary Venture	Business Stage	Main Platform	Interview Length
Lena	Female	40	Gaming Company	Post-transition	X / LinkedIn / Instagram	50 minutes
Sandra	Female	26	Online Sport Store	Transition	Instagram / TikTok / YouTube	85 minutes
Natalie	Female	26	Music and Acting Influencer	Transition	TikTok / Instagram	80 minutes
Katherin	Female	43	Psychological Company	Transition	TikTok	76 minutes
Leo	Male	25	Marketing Company	Post-transition	Instagram	85 minutes
Richard	Male	24	Logistics	Pre-transition	Instagram	85 minutes
Astrid	Female	28	Online Kids Shop	Post-transition	Instagram/ LinkedIn	70 minutes
Alexander	Male	31	Legal Company	Post-transition	YouTube/ LinkedIn	80 minutes
Anna	Female	26	Dance Studio	Post-transition	Instagram	73 minutes

3.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they are well-suited to exploring how individuals explain complex and evolving experiences, such as the transition from influencer to entrepreneur. This method allows participants to reflect on their identity, decision-making, and personal journey in their own terms, which is vital for capturing how entrepreneurial identity is constructed. The interview guide was developed based on the research question and a review of the literature on digital influencers, entrepreneurship, and identity. Instead of focusing on strictly formulated questions, the interviews were organised around broader thematic areas. These included participants' backgrounds as influencers, their motivations for starting entrepreneurial activities, how they perceive their own identity, how their audiences reacted to these changes, and the strategies they use to develop their businesses.

In addition, participants were asked about challenges they encountered during this transition, including potential conflicts between maintaining authenticity and pursuing commercial opportunities. This thematic structure helped keep the interviews focused while still allowing participants to share their individual experiences in their own way. The data collection took place between March and May 2026 and was conducted online in English using platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. This approach enabled greater flexibility and allowed participants from different geographical locations to be included. In total, nine interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 50 to 80 minutes.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed through narrative analysis. This method was chosen because it allows for examining how participants construct and present their experiences in the form of stories, while staying close to their own words and expressions (Bamberg et al., 2012). Since the aim of the study is to understand the transition from influencers to influencer-entrepreneurs through processes of role construction, narrative analysis provides an appropriate approach for exploring how participants define their roles and describe their transitions. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed word-for-word. Transcribing the interviews personally helped with becoming familiar with the data at an early stage, which was useful during the later phases of analysis. The transcripts aimed to capture not only what was said, but also how participants expressed their thoughts, as this is important when analysing how they construct their roles and describe their transition from influencer to influencer-entrepreneur.

The analysis focused on how participants structured their narratives and how they described their roles and transitions (Bamberg et al., 2012). After conducting and transcribing the interviews, the first step was familiarising with the data. This involved reading through the transcripts multiple times and noting initial impressions, recurring storylines, and how participants framed their experiences. The goal at this stage was to understand how each participant presented their trajectory rather than to break the data into smaller units. The next step was to identify key narrative elements in the interviews. This included examining how participants defined roles such as influencer and entrepreneur, how they described shifts between these roles, and how they positioned themselves within different stages of the transition. Attention was given to how

participants explained their involvement in business activities, particularly considering that most participants already engaged in monetisation or had business intentions. The analysis focused on how these elements were presented within their narratives rather than isolating them as separate codes.

It is also important to acknowledge that the analysis is influenced by the researcher's perspective. The way the narratives were interpreted reflects our own understanding of social media and entrepreneurship. To reduce potential bias, we aimed to stay close to participants' own words and avoid imposing meanings that were not evident in their accounts. Overall, narrative analysis provided a suitable framework for understanding how influencers describe and construct their roles and how they present the transition towards entrepreneurship through their own narratives.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Research Quality

In this study, ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms. The data were stored securely and used only for the purposes of this study.

Furthermore, several steps were taken to ensure that the findings are trustworthy and clearly grounded in the data. First, credibility was established by ensuring a connection between the data and the analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled participants to express their experiences in detail, yielding rich, nuanced data. Also, during the analysis, attention was paid to staying close to participants' own words and meanings, rather than imposing predefined interpretations. In addition, the inclusion of direct quotes in the findings chapter helps demonstrate how interpretations are supported by the data. Moreover, transparency was also an important consideration. The research process, including data collection and analysis, has been described in detail in the methodology chapter. This allows us to understand how the research was conducted and how conclusions were reached. By clearly outlining each step, the study is visible and open to evaluation.

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from semi-structured interviews with 9 digital influencers engaged in entrepreneurial activities. The findings are organised into four main themes. The first theme introduces how participants constructed their identities throughout the influencer-to-entrepreneur transition and how entrepreneurial identity developed gradually through prior experiences and digital engagement. The second theme explores how participants developed authority and legitimacy through audience interaction and social validation within online environments. The third theme examines the psychological and structural constraints encountered during this transition, including self-doubt, emotional exhaustion, pressure to be visible, and challenges associated with digital entrepreneurial work. The fourth one introduced a fragmented, hybrid, and progressively evolving identity construction, emphasising that entrepreneurial identity is not a fixed personality path. The **Table 4.1** below illustrates the superordinate and subordinate themes identified through the analysis.

Table 4.1 Narrative Analysis Findings

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Professional Identity as the Starting Point	• Pre-existing institutional identities (academia, policy, research) as foundational anchors • Content creation as an extension of professional expertise rather than a new role • Purpose-driven motivations (education, knowledge dissemination, accessibility) • Legitimacy derived from expertise rather than market logic
Construction of Authority Through Social Validation	• Emergence of authority through audience engagement rather than prior self-positioning as expert • Transition from personal storytelling to more analytical and expert-oriented content • Audience trust and recognition as reinforcement of perceived credibility

	• Social validation as mechanism for consolidating professional legitimacy • Authority as conferred through interaction rather than self-assigned role • Feedback loop between content production and evolving self-perception as knowledgeable actor
Psychological Constraints	• Fear of judgment, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome • Emotional impact of criticism and online negativity • Time pressure and work–life imbalance • Lack of resources, skills, and institutional support
Fragmented and Hybrid Identity Performance	• Simultaneous occupation of multiple roles (entrepreneur, educator, academic, etc.) • Platform-specific identity performances (Instagram, LinkedIn, X/Twitter) • Strategic adaptation of self-presentation across contexts • Entrepreneurial identity embedded within broader identity systems • Resistance to fixed identity labels (entrepreneur, influencer, etc.) • Continuous renegotiation of professional self-understanding • Relational identity formation through audience feedback • Identity as a dynamic “becoming” process rather than a final state

4.1 Identity Construction Across the Influencer-to-Entrepreneur Transition

This theme examines how participants constructed their identities across the influencer-to-entrepreneur transition. Rather than moving through a clean linear shift, participants drew on established roles and skills as the basis for their online presence while gradually developing a more defined sense of themselves as entrepreneurial actors. Four dimensions reflect the layered nature

of this process. Participants entered content creation not as aspiring influencers but as individuals with already established professional roles. Going online was grounded in what they already were rather than in any deliberate ambition to build an audience. For Alexander, a human rights lawyer, content creation was tied directly to a gap he observed between professional knowledge and public awareness:

"I always read different judgments, different decisions, different reports, and I was pretty sure that individuals and society do not know any kind of knowledge about these standards... my decision behind starting my YouTube channel was to raise individuals' awareness about the main challenges, the main standards that exist in the world, and they are free to use them". (Alexander)

Purpose-driven and commercial motivations coexisted from early on, though the balance varied across participants. Richard, an influencer focused on logistics-related topics, framed monetisation as a form of recognition rather than a primary goal, describing it as confirmation that the work held value:

"Monetisation looks in this context as a nice tool that not just motivates you but also shows you how you do that. It's not like just a thing that brings you money, it's actually some kind of recognition that you do your job". (Richard)

Lena, a serial entrepreneur from Sweden, offered a contrasting account, where content creation was driven from the start by the practical recognition that visibility had become a condition for entrepreneurial survival:

"It's something that I don't like to do, and I was forced to do because it's the way for me to be visible in a world that is crowded... if you are not visible, you do not exist. And I think, for me, building this platform has been really a way to tell people who I am and what I do. And I also learned that people love stories, and get so engaged with them. So they have followed me since I started my first venture, many of them, until, you know, like going back to university and starting press,... so all these things are like I'm always telling a story, sharing the story that empathizes with people and that has also had an impact on my career and the business I do because people connect on a different level with you". (Lena)

Neither participant described choosing one orientation over the other, suggesting that the transition toward entrepreneurship is less a movement between motivations and more a gradual clarification of how they relate. Entrepreneurial identity took shape incrementally through practice rather than deliberate planning, and in several cases was only recognised in retrospect. Sandra, a sport store owner, made the retrospective dimension most explicit, describing how she named herself an entrepreneur only the day before the interview, despite years of entrepreneurial activity:

" Since I was a kid, I knew I wanted to have my own business... but when you came to the question like when did you start to consider yourself an entrepreneur, I think that was something I kind of figured out yesterday... I had this realisation, like no Sandra, you know you're an entrepreneur, and you have to believe in that, and you have to say that out loud to people". (Sandra)

This illustrates that self-identification as an entrepreneur is not an event but a process shaped by prior professional values, practical learning, and the retrospective understanding that helps participants understand their own trajectories. Identity at this transition is neither linear nor predetermined, but layered, context-dependent, and often fully articulated only in hindsight.

4.2 Construction of Authority Through Social Validation

This theme captures how participants gradually moved from personal storytelling toward expert-oriented content, and how audience engagement functioned not merely as feedback but as a mechanism through which professional credibility became consolidated in the digital space. Across the narratives, participants did not set out to position themselves as authorities. Instead, this status emerged through the response their content received.

Lena, a serial entrepreneur from Sweden, described how the story she built around her ventures attracted a level of recognition that consistently exceeded her expectations, with people approaching her at events not as a stranger but as someone whose journey they had been following:

" So when I go to an event then always a couple of people will come that were going to give me a hug because they are following my journey, congratulate on I've made it to Stanford or congratulate that I am leading the game tech hub in Stockholm so cool they know it's like they give you a hug I'm following your journey it's so amazing it's so inspiring

so so so this is literally like the way that it works, at least for me. And it's how it has changed, also the way I see my businesses, and I see the importance. Because I see this also as long-term, it's like the story, and then they get interested in me as an individual. And then when I have my ventures, they convert into clients, customers, or supporters".
(Lena)

This moment captures the broader pattern across the data. Content that began as personal or professional sharing gradually attracted a form of social recognition that fed back into how participants understood both their role and their output. Astrid described a parallel dynamic, noting that her followers came to rely on her not simply for information but for the analytical framing she brought to events, trusting her presentation because it was grounded in professional knowledge:

"People were waiting for me to post something, and I received many messages from strangers about the context, saying they trust my information and the way that I present, because I won't just be merely presenting news. But I was giving them background, like scientific materials to read, and I was referring them to other experts who were obviously more professional than I, so they could follow them. What I received mostly during that time is that they trust the information that I present, they trust the way that I present, and they receive a lot of new insights through the content that I had during that period". (Astrid)

What these accounts suggest is that authority in this context is not claimed but conferred. Participants did not position themselves as experts and then attract audiences. Rather, consistent knowledge-based communication drew engagement, and that engagement in turn reinforced a sense of legitimacy that shaped how participants came to see their own role. Social validation, in this sense, functioned as the mechanism through which informal content creation became recognised expertise.

4.3 Psychological and Structural Constraints

The theme, Psychological and Structural Constraints, focuses on the internal and external challenges digital influencers face as they transition into entrepreneurship. It is concentrated on how participants are facing social, emotional, psychological, and institutional difficulties during the process of building entrepreneurial identities and businesses. Even though social media usually

portrays entrepreneurship as flexible, empowering, and glamorous, participants' experiences revealed a more complex reality marked by uncertainty, emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, limited support systems, and pressures from platform economies. One of the most visible aspects emerging across interviews was self-doubt and uncertainty about legitimacy, competence, and identity. Many participants had difficulty fully identifying themselves as influencers, entrepreneurs, or professionals, despite already having their own businesses, building audiences, or generating income.

Many participants explicitly questioned whether they deserved the label “influencer”, demonstrating the tension between public visibility and internal legitimacy. For instance, Sandra, mini-golf World Champion and sport store owner, said:

“I wouldn’t like it... It really depends on how you see an influencer... because I don’t have a big reach right... I have less than 2,000 followers on Instagram and TikTok... so when you’re looking from this kind of perspective, I don’t know when you consider yourself an influencer... but there is definitely the point where I have been at some point updating content regularly, where I would say I had been working as an influencer.” (Sandra)

This sentence illustrates how participants often gauge their legitimacy through external validation, such as follower count, engagement, or visibility metrics. Although Sandra engaged in influencer-related activities, she still questioned whether her audience size was “enough” to justify her identity. This demonstrates how platform cultures contribute to self-doubt by constantly encouraging comparison and evaluation. Therefore, participants also frequently minimised their success or framed their journey as accidental rather than intentional, reflecting deeper insecurities regarding competence and legitimacy. For example, Astrid, a political expert and online shop owner, repeatedly described her content creation journey as something that emerged “casually” rather than strategically:

“I would say it happened more accidentally. Firstly, I just wanted to share a bit about my life when I was living abroad... I didn’t have a content plan or a calendar plan for what to share, when to share and how to share... I just wanted to share my opinion, to gather others’ opinions and to understand how actually the world works.” (Astrid)

Although Astrid later became highly active online and built strong engagement through political and social descriptions of that time, current political actions of the Armenian government, she continued to describe her development in informal and almost accidental terms. This reflects a broader pattern where participants struggled to internalise entrepreneurial competence despite evidence of influence, audience building, and strategic communication skills.

Catherine, a well-being coach, demonstrated similar uncertainty when talking about her online presence:

“I didn’t know I was an influencer, even though I asked you if you were sure I was an influencer when you asked me for this interview... I do some values, you know, so I share my values and my experience as well.” (Catherine)

This quote is important because it shows how participants often justified their visibility through helping others, sharing values, and/or providing emotional support rather than openly embracing entrepreneurial ambition or influence. Such responses suggest that participants may have felt more comfortable marking their experiences as socially valuable.

Another important psychological constraint was that participants were experiencing the emotional impact of online visibility, criticism, and constant exposure to audience evaluation. Although social media platforms provided opportunities for self-expression, networking, and entrepreneurial growth, participants also described these spaces as emotionally challenging environments that require emotional regulation, resilience, and self-management. Therefore, throughout the interviews, participants revealed that maintaining online perseverance involved not only creativity but also emotions, as they are judged by the external world.

Many participants emphasised that content creation was deeply connected to emotional state and mental well-being. For instance, unlike many traditional forms of work, influencer and entrepreneurial activities often depended on creativity, motivation, personal visibility, and emotional energy. As a result, emotional exhaustion directly affected participants' ability to produce content and sustain entrepreneurial activities. Sandra described this emotional dependency:

“I would say it’s a kind of work that requires so much passion, so much creative skills and enormous amount of dedication... and patience because from my experience I know that

sometimes I have a good mood for creation and sometimes when I just feel down the dumps it's so hard to make something unique and something that might catch the attention of others... it affects the way how you make videos, it affects the way how you edit it... It's a very creative profession that requires so much mental health effort.” (Sandra)

This demonstrates how entrepreneurial content creation became emotionally consuming because participants themselves functioned as the source of creativity, public engagement and productivity. So, emotional struggles were not separate from work performance, but they directly shaped visibility, productivity, and entrepreneurial success.

Natalie, an American-Swedish influencer-entrepreneur, described social media work as psychologically overwhelming due to the constant pressure for consistency and continuous output:

“It felt validating in a way... but it's really hard because you have to stay consistent and you really need to stay on top of your output... I think I also got to a place where it's like feeding the machine in a way... keeping people stuck in social media and scrolling... as I was creating more, I was also consuming more too, and I think I could get into spaces where yeah, where I am creating a lot but where I'm also taking in a lot.” (Natalie)

This marks several important emotional struggles connected to entrepreneurial identity construction. Moreover, the emotional burden of online visibility was also visible in participants' discussions of burnout and exhaustion. Leo, a German influencer with marketing agency, described that content creation gave him creative freedom and created periods of extreme emotional strain:

“Freedom is the main thing for me that I have always been striving for and I'm now super grateful that everything I do is purely based on me deciding to do that... but I've been at moments where I was pretty close to burning out because there's no relaxing really because nobody's telling you what to do... at the same time you're also kind of creating everything for yourself.” (Leo)

Here, while participants valued autonomy and independence, they also experienced constant self-imposed pressure because success was seen as solely a matter of their hard work. Not being very organised meant creators were constantly thinking about how to be productive, engage with the audience, and plan future content, which resulted in emotional fatigue and burnout.

4.4 Fragmented, Hybrid, and Progressively Evolving Identity Construction

This theme emerged across the interviews regarding the developing nature of entrepreneurial identity construction among influencers. Instead of having one particular identity with a fixed professional role, participants frequently talked about multiple identities, for example, entrepreneur, educator, academic, activist, athlete, or creative, while adapting their self-presentation within different social contexts and digital platforms. Many participants did not place them in specific boxes (e.g., influencer or entrepreneur). So, the findings suggest that entrepreneurial identity within influencer culture is neither stable nor fixed, but rather a developing, ongoing process of self-understanding.

During the interviews, most participants described themselves as occupying multiple professional and personal roles rather than placing themselves in a single fixed category. For example, Alexander, a human rights lawyer and influencer on YouTube, provided:

“Previously I worked for the judicial system of Armenia around 10 years... initially I started as a legal expert, then was promoted to the judge’s assistant, then was the head of the legal expertise service of the Supreme Court of Armenia and was also a representative before the European Court of Human Rights... currently I mainly focus on the company... additionally I’m lecturer at the Yerevan State University where I’m lecturing around eight-nine years... I’m also a visiting researcher here in Lund... I also worked for the International Labour Organisation as an international legal expert... and regarding the part of online campaigns and creating different videos, I started my YouTube channel a couple of months ago.” (Alexander)

This paragraph shows that Alexander’s entrepreneurial identity did not emerge separately from his previous professional roles but became intertwined with his legal expertise, academic role, international lawyer role, and activist motivations. Therefore, his influencer activities are implanted within a much broader professional identity with a strong focus on law, education, human rights, and social impact. Another example, Astrid provided:

“Now I’m actually pursuing my PhD degree again related to political science... now I am the head of the alumni and career center at the Yerevan State University but overall throughout this whole process what I did constantly is that I had my own small business which started firstly as some kind of side hustle... and later on what brought me to become some sort of content creator is that I really enjoyed sharing the details of my daily life with people.” (Astrid)

This shows that entrepreneurial identity was layered onto pre-existing academic and professional identities rather than changing them. Moreover, Astrid’s narrative shows how personal storytelling and entrepreneurial activity are interconnected. Also, Anna, a dance studio owner, said:

“When I do my own things, I mostly create what I would like to see or what I would like to share... I don’t really have this target group vision when I create stuff for me but when I work with content and create content for other brands or other people then of course I have a completely different mindset and then I take on the role... the role is more strategic in that way when I create for others and then when I create for me I would see the role as more for my own enjoyment and for my own creativity.”(Anna)

This shows how participants shifted between strategic entrepreneurial identities and more personal or creative identities. Moreover, identity performance is changing according to goals, audience, and platform expectations.

Here, participants actively adapted their identity performance depending on the type of social platform they were using. Therefore, it was clear that different platforms encourage different communication styles, levels of professionalism, emotional expression, and audience interaction, leading participants to modify how they present themselves online.

5. Discussion

This chapter explores the theoretical contribution to understanding how digital influencers identify themselves during the transition to entrepreneurship and how entrepreneurial identity is constructed during this process. Drawing on 9 in-depth interviews with participants operating across different professional and cultural contexts, four main themes emerged from the data: identity construction through professional grounding and entrepreneurial becoming, the construction of authority through social validation, psychological constraints, and hybrid identity. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, presents the theoretical contributions of the study, and outlines practical implications alongside limitations and directions for future research.

5.1 Finding Explanations and Theoretical Contributions

The first and most central finding of this study is that entrepreneurial identity among digital influencers does not emerge through a single decisive transition but develops gradually through the layering of professional foundations, creative practice, and accumulated experience. This is consistent with Burton et al. (2016), who argue that entrepreneurship is better understood as one stage within a broader career trajectory rather than a permanent endpoint. The present study extends this argument by showing that in digitally mediated careers, this trajectory is shaped not only by structural conditions but by the interplay between prior professional identity and the incremental recognition of entrepreneurial selfhood. Participants did not abandon existing identities upon entering entrepreneurship but instead extended them, suggesting that the transition is less a rupture than a continuation.

This finding also corresponds with Hoang et al. (2010), who argue that entrepreneurial transition requires the internalisation of a new role identity rather than merely behavioural change. However, the present study nuances this claim. Several participants, most notably Sandra, described recognising their entrepreneurial identity only in retrospect, long after engaging in entrepreneurial activity. This suggests that identity internalisation does not necessarily precede or accompany entrepreneurial behaviour but may follow it. Extending prior work, this study shows that the sequence of doing and then becoming is a meaningful and underexplored pathway in entrepreneurial identity formation, one that existing role identity frameworks have not fully

accounted for. Another important finding concerns the role of professional expertise as the primary source of legitimacy in the early stages of content creation. Participants across the sample consistently grounded their online presence in pre-existing professional authority rather than in audience size or platform logic. This resonates with Khamis et al. (2017), who argue that identity itself becomes part of the business model in digital entrepreneurship. The present study extends this by demonstrating that for expert-driven participants, legitimacy precedes visibility rather than emerging from it. Content creation was not the origin of credibility but a new channel through which existing credibility was communicated.

A further contribution concerns the mechanism of social validation in the construction of entrepreneurial identity. The finding that audience engagement reinforced participants' self-perception of professional authority is consistent with Social Identity Theory, which holds that identity is shaped through social recognition and group membership (Tajfel et al., 1979). The present study extends this by showing that in digitally mediated contexts, social validation operates not only as affirmation but as a constitutive force in identity development. Lena's account of followers approaching her at events as someone whose journey they had followed, and Astrid's description of audiences trusting her analytical framing during a national crisis, both illustrate how external recognition gradually transformed informal content into recognised expertise. This study contributes by showing that audience validation functions as a mechanism through which authority is granted rather than claimed, a distinction that carries significant theoretical implications for understanding legitimacy in digital entrepreneurship.

An additional insight relates to the coexistence of purpose-driven and monetisation-oriented motivations. In contrast to studies that frame the influencer-to-entrepreneur transition as a movement from authentic expression toward commercial activity, the present findings suggest these orientations are present simultaneously from early on, weighted differently across individuals rather than sequentially ordered. This challenges linear transition models and supports a more hybrid understanding of motivation in digital careers. Extending the work of Stephens et al. (2024), who highlight follower-driven venture development, this study shows that motivational complexity is not a product of platform dynamics alone but is shaped by the professional and personal histories participants bring to content creation.

The research additionally highlights retrospective sense-making as a mechanism of identity consolidation. Several participants framed earlier decisions as part of a coherent entrepreneurial path only in retrospect, which aligns with narrative identity theory and supports Leitch et al.'s (2016) view that identity is dynamic, socially constructed, and continuously evolving. This study contributes by providing empirical evidence from a digital entrepreneurship context that retrospective framing is not merely a storytelling device but a substantive process through which entrepreneurial identity becomes stabilised. The implication is that entrepreneurial self-recognition is temporally displaced from entrepreneurial action, a finding with significance for how identity formation is theorised and studied.

The findings shed light on the multi-role nature of participants' identities. Consistent with Stryker et al. (2000), participants held multiple simultaneous identities, including professional, educator, creator, and entrepreneur, without any single identity achieving stable dominance. The present study extends role identity theory (Stryker et al., 2000) by showing that in platform-based careers, identity is not merely multiple but platform-dependent, with participants performing distinct versions of themselves across Instagram, LinkedIn, and X, depending on audience expectations. This fragmented yet interconnected performance reflects what the literature describes as the hybrid nature of digital entrepreneurial careers, but the present study adds specificity by showing how this fragmentation is experienced and managed at the individual level.

This research also enriches discussions on gender and cultural differences. The gendered and cultural expectations that shape legitimacy negotiations among female participants align with Anglin et al. (2022), who argue that individuals are evaluated according to socially constructed role expectations. The present study extends this framework to digital entrepreneurship contexts, showing that role incongruity is not only experienced between influencer and entrepreneur roles but also between entrepreneurial identity and broader social expectations tied to gender and cultural context. This dimension remains underexplored in existing digital entrepreneurship literature and represents an important avenue for future theoretical development.

Findings from the theme 3 regarding psychological and structural constraints support the journal articles by Abidin et al. (2016) and Arriagada et al. (2020), which argue that social media platforms are creating significant pressure for constant visibility, productivity, and emotional self-

management. One of the findings suggests that this theme involves self-doubt, struggles with legitimacy, and imposter syndrome. Many participants doubted whether they were calling themselves “influencers” or “entrepreneurs,” yet they often generated audiences, engagement, and income. For example, Sarah’s uncertainty regarding whether 2000 followers were enough to be an influencer shows how legitimacy became dependent on external visibility metrics. So, this aligns with the article by Abidin et al. (2016), which examines visibility labour, in which influencers regularly work to maintain relevance and legitimacy through audience engagement and visibility. Another example would be participants who frequently minimise their achievements or shape their entrepreneurial journeys as “random” rather than intentional. For instance, Astrid described her content creation journey as developing naturally, while Kathrine did not label herself an influencer, instead being very active on social media. These findings align with Hoang et al. (2010), who argued that entrepreneurial role identity strongly influences entrepreneurial persistence and self-understanding. This finding also supports research by Fauchart et al. (2011) on founder identity, in which entrepreneurs construct identities around different motivations, such as community, mission, or commercial goals. Participants often justified their visibility and content creation by helping others, spreading awareness and education, or sharing personal values, rather than, for example, financial ambition or success alone. Therefore, Kathrine emphasised the importance of sharing values and providing emotional support, while Alexander connected his content creation with legal education and activism. Therefore, the study contributes to founder identity literature by showing that influencer entrepreneurs frequently combine entrepreneurial activity with educational or socially oriented motivations.

Another finding concerned the emotional burden associated with online visibility and entrepreneurial performance. Participants often said that content creation is emotionally exhausting due to constant audience evaluation, pressure for consistency and everyday public exposure. It supports Arriagada et al. (2020), who argued that platform capitalism creates conditions requiring the maintenance of everyday long-term productivity and visibility. Moreover, one participant characterised work within social media as “feeding the machine”, illustrating how creators may become psychologically overwhelmed by endless cycles of production and audience engagement. Moreover, this research aligns with Kelly et al. (2022), who explored the limitations and emotional uncertainty of women entrepreneurs in digital spaces. Therefore, our study can extend this argument by suggesting that emotional instability and identity uncertainty may reflect

broader structural features of platform entrepreneurship rather than being experienced by particular demographic groups. Also, our research can potentially contribute to the article by Shepherd et al. (2018), which argued that entrepreneurial identity involves emotional and cognitive processes that shape how certain people understand entrepreneurial roles. Hence, our research can contribute by showing how these emotional processes become intensified through algorithmic visibility systems, audience feedback, and public evaluation within the social media environment.

Another theme observed in this study was the fragmented and hybrid nature of entrepreneurial identity construction among influencers. Participants rarely described themselves through a single entrepreneurial identity. Instead, they combined multiple personal and professional identities simultaneously, for example, entrepreneur, educator, activist, academic, athlete, researcher, or creative individual. Although this finding can support the entrepreneurship literature, pointing out that entrepreneurial identity is socially constructed, negotiated, and evolving rather than fixed or stable (Leitch et al., 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Shepherd et al., 2018). Similarly, Horst et al. (2020), which argued that entrepreneurial identity development in digital media environments involves long-term experimentation and adaptation across multiple social contexts. Also, Stephens et al. (2024) argued that social media entrepreneurs construct entrepreneurial stories gradually as they navigate complex personal and professional experiences.

The study extends this literature by showing that entrepreneurial identity among influencers rarely completely replaces prior professional identities. Instead, entrepreneurship became integrated with participants' certain experiences, values, and professional backgrounds. For example, this was especially evident in Alexander's narrative, where entrepreneurship was integrated with his legal, academic, and activist backgrounds. Alexander did not separate his entrepreneurial activities from his professional expertise or social motivations. Despite his YouTube activities and content creation becoming extensions of his broader identity focused on education, law, and human rights. Another example, Astrid combined her academic role, political science background, career management position, small business ownership, and content creation. Although these results support the research by Burton et al. (2016), who found that entrepreneurial careers involve nonlinear trajectories in which people move between occupational identities rather than abandoning former roles entirely. Therefore, the current study prolongs this discussion into

influencer culture, showing how digital platforms allow entrepreneurial identity to emerge alongside multiple co-existing identities rather than replacing them.

Additionally, the findings strongly connect with role theory perspectives. For example, the research by Anglin et al. (2022) showed that individuals simultaneously hold multiple social roles and adapt these roles depending on context and social expectations. Moreover, participants within this study continuously shifted between personal, creative, and strategic entrepreneurial identities. For instance, Sandra's distinction between creating content for personal enjoyment and creating content strategically for brands demonstrates this particularly clearly. When producing content for herself, Sandra emphasised creativity, enjoyment, and self-expression. However, when working commercially for brands, she described becoming more strategic and goal-oriented. This demonstrates how entrepreneurial identity performance changes depending on audience, professional expectations, and commercial objectives.

Moreover, the study contributes to the role theory literature by illustrating how influencers negotiate different identity performances across social contexts and platform environments. Entrepreneurial identity among influencers appears very flexible and adaptive rather than stable. Participants moved flexibly between commercial professionalism and authentic self-expression while managing multiple expectations simultaneously. Different aspects of this theme concerned platform-specific identity performances. Participants actively adapted how they presented themselves, spending more on the type of social media they used. Astrid, for example, explained that she adopted "two different personalities" across different social media platforms: the X platform is associated with expertise, political analysis, and authority, while Instagram allows more emotional storytelling and awareness-oriented communication. This demonstrates that different platforms encouraged different communication techniques, emotional expressions, and professional behaviours.

Therefore, this finding supports Khamis et al. (2017), who argued that self-branding and micro-celebrity practices require continuous strategic self-presentation across digital spaces. Another example, Duffy et al. (2015) explained that influencers carefully balance authenticity through self-branding practices online. However, the current study can add an extra issue by showing that these platform-specific performances were not always only strategic or commercially planned. Many

participants described these adaptations as natural responses to platform cultures and audience expectations rather than purely calculated branding strategies. The findings also support Zaheer et al. (2022), who argued that digital entrepreneurial journeys are often characterised by uncertainty, experimentation, and evolving self-understanding. Participants in the study typically placed themselves in fixed categories such as influencer or entrepreneur, suggesting that entrepreneurial identity in digital spaces remains open, flexible, and continuously negotiated. The findings demonstrate that entrepreneurial identity among influencers should not be understood as a fluid, hybrid, and continuously negotiated through systematic interaction among personal values, professional experiences, audience expectations, and digital platform environments.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry practical relevance for several groups. For aspiring digital entrepreneurs, the study highlights that professional expertise and existing credibility are meaningful assets in building an online presence, and that content creation need not be treated as a separate career project but can function as an extension of established knowledge and values. Participants who grounded their content in genuine expertise attracted trust-based audiences that later supported entrepreneurial ventures. This suggests that influencers seeking to transition into entrepreneurship may benefit more from deepening their niche than from broadening their reach (Khamis et al., 2017).

For educators and entrepreneurship program designers, the retrospective dimension of identity formation identified in this study is directly relevant. If individuals often do not recognise themselves as entrepreneurs until well after engaging in entrepreneurial activity, then programs focused solely on intention and planning may be insufficient. Reflective practice components that help participants understand what they are already doing could accelerate identity consolidation and reduce self-doubt and imposter syndrome, as several participants described (Ibarra et al., 1999).

For platform developers and policy makers, the finding that identity is shaped differently across platforms suggests that support infrastructure for digital entrepreneurs should account for platform-specific dynamics rather than treating social media as a uniform environment. Policies aimed at supporting the creator economy, such as monetisation frameworks, tax structures for

freelancers, and business registration processes, should be designed with awareness of the gradual and often informal way entrepreneurial activity emerges in digital careers. Armenia's announcement of YouTube monetisation, mentioned by one participant as a potential trigger for industry development, illustrates how platform-level policy decisions can shape entrepreneurial trajectories in ways that are not yet well understood.

For mentors and coaches working with digital creators, the study underscores the importance of helping clients recognise and articulate their existing professional identities as entrepreneurial assets rather than positioning entrepreneurship as a departure from prior roles. Supporting clients in narrating their own trajectories and in connecting past experience to emerging entrepreneurial practice may be among the most effective forms of identity-level intervention available.

5.3 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, this study's limitation is the scarcity of existing scholarship on influencer-to-entrepreneur transitions as a distinct phenomenon. Research examining the identity processes that unfold as influencers transition into entrepreneurship remains, at best, fragmented across adjacent fields, including digital entrepreneurship, career transition theory, and personal branding (Abidin, 2016; Duffy et al., 2015; Khamis et al., 2017). This study, therefore, acknowledges that it operates at the frontier of an emerging research area, where empirical evidence outpaces theoretical development. Rather than constituting a weakness, this gap represents the very condition that justifies the present study's contribution, and points to the need for dedicated scholarship that treats the influencer-entrepreneur not as a subcategory of existing career models but as a distinct subject of theoretical attention in its own right. Secondly, the sample consists of 9 participants, which is appropriate for the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, but limits the transferability of the findings to other populations and contexts. The conclusions drawn here are analytically rather than statistically generalizable, and caution should be exercised in applying them beyond the specific contexts represented. Also, this study relies on single-point interview data, which captures participants' retrospective accounts of their trajectories but cannot track identity development in real time.

5.4 Future Research Directions

Subsequent studies might benefit from using repeated interviews or longitudinal research designs to better understand how entrepreneurial identities evolve throughout different stages of digital careers (Creswell et al., 2018). Since this study captures participants' reflections at a single point in time, it cannot fully explore how professional self-understanding develops through ongoing interactions with observers, platforms, and commercial activities. Following participants over a longer period might offer greater insight into how they reinterpret past experiences, respond to changing opportunities for visibility and monetisation, and shift between the roles of creator, influencer, and entrepreneur.

In addition, this study relies primarily on self-reported interview data instead of direct observation of participants' online activities. This means there may be differences between how participants describe themselves and how these roles are actually presented or seen within digital platform environments. Future studies could therefore combine interview data with methods such as digital trace analysis, platform observation, content analysis, or ethnographic research to develop a richer and more detailed understanding of how entrepreneurial identities are shaped through audience interaction and platform engagement (Creswell et al., 2018). Additionally, studies involving broader and more diverse samples could help clarify how factors such as gender, professional background, audience size, and commercial strategies influence the transition from influencer activity to entrepreneurship.

6. Conclusion

This study aims to examine how digital influencers identify themselves through the transition to entrepreneurship and how entrepreneurial identity is constructed during this process. The research question asked how influencers identify themselves during the transition from influencer to entrepreneur. Based on 9 semi-structured interviews, the study identified four interconnected themes: identity construction across the influencer to entrepreneur transition, the construction of authority through social validation, psychological and structural constraints, and fragmented, hybrid, and progressively evolving identity construction. Together, these themes show a transition that is more complex, gradual, and identity-intensive than existing literature has tended to acknowledge.

The primary finding indicates that entrepreneurial identity among digital influencers develops gradually through the integration of prior professional experience and creative practice, rather than emerging at a single identifiable moment. Consequently, the transition to entrepreneurship unfolded gradually, shaped by evolving motivations, practical learning experiences, and the ongoing development of entrepreneurial identity. Participants reported holding both purpose-driven and commercially oriented motivations simultaneously from the outset, rather than moving sequentially from one to the other. A recurring pattern across the interviews was that participants often identified as entrepreneurs only retrospectively, sometimes long after engaging in entrepreneurial activities. The study found that authority was not self-assigned but gradually conferred through audience engagement. This dynamic indicates that, in digital environments, identity and legitimacy are co-constructed through ongoing interaction rather than predetermined. The transition to entrepreneurship also involved psychological challenges.

Additionally, participants simultaneously maintained multiple professional identities, such as entrepreneur, content creator, educator, or field specialist, and adapted their self-presentation according to the platform. These findings indicate that the transition from influencer to entrepreneur is a gradual process shaped by prior experience, audience interaction, platform dynamics, and evolving self-identity.

This study contributes to entrepreneurship research by focusing on a group whose career trajectories are not well understood: digital influencers transitioning to entrepreneurship. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs, they typically do not follow structured entrepreneurial pathways and frequently develop their businesses without formal support systems or institutional guidance. The study demonstrates that many individuals engage in entrepreneurial activities well before formally identifying as entrepreneurs, indicating that entrepreneurial development can emerge gradually through routine professional and creative practices rather than through formal business launches. Recognizing this process can enable influencer-entrepreneurs and stakeholders to better address the realities of digital and platform-based careers. Different platforms foster distinct forms of self-presentation and audience interaction, which affect how individuals construct and communicate their professional identities.

Hence, this study demonstrates that entrepreneurship in digital contexts involves not only business creation but also the gradual construction of entrepreneurial identity. Participants frequently engaged in entrepreneurial practices prior to fully identifying themselves as entrepreneurs. Their transition was characterized by gradual change, influenced by prior experience, audience interaction, platform engagement, and ongoing self-reflection. The findings further reveal that the boundaries between influencers, content creators, and entrepreneurs are often ambiguous and overlapping. Rather than replacing one identity with another, participants negotiated multiple roles simultaneously and adapted them across various contexts and platforms. As digital careers continue to expand, understanding these identity processes is increasingly important for both research and practice.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Interview Guide: How influencers identify themselves through the transition from influencer to entrepreneur

Part 1: Personal Background and Early Aspirations

1. Could you tell us a little about yourself, including your background, education, and what your career goals were before becoming an influencer?
2. Did you initially plan to become an influencer?
3. How did your journey as an influencer begin?
4. Was becoming an influencer something intentional, or did it happen more accidentally?

Part 2: Influencer Identity Phase

1. How would you describe your role when you were primarily working as an influencer?
2. How did you see yourself professionally at that time?
3. What did being an influencer mean to you personally?
4. How did you build and present your personal brand during that period?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your followers?
6. How important was authenticity for you when working as an influencer?

Part 3: Transition to Entrepreneurship

1. What motivated you to start your own business or entrepreneurial activity?
2. Was there a specific moment when you began to see yourself as more than just an influencer?
3. What happened during that moment or period?
4. Did your way of thinking or decision-making change once you started building a business? If yes, how?
5. What were the main challenges you experienced while balancing being an influencer and running a business?

Part 4: Entrepreneurial Identity Construction

1. What actions did you take to show others that you were now running a business and not only influencing?

2. Did you deliberately try to change how people see you professionally? If yes, how?
3. Did you feel that you needed to prove yourself as a “real entrepreneur”? How did you do that?
4. Once you started your own business, did you begin to see your influencer role differently?

Part 5: Social Reactions and Identity Negotiation

1. How did your followers react when you started moving toward entrepreneurship?
2. Did your relationships with brands, partners, or industry contacts change after you started your business?
3. Have you ever felt tension between staying authentic as an influencer and growing your business?
4. Can you give an example of such a situation?

Part 6: Reflection

1. Do you now see yourself primarily as an influencer, an entrepreneur, or both?
2. Looking back, how has this transition changed the way you see yourself professionally?
3. What advice would you give to influencers who want to become entrepreneurs?

Closing Questions

1. Is there anything about your journey that we did not ask but that you think is important to mention?
2. Do you have any questions for us?

Appendix B - AI Declaration

In accordance with Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM) guidelines, this thesis includes a mandatory statement on the use of generative artificial intelligence. Generative AI tools were used as a limited support during the writing process. ChatGPT was used for language assistance, including grammar correction and minor sentence-level clarity improvements. It was not used to generate ideas, arguments, analysis, or findings. All theoretical development, empirical analysis, interpretations, and conclusions were developed independently by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this thesis, and all material has been critically reviewed to ensure academic integrity.