#Fakefamous: How do influencers use disinformation to establish long-term credibility on social media?

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#Fakefamous: How do influencers use disinformation to establish long-term credibility on social media?

Abstract

Purpose: Credible influencers play a key role in shaping the views and preferences of social media users. However, many influencers intentionally use disinformation (e.g., false narratives) to deceive users and gain their trust. This can have serious repercussions, not only for the firms that associate with these influencers but also for users. Further, and alarmingly, many influencers who use disinformation can sustain their credibility over time. This research explores how influencers use disinformation to establish long-term credibility on social media.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on self-presentation theory, we use an in-depth qualitative case study to address our research question, primarily relying on archival data obtained from multiple sources.

Findings: Our findings suggest that three stages of self-presentation are required to establish influencer credibility based on disinformation: backstage (preparing to deceive), experimentation (testing deception), and frontstage (launching deceptive ideas on a large scale). We also find that when fraudulent influencers simultaneously weaponise a counterculture and mindfully encase disinformation, users view them as highly credible.

Originality/value: We contribute to self-presentation theory by adding experimentation as a critical stage in developing disinformation that works for long periods. We also contribute to the literature at the intersection of social media influencers and disinformation research by revealing why social media users believe in fraudulent influencers.

Practical implications: We offer practical suggestions for regulating fraudulent influencers, including enacting fact-checking procedures, using IT artefacts as reliability signals, and building awareness programmes to develop vigilance in social media communities.

Keywords: social media influencers, disinformation, self-presentation, counterculture, case study, qualitative research.

Paper type: Research paper

Information Technology & People

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1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, users are no longer merely passive recipients of information from brands. Instead, they can act as both consumers and promoters (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Some users gain traction, attract large audiences, and become sources of advice for their followers; thus developing into influencers (Gräve, 2019; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Influencers are users or groups of users "who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers" (Leung *et al.*, 2022, p. 228). Research shows that 63% of US consumers buy specific brands based on recommendations offered by influencers (Statista, 2018). Therefore, many firms are increasingly entering into paid collaborations with influencers to leverage their positive word-of-mouth to increase brand awareness, maximise campaign reach, and strengthen emotional intimacy with users (Bussy-Socrate and Sokolova, 2024; Zhou *et al.*, 2021). As a result, the influencer industry is growing, with its market size exceeding $16.4 billion in 2022 (Dhun and Dangi, 2022).

The foundation for success as an influencer is credibility (Kim and Kim, 2021; Ozuem *et al.*, 2023; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). Followers view influencers as credible sources because they produce seemingly authentic content, promote brands in their domain of expertise, and are transparent about their sponsorship arrangements with brands (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Kapitan *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, users trust influencer posts about brands more than company posts (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

However, in contrast to user perceptions, many influencers are increasingly using disinformation, intentionally deceiving users to establish credibility on social media (Bishop, 2021; George *et al.*, 2021). Disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is created and spread intentionally, often with the aim of promoting a particular agenda (George

Information Technology & People

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et al., 2021; Shirish *et al.*, 2021; Westney *et al.*, 2024; Wu *et al.*, 2023). Influencer fraud is a growing concern for brands, with influencers using doctored images, manipulating their follower counts, and inventing stories about their lives (Kim *et al.*, 2021; McMullan, 2022). This is alarming because evidence suggests many users invest blind faith in content shared on social media (Pal and Banerjee, 2021; Shareef *et al.*, 2020; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Thus, influencers who employ disinformation can not only hurt a brand's reputation and sales (Kim *et al.*, 2021) but also encourage users to engage in risky or inappropriate behaviours (e.g., following on a diet that can cause long-term illness). Such negative impacts are exacerbated when fraudulent influencers sustain their credibility for many years without getting caught. It is therefore salient to explore the following research question: ***How do influencers use disinformation to establish long-term credibility on social media?***

To address our research question, we undertake an in-depth, qualitative case analysis (Walsham, 1995) of a fraudulent wellness influencer through the lens of self-presentation theory (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996). Self-presentation theory is concerned with how individuals project themselves to shape how others view them (Watanabe *et al.*, 2023). The theory is particularly relevant in the social media context, as users share posts about themselves to maintain certain impressions (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). We argue that, particularly on social media, self-presentation can also be weaponised by users to present fake personas and hide their true selves.

Our findings indicate that fraudulent influencers use three phases to establish long-term credibility: (i) backstage, (ii) experimentation, and (iii) frontstage. Backstage is the preparatory phase, during which fraudulent influencers conduct background research and frame compelling false narratives. Our study extends self-presentation theory by adding an experimentation stage, in which fraudulent influencers test their false narratives, evaluate user reactions, and refine their actions accordingly. Finally, in the frontstage phase,

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fraudulent influencers broadcast their false narratives to the wider public and legitimise their false claims. Our findings also reveal that when fraudulent influencers concurrently (i) weaponise a counterculture, such as wellness culture and (ii) mindfully encase disinformation, the wider public will view them as highly credible.

Based on our findings, the study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to the literature at the intersection of social media influencers and disinformation (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2022; Moravec *et al.*, 2019) by offering new insights into how and why influencers' deceitful strategies can establish long-term credibility on social media. Second, it contributes to the persuasion literature by showing that an influencer's credibility does not always have positive implications (e.g., Belanche *et al.*, 2021a; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Credibility can be a double-edged sword, causing harm to users, particularly when it is established based on disinformation. Finally, we extend self-presentation theory (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996) by adding an experimentation stage to the original model. Moreover, we contribute to the ongoing application of this theory in the online context (e.g., social media).

We also offer practical mitigation strategies to businesses engaging with influencers (e.g., cosmetics companies), media agencies (e.g., online lifestyle magazines), and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and TikTok). Our suggestions include stricter verification procedures, the use of IT artefacts (e.g., badges) as reliability indicators, and warning social media communities about fraud influencers.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we review the related literature on influencers, credibility, and influencer fraud. Second, we discuss self-presentation theory and how it can be used to establish credibility on social media. Third, we describe our research methodology, detailing how we collected and analysed our data. Fourth, we present our findings and

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conceptual framework. The final section is a detailed discussion, including our contributions, the study's limitations, and suggestions for future empirical work.

2. Theoretical Background

Firms are increasingly engaging with influencers to promote their brands (Gu *et al.*, 2024; Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Rundin and Colliander, 2021), ideally partnering with the right online opinion leaders for their products or services (Lin *et al.*, 2018). In exchange for a fee, influencers share sponsored content and spread positive word of mouth to engage their followers with a particular brand (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2024; Hwang and Jeong, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2021). This practice enables firms to tap into the intangible resources offered by influencers; for example, their creativity to come up with unique content (Leung *et al.*, 2022), and their credibility in a specific domain (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020) such as yoga or gaming. As discussed next, the success of influencers rests on their ability to engage users in online environments such as social media (Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2024).

2.1 Influencers' online engagement initiatives

Influencers' online engagement initiatives encompass a range of strategies to foster user interaction and participation on social media (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2021; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Examples include live-streaming, writing blogs, and posting pictures and videos that include sponsored brands (Giuffredi-Kähr *et al.*, 2022; Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). However, not all online engagement initiatives are effective, with some resulting in negative implications for brands and firms (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2021; Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). For instance, users typically react negatively to product-only influencer posts because they perceive the influencer to be more financially motivated, and therefore commercial (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). In addition, when influencers post entertaining content (e.g., funny videos) for brands that are considered competent (i.e., intelligent and

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capable), users find this less authentic (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2021). We argue that the effectiveness of online engagement initiatives is influenced by (i) post characteristics, (ii) content marketing tactics, (iii) users' psychology, and (iv) influencers' personal attributes.

The characteristics of social media posts include key parameters such as information quality, design quality, and creativity (Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Information quality refers to the timeliness, usefulness, and authenticity of posts; it strengthens users' intentions to engage with influencers (Cheung *et al.*, 2008; Kim and Baek, 2022). In practice, influencers ensure higher levels of information quality by sharing the latest information on a topic of interest (e.g., fashion and lifestyle) and providing honest reviews or opinions about brands they use (Cheung *et al.*, 2022). However, influencers need to be mindful of the level of positive information they share about brands (Leung *et al.*, 2022). High levels of positive posts can make users sceptical, raising perceptions of manipulation (Leung *et al.*, 2022). As such, influencers should exercise caution and offer a more critical analysis of brands, including both strengths and areas for improvement.

Design quality relates to the aesthetics of social media posts, with elements such as the format, colour palette, and graphical aspects (Cheung *et al.*, 2022; Tang, 2023) orchestrated in a way that makes content visually appealing (Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Influencers need to demonstrate creativity in content creation to gain attention and engage followers (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Coming up with original and relevant posts drives up numbers of views, positive reactions, and shares on social media (Leung *et al.*, 2022; Rosengren *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, research suggests that when influencers develop creative posts, this fosters a positive impression and enhances opinion leadership (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

Content marketing tactics are also used to effectively engage users on social media (Saleh, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021), and include the use of humour (Kostygina *et al.*, 2020)

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and high-arousal language (Rizzo *et al.*, 2024). In addition, as part of a broader marketing campaign, influencers may provide personalised discount codes and offer giveaways to promote a brand and increase its sales (Britt *et al.*, 2020; Gross and von Wangenheim, 2022). However, the success of influencers' tactics depends on having control over the content they produce, as opposed to this being controlled by firms (Kapitan *et al.*, 2021). When influencers have more control over their work, the perceived trustworthiness of their content increases, and in turn user engagement (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2020). As a result, influencers frequently create meaningful content to develop a large and engaged network of followers on social media (Hudders and Lou, 2022). However, they need to be cautious about posting too frequently, as followers may then become fatigued and uninterested in their content (Leung *et al.*, 2022).

The third factor is users' psychology. The psychological process of engagement explains why users engage with influencers, offering insight into how to make online engagement initiatives more effective. Studies highlight that users engage when they feel emotionally connected to influencers (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, users develop genuine affection for influencers when they perceive them to be transparent and authentic about their daily lives on social media (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). Homophily, the perception of having similar attitudes, values and social status to another person or group, is another psychological reason why users engage with influencers (Hu *et al.*, 2023; Masuda *et al.*, 2022; Shehzala *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, parasocial relationships involving users' imagined, but in reality one-sided friendships with influencers are a key aspect of online engagement (Aw *et al.*, 2023; Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Empirical work shows that when users sense that influencers are credible, fair, and respectful to their followers, parasocial relationships are formed (Ashraf *et al.*, 2023). Wishful identification – that is, a user's desire to be and behave similarly to an influencer – is also

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instrumental in the formation of psychological connections (Hu *et al.*, 2020). In practice, users feel a sense of inspiration and look up to influencers, encouraging them to adjust their behaviours to more closely identify with influencers (Ki *et al.*, 2020).

Influencers' personal attributes, such as popularity and credibility, also play an important role in their marketing success (Balaji *et al.*, 2021; Belanche *et al.*, 2021a; Leung *et al.*, 2022). Popularity – the number of followers an influencer possesses – has an impact on user engagement (Beichert *et al.*, 2024; Leung *et al.*, 2022). However, prior research offers mixed results. On the one hand, popularity fosters a sense of credibility, status, and reputation in a particular field (Leung *et al.*, 2022). As such, users are likely to believe influencers with high follower counts and consider them opinion leaders (Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Conversely, high popularity can have negative implications for user engagement (Wies *et al.*, 2023; Yadav *et al.*, 2022) when it is perceived as signalling low levels of relationship, or weak ties between influencers and their followers (Wies *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, credibility is an established phenomenon in influencer research in the social sciences in general, and marketing and advertising in particular (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2021; Ozuem *et al.*, 2023; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). Drawing on persuasion research (Hovland and Weiss, 1951), credibility is defined as the degree to which an influencer is perceived as attractive, expert, and trustworthy (Ohanian, 1990; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020). Attractiveness relates to whether an influencer is likeable and physically appealing (Ki *et al.*, 2022). Expertise refers to the influencer's knowledge, skills, and experience in a particular field or profession (Bourne Jr *et al.*, 2014), and trustworthiness concerns whether an influencer is honest, truthful, and believable in their opinions and recommendations (Yuan and Lou, 2020). Trustworthy influencers publish authentic content that is real and based on their personal experiences (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020; Kapitan *et al.*,

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2021). Users are attracted to such content because unlike advertisements, it is original and personal, and thus more relatable (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021; Leung *et al.*, 2022).

2.2 The rise of fraudulent influencers

In contrast to views of influencers as authentic and truthful, more and more influencers are using disinformation to build credibility on social media (Bishop, 2021; Mangiò and Di Domenico, 2022) by intentionally deceiving users (George *et al.*, 2021; Shirish *et al.*, 2021; Westney *et al.*, 2024; Wu *et al.*, 2023). For example, some influencers post fake content such as doctored images to make themselves look genuine and gain traction. Users believe the fake content (e.g., videos, pictures, text) because it looks and feels real (Moravec *et al.*, 2019; Vasist and Krishnan, 2022**.** They trust the content even more if it fits their existing values and beliefs (Kim and Dennis, 2019; Moravec *et al.*, 2019).

Fraudulent influencers can influence social media users, particularly adolescents, to engage in risky or inappropriate behaviour (de Castro *et al.*, 2021; Shepherd *et al.*, 2023). For example, filtered images can promote negative body image, affecting users' health and lifestyle. In addition, influencer fraud can diminish brand reputation and trust over time as users build negative perceptions of brands that engage with such influencers (Costello and Biondi, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2021).

Based on our readings of academic research (Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Leban, 2022; Shepherd *et al.*, 2023), case studies, and news articles, as well as observations of fraud influencers on social media, we argue that influencer credibility based on disinformation can either be (i) short-lived – that is, sustained for a few hours, days, weeks, or months, or (ii) prolonged – that is, sustained for years. While fraud influencers can be harmful to their followers and wider society, their deceptive actions are debunked sooner rather than later. As a result, they lose credibility relatively quickly. For instance, one influencer used a filter to

Information Technology & People

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make herself look young during live-streaming sessions. While her followers initially adored her, she quickly lost them when a glitch in the filter during one of the live sessions resulted in users seeing her real face [citation anonymised by authors]. In another case, a food-based YouTuber lost credibility with her followers because she chose not to disclose her sponsorship arrangements with food companies [citation anonymised by authors]. Furthermore, firms are able to tell when influencers have purchased fake followers or bots (Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2023).

However, fraudulent influencers who sustain their credibility in the long run (i.e., many years) are even more dangerous and can have long-lasting negative impacts on users' lives, as well as the reputations of brands (Khamis *et al.*, 2017). For example, a wellness influencer sustained her credibility for many years, influencing cancer patients to forego scientifically based treatments (e.g., chemotherapy) and focus on a lifestyle inspired by alternative therapy and whole foods [citation anonymised by authors]. She also had commercial arrangements with well-known brands, whose image was later significantly tarnished due to their association [citation anonymised by authors]. These examples show that social media users may find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between reliable and fraudulent influencers. This research focuses on the influencers who carefully use disinformation to sustain credibility over time.

We argue that the existing literature mainly highlights the problem of influencer fraud and its adverse effects on social media users and brands (Mangiò and Di Domenico, 2022). However, there is limited empirical work on how influencers use disinformation to establish credibility on social media, including for prolonged periods (i.e., many years). Our aim is to contribute to this stream of knowledge from a self-presentation perspective. In the following section we review self-presentation theory, and further discuss how this perspective could be useful in explaining the phenomenon under study.

Information Technology & People

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2.3 Self-presentation theory

Self-presentation theory offers insight into the strategies people use to develop, maintain, or modify the impressions others may have about them (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996). This theoretical lens was originally applied in offline contexts (Jacobs, 1992; Schütz, 1997, 1998; Wayne and Ferris, 1990). Our focus is understanding how influencers use self-presentation strategies to build credibility based on disinformation in online contexts, such as social media. Self-presentation theory fits our purpose for four reasons. First, it is an ideal lens to explore how users present themselves to control how others view them (Eckhardt and Houston, 1998; Marder *et al.*, 2017; Watanabe *et al.*, 2023). Second, it is relevant in the social media context as to project a certain image, users on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook extensively share information about themselves (Chou and Hung, 2016; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). Third, social media users can present fake personas and hide their true selves from others. Finally, users can deploy disinformation to manipulate others' opinions and impressions.

Goffman (1959) called the self-presentation process "impression management", utilising the theatrical metaphors of backstage and frontstage to illustrate the phenomenon. Backstage is a private place, such as one's home (Goffman, 1959). It provides a more comfortable and relaxed atmosphere (Jeacle, 2014; Katie and Danylchuk, 2014) where people can be themselves as no one else is watching. In contrast, frontstage is the platform (in our case social media sites such as Instagram) on which to present oneself to society (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Self-presentation theory encompasses the different back- and frontstage strategies people use to manage the impressions they make (Arkin, 1981; Ma and Agarwal, 2007). Backstage strategies entail exploration and self-rehearsal (Cho *et al.*, 2018; Jacobs, 1992;

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Siegel *et al.*, 2023). Frontstage strategies include supplication, self-promotion, downward comparison, and exemplification (Jones and Pittman, 1982; Schütz, 1998).

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In terms of backstage strategies, exploration refers to conducting research about a phenomenon or context (Jacobs, 1992) that will be the focal point of one's identity; for example, the wellness industry. Self-rehearsal relates to preparing for and developing actions to perform in public (Cho *et al.*, 2018; Siegel *et al.*, 2023). An example is preparing a life story to share on social media about one's journey with wellbeing.

Among frontstage strategies, supplication means projecting oneself as vulnerable or helpless to gain sympathy or solicit assistance from others (Korzynski *et al.*, 2021; Schniederjans *et al.*, 2013). For example, a user may seek financial help on social media by claiming to be struggling with a disease. In contrast, self-promotion involves promoting oneself as an expert, competent in a specific area or field (Bande *et al.*, 2019; Schütz, 1997). This typically involves claims about qualifications, capabilities, or accomplishments (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005), such as posting on social media about certifications or awards. Downward comparison is an attempt to make oneself look favourable at the expense of others (Schütz, 1998; Wills, 1981), for instance by claiming to be a game changer in a particular field where others have failed to make a meaningful contribution. Finally, exemplification refers to actions to portray oneself as a morally better person through deeds that help others (Gardner, 2003; Gilbert and Jones, 1986); for instance, by showcasing charitable or philanthropic activities.

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As shown in Figure 1, together these self-presentation strategies play a profound role in shaping an individual's credibility in the minds of others (Chiang and Suen, 2015; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Jacobs, 1992; Ortiz *et al.*, 2017).

2.4 Previous research focus and potential research agenda

In summary, prior research work offers insight into influencers' engagement initiatives in terms of post characteristics and how posts can be crafted to maintain high levels of information quality, design quality, and creativity (Casaló *et al.*, 2020; Cheung *et al.*, 2022; Kim and Baek, 2022). Studies have unpacked the content marketing tactics applied by influencers, such as post frequency and humour, to foster user engagement (Barta *et al.*, 2023; Kostygina *et al.*, 2020; Leung *et al.*, 2022). Others delve into psychological processes to explain why users engage with influencers (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2023), exploring key psychological concepts such as homophily and wishful identification (Hu *et al.*, 2020; Shehzala *et al.*, 2024). However, these research studies focus on influencer engagement initiatives that are based on truthful and honest tactics (Boerman, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2022; Kapitan *et al.*, 2021). A potential new research thrust is to examine deceitful online engagement initiatives by influencers (Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Kay *et al.*, 2023). In particular, disinformation – that is, influencers' intentional actions to deceive followers (George *et al.*, 2021; Shirish *et al.*, 2021) – provides a useful lens to investigate this phenomenon.

In addition, prior empirical work in persuasion research considers credibility a positive phenomenon that reflects influencers' perceived attractive, expert, and trustworthy nature (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2022; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020). However, with the rise of fraudulent influencers on social media, a potential research avenue is unpacking whether and how credibility can also have negative repercussions for users, firms, and broader society. This calls for more research at the intersection of source

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credibility and deception (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2010). More importantly, examining how such fraudulent credibility is built on a long-term basis is crucial to drawing practical implications to help different stakeholders in our communities become resilient to its negative implications.

Further, self-presentation theory has proven a valuable theoretical lens to explore how individuals maintain their image in everyday society (Goffman, 1959). However, the theory was originally developed for offline contexts, such as social gatherings, interview sessions, political debates, and workplaces (Jacobs, 1992; Schütz, 1997, 1998; Wayne and Ferris, 1990). A potential research thrust, then, is to contribute to the ongoing application of self-presentation theory to online environments where users employ social media and the technology artefacts it offers to manage their self-impressions to others. In other words, social media has become an important platform to manage one's image, complementing the image-building process that occurs in offline settings.

Based on the potential research agendas outlined above (see Table I for a summary), we frame our research at the intersection of disinformation, credibility, and self-presentation, and apply it to the context of social media influencer research. In practice, we seek to address the following research question: ***How do influencers use disinformation to establish long-term credibility on social media?*** To answer this question, we now move on to the methodology that guided our empirical research work.

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Insert Table I here
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3. Methodology

We conducted an in-depth, qualitative case analysis (Walsham, 1995) of a social media influencer – Alpha [anonymised name] – looking at how she used disinformation to

Information Technology & People

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establish credibility on social media for a prolonged period. Due to the nascent state of knowledge on credibility establishment through disinformation, we adopted an interpretive approach (Klein and Myers, 1999; Myers, 2013).

3.1 Case description

This study is based on the case of Alpha, a successful wellness blogger who lied about having terminal brain cancer. We chose this case for three main reasons. First, Alpha used disinformation to establish credibility on social media. She claimed that when conventional treatments failed to help her, she cured her inoperable cancer through lifestyle changes (e.g., healthy eating) and alternative medicine (e.g., ayurvedic, oxygen therapy). She subsequently wrote a book and launched an app based on this claim. Second, she maintained her false credibility for a prolonged period (from 2012 to 2015). Third, she was considered among the most popular influencers and had a large online following (e.g., more than 300,000 followers on Instagram). Popularity is considered highly important and is used by many firms as the basis for choosing the influencers they collaborate with (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Also, Alpha's app became a top-rated and popular food app, winning several awards. Many users started believing her compelling false narrative and purchased the book or app to take control of their own treatment.

3.2 Data collection

This study primarily relies on archival data, a well-recognised data source for conducting case study research (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Archival data adds empirical depth, supports verification of theoretical explanations, and facilitates access to aspects of historical events that may not be accessible otherwise (Pandey *et al.*, 2022). It is also regularly used in information systems research (Deng and Chi, 2012; Kshetri, 2016; Pandey *et al.*, 2022). We obtained a range of archival data from multiple sources, including

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court documents (Federal Court of Australia), online news articles (e.g., Guardian.com), documentaries (BBC), video interviews and news items (e.g., 60 Minutes Australia), and online forums where Alpha participated. Another major data source was a book authored by investigative journalists, which provided further details of the case. Overall, our rich archival data sources enabled an in-depth understanding of how sustained disinformation-based credibility is established on social media. Table II summarises the data used in this study.

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Insert table II here
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3.3 Data analysis

Initially, our analysis involved examining the rich archival data and exploring theories that might be useful to explain our findings. In practice, we coded the raw data without any prior theoretical lens, while simultaneously reviewing the literature for appropriate theories. Through this procedure, we identified self-presentation theory (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996) as a suitable interpretive lens to guide the analysis. Subsequently, as shown in Table III, we followed three stages of data analysis, a method commonly applied in previous case studies in IS research (e.g., Huang *et al.*, 2017; Kotlarsky *et al.*, 2014). In the first stage, we pursued open coding, reading through the archival data to code statements that illustrated activities related to self-presentation strategies. We referred to these activities as first-order concepts (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). In the second stage, we applied axial coding to group the emergent first-order concepts into second-order themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1997, 1998). We then compared these themes against our chosen theoretical lens. For example, we derived concepts such as (i) learning the template for being a successful influencer, and (ii) mirroring the template of a successful influencer. We grouped these concepts under the theme – developing a template for being a successful influencer, which is

Information Technology & People

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a backstage strategy called self-rehearsal. In this phase, we also uncovered themes not included in self-presentation theory. For example, we found first-order concepts such as (i) sharing false narratives on social media and (ii) evaluating users' responses to false narratives. These concepts were grouped under the theme – testing false narratives. In the final stage, we pursued selective coding and categorised the second-order themes into aggregate dimensions (Baiyere *et al.*, 2020; Gioia *et al.*, 2012). For example, we aggregated the themes (i) testing false narratives and (ii) workshopping business ideas and plans into the dimension – experimenting in a small cohort. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used for the coding procedures (Njihia and Merali, 2013).

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Insert Table III here
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Based on our analysis, we developed a conceptual framework by connecting the themes and aggregate dimensions (Montealegre, 2002). The resulting framework (see Figure 2) extends self-presentation theory by adding an experimentation stage. In this stage of our case, Alpha experimented in a small cohort, testing false narratives and workshopping business ideas and plans. We also observed two common patterns across the three phases of self-presentation (backstage, experimentation, and frontstage): *weaponising a counterculture* and *mindfully encasing disinformation*. When used together, these two tactics can help fraud influencers sustain credibility in the minds of their followers. We elaborate on these insights in the findings and discussion sections.

3.4 Trustworthiness of the research

We adhered to the following trustworthiness standards for interpretive research: credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Hirschman, 1986; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). To ensure the credibility of our

Information Technology & People

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findings and interpretations, we tracked Alpha's life story over a long period (2009–2015), through close observation of a large volume of archival data. We also attained data triangulation by reviewing multiple sources, including court documents, news reports, video interviews, documentaries, books, and online blogs. These practices ensured both the richness and accuracy of our findings.

Confirmability was attained through keeping an auditable trail of our research procedures, showing how we came up with our interpretations in a logical and reasonable way. In particular, our data structure (see Table III) illustrates how we derived the concepts, themes, and aggregate dimensions of self-presentation strategies from the raw archival data. We have also provided thick descriptions of our archival data (see Table V), which are readily accessible for reanalysis by others.

Dependability was achieved through constant comparison of the raw archival data, emergent concepts (e.g., framing a compelling false narrative) against the theoretical lens (self-presentation). This procedure ensured consistency in the patterns we derived from the data. In addition, during the data analysis phase, we, the authors, met regularly to review the consistency of our interpretations. Through this procedure, the emergent findings and conceptual framework were refined and improved.

4. Findings

In this section, using the case of Alpha we explain self-presentation strategies to build credibility based on disinformation. Figure 2 shows our conceptual framework, illustrating three categories of self-presentation strategies: backstage, experimentation, and frontstage. Alpha used backstage strategies to develop her potential to be a successful influencer. Subsequently, she experimented on social media to test, evaluate, and refine her actions. Finally, she applied frontstage strategies to present herself to the wider public and become a

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mainstream influencer. Together, these strategies played a crucial role in building credibility, albeit based on disinformation.

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Insert Figure 2 here

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At this point, it is important to differentiate between the backstage, experimentation, and frontstage phases of our framework based on four factors: scale (number of users present), properties (characteristics of the strategies in each stage), motivation (the reasons behind the strategies), and platform (place of occurrence). See Table IV for a summary of our argument.

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Insert Table IV here

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In terms of scale, backstage strategies are pursued alone. In the experimentation phase, the strategies are enacted in a small cohort. Subsequently, on the frontstage, strategies are executed in a large public space. Regarding properties of strategies, all three phases relate to actions, albeit with distinct motivations. In the backstage phase, the motivation is to build a potential idea (e.g., framing a compelling false narrative). In the experimentation stage, the motivation is to test whether the potential idea will work (e.g., by testing false narratives). On the frontstage, the user launches the idea into the mainstream (e.g., broadcasting compelling false narratives). In terms of platform, backstage strategies mostly occur offline, for example in one's home, whereas experimentation and frontstage strategies are enacted in an online world. We now discuss these strategies in greater detail.

Information Technology & People

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4.1 Backstage strategies

To develop herself as an influencer, Alpha pursued exploration and self-rehearsal strategies. In the course of this exploration, she *searched for alternative medicine* approaches, including healthy diets and therapies (e.g., oxygen therapy) through research and travel. In doing so, she decided to *embrace alternative medicine* as part of her lifestyle and self-presentation to propagate disinformation. The quote below, originally from her book, suggests the exploration work undertaken by Alpha in the field of alternative medicine:

> *"I started travelling around the country, speaking to anyone who might help me and treating myself through nutrition and holistic medicine. Meanwhile, I just kept reading, educating myself – everything I now know is gleaned from reading, and speaking with as many people as possible. I was empowering myself to save my own life, through nutrition, patience, determination and love – as well as salt, vitamin and Ayurvedic treatments, craniosacral therapy, oxygen therapy, colonics, and a whole lot of other treatments … I said right from the start that I was a brain cancer patient, on a quest to heal myself naturally."* [Source: Court documents]

Alpha pursued self-rehearsal by developing a template, framing a compelling false narrative and developing a business idea. To *develop a template for being a successful influencer*, Alpha learned from and mirrored a successful wellness influencer, Beta [anonymised name], who actually had cancer and passed away in 2015. For instance, Alpha mirrored Beta's story of trying conventional treatments as a cure for cancer but later empowering herself through a healthy diet to save her own life. Alpha also learned the power of launching a physical artefact (a book) to build credibility, as Beta had done. Such strategies enabled Alpha to master the art of influence, learn how to gain users' trust, and then use it to deceive them. The evidence below offers insight into how Alpha adopted tactics employed by Beta:

> *"The template she [Alpha] used in her story followed a similar path [to Beta]. Both women spoke of spiralling into bad eating habits that began as teenagers. They talked about listening to their doctors and trying*

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> *conventional medicine to treat terminal cancer, but ultimately coming to the realisation of needing to trust their "intuition" ... Beta called herself a cancer survivor, and said she was "living proof of the body's ability to heal itself", while [Alpha] knew her cancer was "curable; my immune system is just suppressed."* [Source: News article]

To *frame* a *compelling false narrative*, Alpha developed a story of having malignant brain cancer and fighting this disease since her early twenties. The quote below illustrates the convincing yet false thoughts behind her story:

> *"I had a stroke at work – I will never forget sitting alone in the doctor's office three weeks later, waiting for my test results. He called me in and said "You have malignant brain cancer, [Alpha] you're dying. You have six weeks. Four months, tops." I remember a suffocating, choking feeling and then not much else."* [Source: Book]

Excerpts from court documents reveal how this compelling narrative was based on deception:

> *"This proceeding concerns alleged conduct of the first respondent, [Alpha], in relation to her claims of being diagnosed with brain cancer. The Director alleges that, in the course of developing and promoting a smart phone application and a book, [Alpha] falsely claimed to have been diagnosed with brain cancer."* [Source: Court documents]

Alpha also *developed a business idea* by envisioning a unique app that would focus on health and wellness. The excerpt below captures the thoughts behind the idea:

> *"I wanted to share what I had learnt on my journey with as many people as possible so I decided to create the world's first health and wellness lifestyle app. I couldn't get the vision out of my head."* [Source: Book]

4.2 Experimentation strategies

To test, evaluate, and refine her actions, Alpha experimented in a small cohort by testing false narratives and workshopping business ideas and plans. *Testing false narratives* helped her evaluate how users would respond to her story, offering early evidence that her

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fake story could capture the attention of many around the world. The following excerpt from Alpha's writings reflects how she tested a false narrative on Instagram about her journey with cancer and taking control of her life with natural remedies. This stimulated a positive response:

> *"I started posting on Instagram – I wanted to share what I had learnt about health and nutrition on my journey with cancer. I said right from the start that I was a brain cancer patient, on a quest to heal myself naturally. I was totally overwhelmed by the immediate response to my first posts – my Instagram account got ridiculous, with hundreds of people contacting me, offering advice and sharing their own stories."* [Source: Book]

Investigative journalists covering Alpha's case suggested that her experimentation on the Instagram platform worked and generated a large following:

> *"She appeared on Instagram just as a photo sharing app was becoming popular, posting as a cancer patient healing herself naturally. She tapped into something big. Her social-media profile exploded, and she quickly amassed tens of thousands of followers."* [Source: Book]

Alpha's strategy to test false narratives in a small cohort had also been successful in a previous attempt, this time in an online forum where she posted:

> *"Tomorrow afternoon I go back into hospital for round three of heart surgeries. If I don't reply to your messages etc, I haven't died ... I'm just back in checking out the nurses. My cancer test results are in so I pick them up then as well. Wish me luck! I'm scared as f** and probably won't sleep until I get forced too."* [Source: Online forum]

The experimentation garnered sympathy and believability from the members of the forum, as seen in the replies below:

> *"I don't know you but, hope all goes well for you!"*
>
> *"Take care best wishes and hope the angel of good health shines upon you. MWAAAAAAAAAAAH! sending all good vibes your way sista."*
>
> *"Yeah good luck. No one deserves to suffer from cancer"*
>
> [Source: Online forum]

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In addition, Alpha experimented with *workshopping her business ideas and plans* for starting a health and wellness app in a small, private Facebook group comprising young parents. This process enabled her to evaluate and refine business propositions. It involved new idea generation, constructive discussion, and feedback mechanisms in a private group of trusted individuals who were similar in terms of demographic and socio-economic variables (e.g., lifecycle stage and family composition) and had a collective identity (young parents). As reported in the book on Alpha written by investigative journalists:

> *"The Facebook group became a place for [Alpha] to connect with other young parents in Melbourne ... Soon the Facebook group became a place for [Alpha] to workshop her business plan. When it came time to pick a name for her business, she put up a post asking the parents to brainstorm ideas."* [Source: Book]

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Insert Table V here
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4.3 Frontstage strategies

To present herself to the wider public, Alpha pursued four key strategies: supplication, downward comparison, self-promotion, and exemplification.

Alpha showed supplication through helplessness by *broadcasting compelling false narratives* and gaining widespread sympathy on a large scale. She reminded users of her cancer story, coming up with dire descriptions of her health condition. The quote below from a 2014 post on Instagram captures how she enacted supplication by sharing the alarming news that she had been diagnosed with a third and fourth cancer:

> *"With frustration and ache in my heart, my beautiful, game-changing community, it hurts me to find space tonight to let you all know with love and strength that I've been diagnosed with a third and fourth [sic] cancer. One is secondary, and the other is primary. I have cancer in my blood, spleen, brain, uterus, and liver. I am hurting. As some of you remember,*

Information Technology & People

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> *there was a scare I briefly spoke about here four months ago where we found gynecological cancer that I stood against with strength I wouldn't have had if it weren't for each of you. With these, it was only a matter of time before it all fell apart as my body goes through the waves of this process."* [Source: News article]

Central to Alpha's supplication strategy was *gaining sympathy at scale* from her network of social media followers and participants at various events (e.g., charities, award ceremonies). Thousands of her followers showed sympathy, showering her with compassionate messages when they read that her cancer had advanced across other organs:

> *"All my love [@anonymised Instagram account] it breaks my heart to read this news. You have changed so many lives with your courage and strength and I pray you will beat this once again. You're an inspiration precious girl, take care and rest up."* [Source: Book]

> *"Our thoughts are with you beautiful lady – you are an amazing soul and an inspiration to all around you. Sending all our healing energy your way xx."* [Source: Book]

In addition, Alpha enacted downward comparison, making her approach to cancer (e.g., by a healthy diet) look favourable by criticising other treatments (e.g., chemotherapy). In particular, she *framed a healthy diet and natural therapy as a superior cure* for cancer. This tactic helped develop her image as a wellness expert. In practice, she seeded lies about being cured by a diet that included, for example, detoxifying fruits and vegetables and excluded ingredients such as gluten and refined sugar. She also seeded lies about using alternative medicine (e.g., oxygen therapy) to help manage her cancer. In other words, she focused on false anecdotal evidence and falsified personal experiences to influence others into believing that alternative remedies could cure cancer.

Alpha *framed conventional treatment* (e.g., chemotherapy) *as an inferior cure* for cancer. She did so by fuelling frustration towards conventional cancer treatment, falsely claiming to have wholly abandoned such treatments, and encouraging others to do so. Alpha spoke negatively about scientific evidence and medical experts to influence others to take

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matters into their own hands. The following quote from an article captures her downward comparison of conventional medicine against natural therapy:

> *"[Alpha] posted a statement on social media reiterating her story – she had given up on conventional treatment and chosen to treat herself naturally. She claimed conventional treatment had made her cancer worse, and she was now helping other people fight cancer by using natural therapies."* [Source: News article]

This is further reiterated in her book, where she suggests that conventional medicine was a mismatch for her needs and instead she used nutrition and lifestyle changes as a healing approach to fight brain cancer:

> *"[Alpha] is an inspirational young mother ... Diagnosed with terminal brain cancer at the age of twenty, she found herself without support and out of sync with conventional medicine. So began a journey of self-education that resulted in her getting back to basics, as she set out to heal herself through nutrition and lifestyle changes."* [Source: Court documents citing Alpha's book]

The third strategy used by Alpha was self-promotion to showcase her skills and expertise to the public. Key to her self-promotion strategy was the *presentation of artefacts*. These were digital (a health and wellness mobile app) and physical (a book), and offered users guidance on how to easily adopt a wellness lifestyle. They established Alpha's expertise in the eyes of others as a wellness influencer. The quote below reflects how she used the power of digital artefacts to develop her expertise:

> *"I wanted to give people access to wellness information, inspiring healthy recipes, and a community. A base so people can encourage wellness back into their lives again, on a platform that most of us are constantly attached to – our phone. The name [of the book] came from the word whole – recognizing the integral needs for a whole life approach we all need to live, not just one aspect of it. The pantry end of it plays on the traditional meaning of pantry – a toolkit, store room, the library of the house, on a digital platform."* [Source: News article]

In addition, Alpha started *broadcasting about awards* received from leading technology and media companies. Such awards reinforced her authority and expertise as a

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credible influencer. For instance, in 2014 a renowned fashion and entertainment magazine for women awarded Alpha the Fun, Fearless Female Award in the social media category.

Alpha enacted exemplification, her fourth strategy, by showing she cared more about others than herself, thus presenting herself as a morally exemplary person. She *hosted a charity event* (online and in-person) to raise money for various causes. However, court documents reveal that not all the proceeds were shared with the intended recipients:

> *"Three of the four nominees to whom Ms [Alpha] referred, namely the [anonymised] Resource Centre, the [anonymised] Foundation and the [anonymised] family, did not receive a donation referrable to the proceeds of the Eventbrite tickets."* [Source: Court documents]

She also *framed her profit-based business as a charity*, claiming that profits from her business (e.g., sales of mobile apps) went towards charity:

> *"Your app download transfers into community donations so not only are you choosing to create changes within your life but you're also financing us to be able to support changes to those that otherwise don't have that access."* [Source: News article]

While questionable in hindsight, Alpha's charitable activities elevated her status as an exemplary human being in the eyes of the public.

4.4 Disinformation-driven credibility

Alpha built credibility based on attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, albeit through disinformation. Users found her extremely *attractive* because of her inspirational story of fighting cancer and her friendly and down-to-earth personality. Further, Alpha was highly photogenic, and for a person allegedly suffering from cancer, she looked picture-perfect, which attracted users even more. Below is a comment from one of her followers, who was in awe of Alpha's beauty:

> *"The other thing that struck me … was [Alpha]'s glow. With beautiful skin, insanely thick hair, and looking almost vibrantly healthy, it seemed*

Information Technology & People

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> *whatever [Alpha] was doing for her health was working."* [Source: News article]

In terms of *expertise*, Alpha developed an image as a "wellness guru" knowledgeable about alternative medicine and plant-based diets to cure cancer. Articles were written in the media about her supposed know-how:

> *"Australian wellness guru [Alpha] … built her career around claims she survived several different kinds of cancer with alternative medicine."* [Source: News article]

Finally, Alpha fostered *trustworthiness*: users believed in her false stories, found her authentic, and as a result, bought her apps and book:

> *"[Gamma] was six months into an intense chemotherapy routine aimed at her recently diagnosed lymphoma when she saw [Alpha] on Instagram… "I'm dying on the inside, getting worse with every single treatment. I look horrendous. And she's [Alpha] out there living her best life," [Gamma] thought as [Alpha] posted snatches of her curated lifestyle on social media. Influenced by it, [Gamma] bought the wellness guru's cookbook and app."* [Source: News article]

5. Discussion

Extant studies suggest that influencers use authentic information with good intentions to establish credibility on social media (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Leite *et al.*, 2022; Stubb and Colliander, 2019). However, there has been a recent surge in influencers who intentionally deceive users to earn their trust and following (Bishop, 2021; Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Leban, 2022; Mangiò and Di Domenico, 2022; Shepherd *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, the dark side of social media influencers remains largely underexplored (Leban, 2022), particularly how influencers use disinformation to establish credibility on social media. We have attempted to address this question using self-presentation theory (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996). Based on our findings, we present a framework (depicted in Figure 2)

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suggesting that a combination of backstage, experimentation, and frontstage strategies is required to establish disinformation-driven credibility on social media.

5.1 How is self-presentation used to establish credibility on social media based on disinformation?

Fraudulent influencers use the backstage (Cho *et al.*, 2018; Jacobs, 1992; Siegel *et al.*, 2023) to plan deceptive ideas and develop their potential as successful influencers. In this phase, influencers can identify a niche industry (e.g., wellness) and work on understanding its beliefs and values. They can also explore and develop different tricks to deceive those who follow that industry. For example, our case illustrates how Alpha explored the different values embedded in the wellness industry. She also researched alternative therapies and framed a compelling false narrative about fighting cancer using those therapies.

Our framework extends self-presentation theory to the online context by adding an experimentation stage; this is a key contribution of the study. The experimentation stage is critical in establishing credibility on social media based on disinformation. Self-presentation theory (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Jacobs, 1992; Leary, 1996; Wayne and Ferris, 1990) was originally developed in the offline context, where experimentation is challenging and not always feasible to enact. For instance, it might be difficult for an influencer to bring together 50 to 60 people in one place and generate feedback about a new idea/narrative. There are logistical, operational, and financial issues involved that can hinder the process. Furthermore, while people can be biased, they are more likely to respond or behave in a way they believe is socially desirable in a public forum or group context. Hence, would-be influencers might find it difficult to draw accurate conclusions from an offline experimentation phase. However, our findings suggest that in an online world, particularly on social media, users can easily and almost instantaneously test and evaluate their deceptive ideas in a small cohort (e.g., a Facebook group). We argue that experimentation is therefore a

Information Technology & People

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crucial stage in creating disinformation that achieves sustained credibility over time (i.e., many years) in online contexts. It allows fraudulent influencers to refine and improve their strategies, making them extremely difficult for the broader community to detect. For example, Alpha first shared her false narratives with a small community on Instagram, and then evaluated users' reactions to those stories. After receiving extremely positive feedback from community members, she decided to make her false narratives available to a larger audience via Instagram, Facebook, and traditional mainstream media such as television and magazines. It is important to note that gaining access to traditional mainstream media outlets is generally challenging because these outlets have gatekeepers, such as editors, who control what content gets published or broadcast (Al-Rawi, 2019). However, research suggests that editorial oversights can happen, and corporate interests (e.g., choosing stories because of their news value despite concerns over their authenticity, or stories that fit ideological tendencies) may influence decisions about content (Tsfati *et al.*, 2020). Such factors may allow fraud influencers to access traditional mainstream media.

Finally, the frontstage (Jones and Pittman, 1982; Schütz, 1998) is where fraud influencers can present themselves to the wider public to become popular mainstream figures. Frontstage strategies allow fraud influencers to promote their compelling false narratives and build sympathetic relationships with their followers. Influencers can also promote their (false) expertise and achievements (Bande *et al.*, 2019; Schütz, 1997; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005), as well as project integrity or moral worthiness (Gardner, 2003; Gilbert and Jones, 1986). For instance, Alpha shared dire descriptions of her fake cancer to gain emotional support from her followers on social media. She also advertised her awards and promoted herself as a wellness expert. Moreover, she highlighted her noble acts, for example hosting online charity events, even though she did not donate all the proceeds to charity.

Information Technology & People

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Prior research has reported the tactics used by some social media influencers to build credibility, for instance, purchasing fake followers or bots (Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2023), using doctored images, or employing video filters to deceive users [citation anonymised by authors]. However, these tactics are short-term oriented and the influencers utilising them are usually exposed rather quickly. For instance, firms can evaluate whether there is a spike in an influencer's follower count, or high levels of irrelevant comments on their posts. However, our research unpacks a more strategic approach by fraud influencers using backstage, experimentation, and frontstage strategies to build long-term credibility on social media. This is key because strategic self-presentation requires a long-term approach with considerable planning and execution (Goffman, 1959; Jacobs, 1992), in turn making it difficult for users to detect the underlying deception.

5.2 Why do users see influencers who employ disinformation as credible?

Of particular note are the reasons social media users see influencers who employ disinformation as credible. Notably, previous findings reported in the social media influencer literature suggest that parasocial relationships (Ashraf *et al.*, 2023; Cheung *et al.*, 2022), wishful identification (Hu *et al.*, 2020; Ki *et al.*, 2020), emotional connection (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2023), and homophily (Hu *et al.*, 2023; Masuda *et al.*, 2022) are the most common psychological factors underlying users' positive attitudes towards an influencer. Additionally, prior disinformation literature suggests that users believe in disinformation when fake content attributes look real, for example doctored images and deepfake videos (Moravec *et al.*, 2019; Vasist and Krishnan, 2022). This is exacerbated by the confirmation bias that arises when fake content aligns with users' belief systems (Kim and Dennis, 2019; Moravec *et al.*, 2019). Other common psychological drivers of belief in disinformation include users' intuitive thinking, the illusory truth effect (Ecker *et al.*, 2022), and social proof (Buchanan, 2020). People are willing to trade credibility for need satisfaction, suggesting that

Information Technology & People

the gratification they obtain from social media may outweigh concerns about credibility (Johnson and Kaye, 2015).

Our study adds to the social media influencer and disinformation research streams with the new insight that when influencers simultaneously (i) weaponise a counterculture and (ii) mindfully encase disinformation, users see them as credible.

Countercultures are cultural practices, trends, and values that are not necessarily widely accepted by society (Turner, 2006). Examples include hippie culture, climate activist culture, and wellness culture (Ingram, 2020; Pruitt, 2021; Yablonsky, 2014). The climate activist counterculture is a social movement whose aim is to pressure companies and government agencies into developing policies to protect the sustainability of our environment (Belam and Staff, 2019; Sabherwal *et al.*, 2021). In the wellness industry, countercultural practices may include attending yoga classes and using natural and organic products (Mayo Clinic, 2022; Macmillan and Naftulin, 2017; Yokoi, 2020). Counterculture is therefore not a bad or negative phenomenon. Embracing or crediting a counterculture simply means recognising and valuing a unique culture that challenges mainstream cultural narratives and values.

However, our findings suggest that such countercultures can be weaponised by fraud influencers to promote disinformation and encourage users to engage in risky behaviours. By weaponizing counterculture, we mean using elements such as alternative beliefs and values as a means of manipulating public opinion and advancing certain interests such as for personal gain. Weaponisation is achieved by embracing or crediting the counterculture yet distorting some of its elements with arguments based on personal testimonials rather than scientific evidence. This is problematic because it can erode the authenticity and integrity of countercultural movements and undermine their potential to create positive change.

Information Technology & People

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Fraudulent influencers and their followers typically express low trust in mainstream scientific institutions (e.g., medical experts, pharmaceutical corporations), focusing on self-empowerment (i.e., taking control of one's own situation) [citation anonymised by authors]. They also foster a highly unregulated space that relies heavily on personal testimonials and anecdotal evidence [citation anonymised by authors]. This allows users to speak freely and question the mainstream narrative. In the case of Alpha, she weaponised the counterculture of wellness by speaking negatively about scientific evidence and medical experts. Furthermore, she focused on false anecdotal evidence and personal experiences to influence others into believing that alternative remedies can cure cancer. She also encouraged her followers to take matters into their own hands when fighting diseases such as cancer. She offered users questionable guidance (mainly through social media, her wellness app, and her recipe book) on how to easily adopt a wellness lifestyle that could help cure health issues such as fertility, depression, and bone damage.

Similar weaponisation has been applied to other industries, including finance. For example, fraudulent influencers are increasingly weaponising the counterculture associated with cryptocurrency. Cryptocurrency (e.g., bitcoin) has emerged as a potential challenger to traditional banking and fiat currency. While it offers benefits such as reduced transaction costs and increased financial inclusion, it also presents challenges around regulatory uncertainty and the potential for unlawful activity. Fraudulent influencers have embraced the positive rhetoric while intentionally misleading their followers, influencing them to invest in scam projects that lead to financial losses (Dupuis *et al.*, 2023).

However, on its own, weaponising a counterculture is not enough to become credible. Our findings suggest that fraudulent influencers can be seen as credible when, at the same time, they mindfully encase disinformation. Mindfulness refers to a state of mind characterised by heightened awareness of self and the surrounding environment (Langer,

Information Technology & People

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1989). By mindful encasement, we mean creating and encompassing disinformation in ways that reduce the chances of getting caught. When disinformation is mindfully encased, it is often difficult to detect and sustains itself over time. Our case shows that influencers mindfully encase disinformation by (i) creating heroic stories, (ii) constructing an expert-identity, (iii) mirroring other successful influencers, and (iv) receiving endorsements from legitimate authorities. Alpha depicted herself as a heroic figure by showcasing the power of alternative medicines or lifestyle changes to fight a deadly disease. She constructed an expert-identity by providing healthy diet recipes and other wellness advice. She mirrored other successful influencers who really were suffering from cancer, for example by launching a book on wellness. Moreover, she received endorsements from legitimate authorities (e.g., awards from mainstream media agencies highlighting her stories/achievements), which helped her to earn her followers' trust.

The above discussion suggests that together, weaponising a counterculture and mindfully encasing disinformation can indeed make fraud influencers look credible for sustained periods. Weaponising a counterculture can create a social environment conducive to the acceptance and dissemination of disinformation. Meanwhile, mindfully encasing disinformation can help weaponise a counterculture by hijacking its beliefs and values. Figure 3 below synthesises these findings into a framework that illustrates the general patterns observed across the three self-presentation phases.

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Information Technology & People

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5.3 Theoretical implications

Our study makes three important theoretical contributions. First, prior research on the establishment of credibility by influencers has mainly focused on truthful online engagement initiatives (Boerman, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2022; Cheung *et al.*, 2022; Kapitan *et al.*, 2021; Ki *et al.*, 2022). These studies suggest that users view influencers as credible and engage with them because they produce authentic, novel, and visually appealing content. However, we show that users can also view influencers as credible when they weaponise a counterculture and mindfully encase disinformation when creating social media posts. This study addresses the need for more research at the intersection of social media influencer and disinformation research (Kay *et al.*, 2023; Leban, 2022) to uncover influencers' deceitful strategies and explain how and why these strategies establish long-term credibility on social media.

Second, our findings suggest that credibility can be a "double-edged sword" in that when it is gained based on disinformation, there are detrimental implications for users. For instance, in our case, a cancer patient was influenced by Alpha's inspirational story and decided to give up conventional treatments. Prior empirical work on persuasion in the social sciences in general and marketing in particular has mainly considered credibility a positive characteristic in social relationships (Belanche *et al.*, 2021; Yuan and Lou, 2020), with studies primarily focusing on its positive implications (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2022). However, the above example from our case highlights the dark side of social media influencers. Fraudulent influencers like Alpha often prioritise personal gain (e.g., financial profit and popularity) over ethical considerations, including using ill-founded credibility to influence users to engage in life-threatening behaviours. Our study addresses the call made by Dunleavy *et al.* (2010) for future research at the intersection of deception and source

Information Technology & People

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credibility, and further highlights the importance of combating disinformation in online spaces (Steinfeld, 2022).

Finally, this study extends the existing understanding of impression management through self-presentation in two ways. First, self-presentation theory (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996) was originally developed in the offline context and so does not fully explain how influencers who use disinformation establish long-term credibility on social media. This study contributes to the ongoing application of the theory to the online context by adding an experimentation stage. Second and similarly, research on impression management originally identified strategies applicable to offline environments (e.g., a physical workplace involving a supervisor–subordinate relationship) and non-influencers (Jacobs, 1992; Schütz, 1998; Wayne and Ferris, 1990). This study makes an early attempt to explore influencers' disinformation-driven impression management on social media, answering the call from Vrontis *et al.* (2021) for new theoretical frameworks to guide social media influencer research.

5.4 Practical implications

From a pragmatic perspective, our study offers several contributions with potential benefit to firms investing significant amounts on influencers to promote their brands. Our study also offers practical implications for mainstream media outlets and social media platforms (i.e., system designers). We summarise these implications in Table VI below.

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First, popularity (i.e., number of followers) is the metric used by many firms to choose the influencers they collaborate with (Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Wies *et al.*, 2023). However, our findings suggest that firms should not choose influencers based on popularity

Information Technology & People

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alone. Instead, they should perform due diligence before working with social media influencers. In the case of Alpha, neither the platform owner (who published Alpha's app) nor the publisher of her book undertook thorough background checks before engaging with her, for example by using third-party fact-checkers (Sarode and Deore, 2017). Before signing contracts with influencers, firms should also ask for verifiable evidence (e.g., a doctor's note). This also applies to mainstream media outlets (e.g., TV channels and newspapers) covering any inspirational stories by influencers. In the case of Alpha, mainstream media outlets broadcast her false narratives without cross-checking their authenticity. Furthermore, mainstream media outlets should highlight examples of fraud influencers to raise awareness among social media users about being more vigilant when following influencers and taking their advice.

Second, social media platforms should implement stricter verification processes for influencers and provide a digital identifier (e.g., a badge) that indicates their expertise in a particular field (e.g., children's education, gym, yoga, and sports). These verification processes should not be blindsided by seemingly reliable endorsements or heroic stories. Alpha's endorsement by leading technology and media companies and inspirational story allowed her to slip through the verification procedures of platforms like Instagram and Facebook and continue to propagate disinformation. It is particularly important to detect and regulate influencers who weaponise a counterculture, as this provides a breeding ground for disinformation to gain momentum. Alpha exploited wellness culture by creating doubt in her followers' minds about the effectiveness of scientific know-how, and in turn belief that alternative therapy could cure cancer.

5.5 Limitations and future research agenda

Our research needs to be viewed within its limitations, which nevertheless do offer implications for future empirical work. Our study focused on a single case study of a fraud

Information Technology & People

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influencer – Alpha. As a result, although our findings are generalisable to self-presentation theory (Arkin, 1981; Goffman, 1959), we cannot generalise across fraud influencers as a population from a statistical perspective (Lee and Baskerville, 2003; Walsham, 2006). Therefore, we encourage researchers to conduct empirical work based on multiple cases of fraud influencers to attain broader generalisability. Similarly, our study emphasises the popular wellness industry. Future research could evaluate variations in influencer fraud practices across multiple industries such as sports, cosmetics, fashion, banking, and finance.

Furthermore, our case study related to a macro fraudulent influencer; that is, one with more than 300,000 followers. There are other categories of fraud influencers based on follower count, including nano (1K–10K followers), micro (10K–100K followers), and mega (over 1 million followers) (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). We encourage researchers to evaluate whether and how disinformation propagation varies across these influencer types.

Finally, our research relied on secondary sources of archival data (court documents, news articles, video interviews, documentaries, books, and blogs). Primary sources of data such as interviews would offer first-hand accounts to unpack additional insights into strategies used to develop credibility based on disinformation.

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Figure 1

Self-presentation and credibility establishment

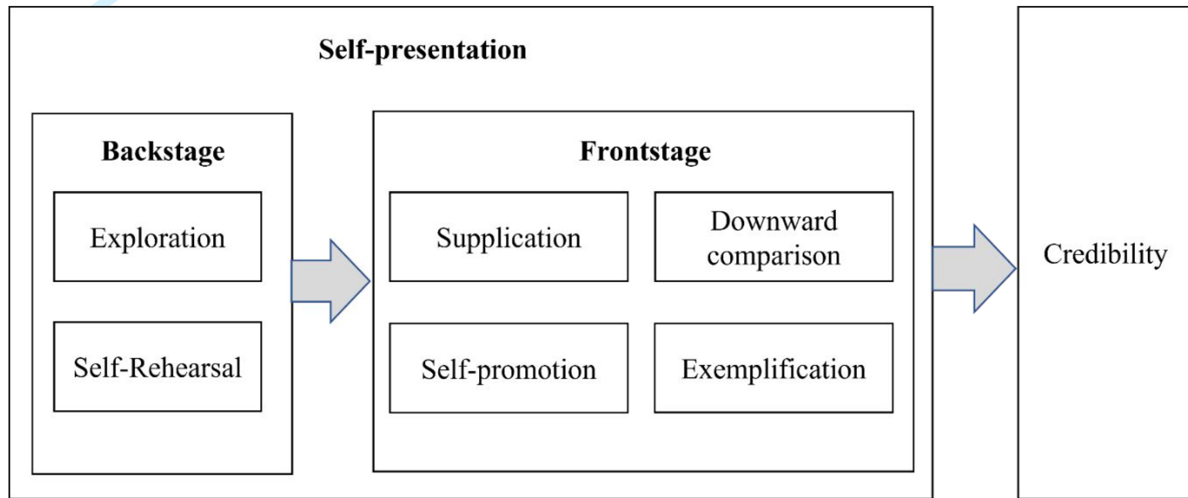

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Figure 2

Conceptual framework – self-presentation strategies

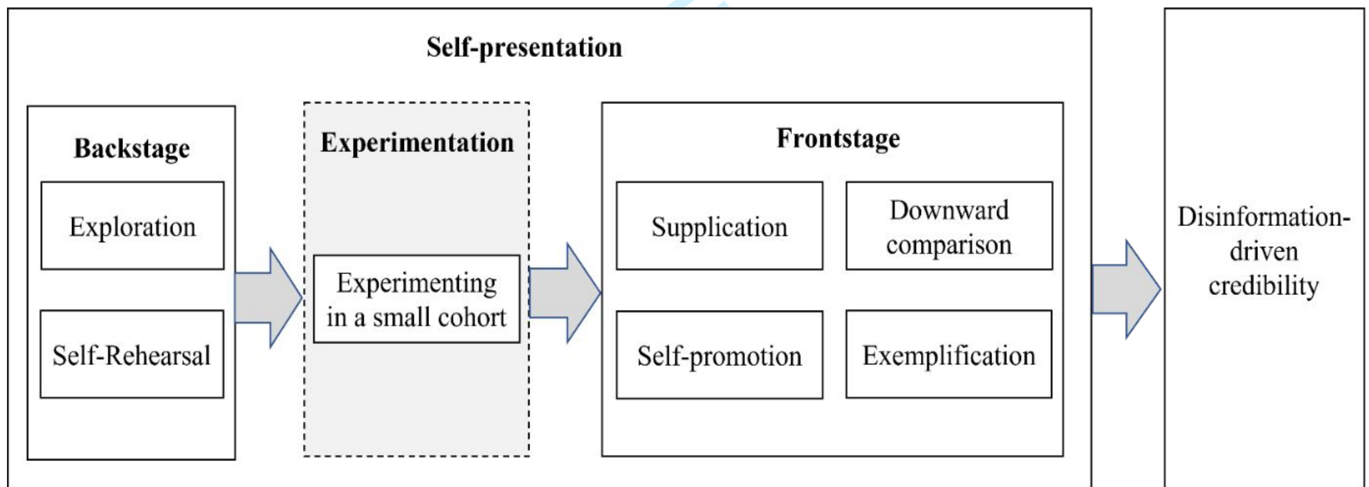

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Figure 3

The simultaneous roles of weaponizing counterculture and mindfully encasing disinformation to build credibility based on disinformation

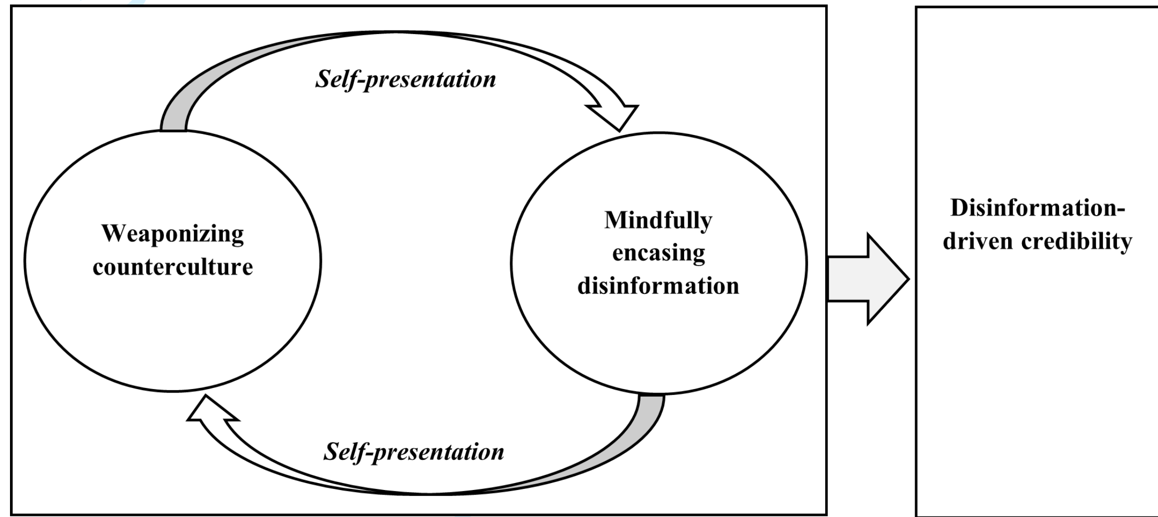

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Table I

Previous research focus and potential research agenda

Previous research focus and selected studies	**Potential research agenda**
Influencers' online engagement initiatives and credibility on social media	
Previous research has focused on influencers' truthful online engagement initiatives. Influencers disclose sponsorship arrangements, publish authentic content, and promote brands that align with their expertise (Boerman, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2022; Kapitan *et al.*, 2021). The effectiveness of online engagement initiatives relies on informative, creative, and visually appealing content (Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Humour is an appropriate tactic to engage social media users due to the hedonic experience it offers (Barta *et al.*, 2023). Perceptions of homophily toward influencers are stronger than for celebrities and foster a psychological connection (Shehzala *et al.*, 2024).	**Research agenda 1:** More research is needed to explore influencers' deceitful online engagement initiatives. Empirical work needs to introduce the notion of disinformation in social media influencer research. Hudders *et al.* (2021) argue that when influencers deceive users based on fake followers who engage with their content, this fosters uncertainty for marketing professionals. Kay *et al.* (2023) note that studies are scarce at the intersection of disinformation and influencer marketing. Leban (2022) argues that there is a lack of research exploring the dark side of social media influencers.
Prior empirical work in persuasion research has considered credibility as a positive characteristic in social relationships. Yuan and Lou (2020) found that users feel a sense of parasocial relationship with influencers who are credible. Belanche *et al.* (2021) observed that users tend to follow the advice of credible influencers and even recommend them to their social circle. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that users trust the branded posts of credible influencers.	**Research agenda 2**: Additional empirical work is required on how credibility can be a double-edged sword; that is, creating positive and negative implications for users, firms, and the broader society. Empirical work in social science disciplines in general and marketing in particular has focused on the positive implications of source credibility (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2022). Dunleavy *et al.* (2010) call for future research at the intersection of deception and source credibility.
Self-presentation on social media	
Research has examined impression management through self-presentation in offline contexts such as workplace settings.	**Research agenda 3:** More research is needed to uncover impression

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Wayne and Ferris (1990) examined the self-presentation strategies of subordinates and evaluated how these impacted their working relationships with their supervisors. Jacobs (1992) investigated impression management by undercover narcotics agents and explored how they pursued backstage and frontstage self-presentation work. Schütz (1998) suggested a typology of self-presentation strategies that are enacted mostly in offline contexts: assertive, offensive, defensive, and protective strategies.	management strategies applicable to the social media setting. Self-presentation theory was originally developed in the offline context (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996). Vrontis *et al.* (2021) recommend the introduction of new theoretical frameworks that are applicable to social media environments to offer new perspectives on social media influencers.

Table II

Summary of data sources

Type of data	Quantity
Court documents	7
Online news articles	122
Documentaries	1
Video interviews / news	10
Online forums	1
Books	2

Table III

Data structure – self-presentation strategies

Open codes (first-order concepts)	Axial codes (second-order themes)	Selection codes (aggregate dimensions)
Researching alternative medicine	Searching for alternative medicine	Exploration
Travelling to find alternative medicine		
Using a healthy diet for healing	Embracing alternative medicine	
Using alternative therapies for healing		
Learning the template for being a successful influencer	Developing a template for being a successful influencer	Self-rehearsal
Mirroring the template of a successful influencer		
Framing a false narrative about having cancer	Framing a compelling false narrative	
Framing a false narrative about fighting cancer		
Having a vision of coming up with a unique app	Developing a business idea	

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Coming up with the business idea of developing an app focusing on health and wellness		
Sharing false narratives on social media	**Testing false narratives**	**Experimenting in a small cohort**
Evaluating users' responses to false narratives		
Sharing business ideas and plans in a private Facebook group	**Workshopping business ideas and plans**	
Generating feedback from the members of the Facebook group		
Reminding users about the cancer story	**Broadcasting compelling false narratives**	**Supplication**
Coming up with a more dire description		
Generating sympathy from a network of followers on social media	**Gaining sympathy at scale**	
Generating sympathy at events (e.g. charities, award ceremonies)		
Seeding lies about a healthy diet as a cure for cancer	**Framing a healthy diet and natural therapy as a superior cure**	**Downward comparison**
Seeding lies about getting cured by alternative medicine (e.g. oxygen therapy)		
Fuelling frustration towards conventional cancer treatment	**Framing conventional treatment as an inferior cure**	
Falsely claiming to have wholly abandoned conventional cancer treatment		
Encouraging users to abandon conventional treatment		
Launching digital artefacts	**Presentation of artefacts**	**Self-promotion**
Launching physical artefacts		
Broadcasting awards from Apple Inc	**Broadcasting about awards**	
Broadcasting awards from *Cosmopolitan*		
Inviting important users in person to raise money for charity	**Hosting a charity event**	**Exemplification**
Inviting online attendees to raise money for charity		
Claiming that profits from her business (e.g. sales from mobile apps) will go toward charities	**Framing a profit-based business as a charity**	
Claiming to give financial support to a child with terminal cancer		
Attracted to Alpha's inspirational story	**Attractiveness**	**Disinformation-driven credibility**
Attracted to Alpha's friendly and down-to-earth personality		
Attracted to Alpha's beauty and photogenic pictures		
"Wellness guru" image	**Expertise**	
Expertise in alternative medicine and plant-based diets		
Believing in Alpha's inspirational story	**Trustworthiness**	
Believing Alpha to be authentic		

Note: White boxes represent themes/dimensions based on theory. Grey boxes highlight themes/dimensions derived from data.

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Table IV

Differences between the backstage, experimentation, and frontstage phases

Factors	Backstage	Experimentation	Frontstage
Scale	Alone (self)	Small	Large
Properties	Actions	Actions	Actions
Motivation	Building potential	Testing the potential idea	Launching the idea into the mainstream
Platform	Offline	Online	Online

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Table V

Definitions and qualitative evidence of themes and dimensions

Dimensions	Themes	Qualitative evidence
Exploration: the practice of conducting research about a specific area/field and deciding to use those research insights as part of one's self-presentation.	**Searching for alternative medicine:** conducting research into other remedies.	*"[Alpha] began her journey of self-education outside of conventional medicine, [which served as] a catalyst for change – both personally and professionally."* [Source: News article]
	Embracing alternative medicine: the practice of using other remedies as part of one's everyday lifestyle.	*"[Alpha] then embarked on a quest to heal herself with nutrition and holistic medicine, including salt, vitamin and Ayurvedic treatments, craniosacral therapy, oxygen therapy, colonics, and a whole lot of other treatments."* [Source: News article]
Self-rehearsal: the private (solo) preparations undertaken to become a successful influencer. These include developing a template, framing a compelling false narrative, and developing a business idea.	**Developing a template for being a successful influencer:** coming up with a schema by learning and mirroring a successful influencer.	*"[Alpha] followed the footsteps of another wellness influencer [Beta] by launching physical artifacts in the form of a book with similar ideas around food, eating healthy, and wellbeing"* [Source: Book]
	Framing a compelling false narrative: coming up with a convincing, believable story (albeit a false one).	*"I was diagnosed with cancer and, yeah, that just very quick domino effect of everything to come, you know, of – I lost a lot of my short-term memory and I reflect back on that now, where I was losing that memory before the stroke and was still kind of shady after that. But then that job started to fall apart as well. Like, my whole life started to crumble"* [Source: Court documents]
	Developing a business idea: having a vision and idea for a unique business opportunity.	*"There was a moment where it was … how I am going to make everything that I have learnt, everything that I know, accessible to the masses? Apps – they are right there in our pockets, in our phones, on the tool that we use every single day."* [Source: Video interview]

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Experimenting in a small cohort: testing false narratives on a small scale on social media and evaluating how users react. This also involves workshopping business ideas and plans in private groups on social media.	**Testing false narratives:** spreading and evaluating false stories with a small group of users on social media and checking how users react to them.	*"I'm not worried about the cancer, I'm worried about the heart disease and brain clotting. I'm sure I'll start realizing s** is real in a few hours."* [Source: Online forum] *"well last time I had this procedure I went into cardiac arrest ... So yeah. I've died before"* [Source: Online forum] *"I had surgery about seven hours ago … the doctor comes in and tells me the draining failed and I went into cardiac arrest and died for just under three minutes. I had the most intense bruising from the paddles when they electrocuted me back to consciousness."* [Source: Online forum] *"I hope everything starts improving from now on, keep positive!"* [Source: Online forum] *"Good-luck with everything [Alpha]"* [Source: Online forum]
	Workshopping business ideas and plans: generating feedback on business ideas and plans with a small group of users on social media and making necessary adjustments/improvements.	*"The Facebook group became a place for [Alpha] to connect with other young parents in Melbourne ... Soon the Facebook group became a place for [Alpha] to workshop her business plan. When it came time to pick a name for her business, she put up a post asking the parents to brainstorm ideas."* [Source: Book]
Supplication: presenting oneself as weak and helpless on social media.	**Broadcasting compelling false narratives:** spreading a convincing (albeit false) story on social media that shows vulnerability and weakness.	*"[Cancer has] made me grow. I have a perspective on life, which I'm really grateful for. The majority of the time, I only see goodness. I'm so proud because it could have gone the opposite direction."* [Source: News article] *"The Director alleges that from at least July 2013, either Ms [Alpha] or her company made three statements amounting to representations about Ms [Alpha]'s health, through a range of different media platforms. They were: (1) Ms [Alpha] had been diagnosed with brain cancer in 2009; (2) Ms [Alpha] had been given four months to live; and (3) Ms [Alpha] had taken and then rejected conventional cancer treatments in favour of embarking on a quest to heal herself naturally."* [Source: Court documents]

Information Technology & People

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		"It was her company, and only hers. She used it – and its name – as a vehicle to promote herself, and to promote the goods and services she sought to sell, on the basis of her story about surviving cancer." [Source: Court documents]
	Gaining sympathy at scale: fostering compassion, love, and attention on social media from a large number of followers.	*"Kick that cancer's butt sweetheart!! You've done it before and can do it again!"* [Source: Book] *"You are such an inspiration and although you've got this [cancer] know that there are so many here supporting you, too. Sending so much love and healing energy and thank you for [all] you have done, you are such an inspiration."* [Source: Book]
Downward comparison: framing a specific approach to cancer treatment (e.g. natural therapy) as superior while framing well-established treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) as inferior.	**Framing a healthy diet and natural therapy as a superior cure:** seeding lies about getting cured of terminal cancer by superior alternative means, such as gluten-, dairy-, and corn-free diets, and oxygen therapy.	*"Six weeks after my diagnosis I changed my diet. Like most Australians, I found I was still eating too many sugars, red meat and refined foods."* [Source: Court documents] *"I have been healing a severe and malignant brain cancer for the past few years with natural medicine, Gerson therapy and foods. Its working for me and I am grateful to be here sharing this journey with over 70,000 people worldwide. Thank you for being here – xx [Alpha]."* [Source: Video interviews] *"In a reference to her liver cancer, she posted on Instagram under her account @[anonymized account name], a photo of a pink smoothie enriched with 'extra support'. She wrote 'This one is for my rash (thanks, liver cancer), inflammation (thanks flying) and for general immunity.'"* [Source: News article]
	Framing conventional treatment as an inferior cure: downplaying the efficacy of conventional cancer treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) by fuelling frustration towards them, falsely claiming to have abandoned them, and encouraging others to take the same path.	*"I feel better than when I was on conventional medicine – but that's just my path and may not be right for everyone"* [Source: Court documents] *"When conventional medicine let her down, she turned to alternative therapies and confounded doctors ... After two months of chemotherapy and radiation therapy, she gave it up, having passed out for several hours alone in a park opposite the Melbourne hospital where she was being treated. She decided 'that if all I had was between one hour and a month to live, I was not going to spend it passed out on the hospital lawn, knee-deep in nausea and other side effects', and*

Information Technology & People

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		chose to change her diet and lifestyle, including immersing herself in therapies such as salt, vitamin, and Ayurvedic treatments, oxygen therapy and colonics. Diet wise, she's a vegetarian who doesn't eat dairy, gluten, preservatives, GMO foods or sugar." [Source: News article]
Self-promotion is the ability to present one's expertise to society by presenting digital and physical artefacts and winning awards from reputable organizations.	**Presentation of artefacts:** launching digital (e.g. mobile apps) and physical (e.g. books) objects to establish expertise in a specific field.	*"I see my app as a resource, a place to connect and share. We have recommended reading on health, life, and good advice on promoting better living. We are not just about food but what you put on and in your body and about the environment; how we should live, combating stress, achieving wellness and healthy, wholesome lifestyle."* [Source: Court documents] *"I created the world's best health, fitness and lifestyle app – and through that we are changing lives."* [Source: News article] *"[Alpha]'s first cookbook, [book name], refreshes our food habits with recipes that are as easy-to-do as they are healthy and delicious. The [book name] is packed with over 80 scrumptious new recipes to heal the body. [Alpha]'s recipes rediscover natural ingredients, which are free from gluten, refined sugar and dairy, that are restorative and easily incorporated into your everyday cooking … [Book name] is a beautiful, easy-to-follow guide to enjoying food and reshaping your lifestyle through [Alpha]'s delicious recipes."* [Source: Book]
	Broadcasting awards: spreading news of awards received from reputable organizations that users are aware of and value. This offers a "seal of credibility".	*"[Alpha] was awarded [anonymized] magazine's 2014 Fun, Fearless, Female award in the social media category for her work."* [Source: News article] *"It [App name] was voted [anonymized company name]'s Best Food and Drink App of 2013."* [Source: News article]
Exemplification: falsely showing oneself as a morally exemplary person.	**Hosting a charity event:** coming up with in-person and online events to raise money for charity, albeit with one key difference: all the money doesn't go to charity.	*"Buy a virtual ticket to our world changing events – this 'ticket' (donation) gives you power to give back to those without support, inspiration, education or the quality of life most of us are blessed with everyday."* [Source: Court documents]

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	Framing a profit-based business as a charity: falsely claiming that a large part of the profits from a business goes to charity.	*"App sales will be donated to rotating charities and organizations ... We feel it's important that part of their spending goes to help those who aren't as privileged."* [Source: Court documents] *"The Book also included in its introduction the statement that a 'large part of everything' [Alpha]'s company earned ... is now donated to charities and organisations which support global health and wellbeing, protect the environment and provide education to those who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity. The evidence discloses only two donations referrable to her company's earnings."* [Source: Court documents] *"Fairfax Media on Sunday revealed [company name] founder failed to hand over proceeds solicited in the name of five charities and had grossly overstated the company's total donations to different causes."* [Source: News article]
Disinformation-driven credibility: the degree to which an influencer builds a likeable, expert, and trustworthy personality based on disinformation.	**Attractiveness:** being likeable, inspirational, and physically appealing.	*"Without a doubt you are THE most inspirational person I have ever encountered."* [Source: Book] *"I have never met you but I 'know' you. I have never heard you speak but I 'hear' you. I have never seen you in person but I 'look' at you in awe, in wonder and in the greatest admiration I have ever felt for anyone."* [Source: Book]
	Expertise: having knowledge and know-how about a specific area or field.	*"[Alpha] was a wellness guru with over 200,000 online followers, a best-selling app, international book deals, and regular speaking gigs."* [Source: News article] *"The Gamechanger [Alpha]: A young Australian woman becomes a health and wellness guru after defeating terminal brain cancer through diet, exercise, and alternative therapies."* [Source: Podcast]
	Trustworthiness: having believable and reliable opinions and recommendations.	*"[Gamma], 44, from Melbourne, was diagnosed with lymphoma in 2014, and stopped her intensive chemotherapy treatment after discovering [Alpha] on social media ... [as Alpha's] condition had been cured by simply eating healthy food."* [Source: News article]

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		"If you were among [Alpha]'s 300,000 Instagram followers and she had told you in 2013 that 'eating clean' would cure your cancer, you would have probably believed her advice too." [Source: News article]

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Table VI

Practical suggestions based on case evidence

Stakeholders	Practical suggestions	Case evidence
Firms collaborating with influencers	• Performing due diligence • Collaborating with third-party fact checkers • Seeking verifiable evidence	• Firms did not pursue due diligence • Firms took Alpha's false narrative at face value
Media outlets (e.g. TV channels, online magazines)	• Performing due diligence • Raising awareness about fraud influencers so that social media communities become more vigilant	• Media channels promoted Alpha without any due diligence • Users let go of scientific treatment (chemotherapy) and began alternative therapy after witnessing Alpha
Social media platforms	• Enacting stricter verification processes for influencers • Using digital identifiers as reliability signals • Regulating influencers who weaponize a counterculture	• Alpha deceived the verification procedures of Instagram and Facebook • Alpha weaponized the wellness counterculture and used it as a breeding ground for disinformation

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