

## **Social Media Influencers as Human Brands: Insights from an Analysis of a Mega-Influencer Follower-generated Hashtag Network on Instagram**

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This study investigates the followers' perspective of social media influencers as 'human brands', via an analysis of follower-generated hashtags on Instagram. Instagram is the fastest-growing social media platform (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) having a higher user engagement (Casaló et al., 2018), making it a promising platform for social media influencers.

Social media influencers have been largely investigated in terms of influencer variables (e.g., number of followers) and consumer outcome (e.g., purchase decision) (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Though influencers have also been understood as 'brands', predominantly from the self-branding theory perspective, Ki et al. (2020) recently highlighted the importance of understanding influencers as 'human brands' from the followers' perspective. Building on this notion, this study investigates the agentic role of followers in the cultural production of influencer brands on Instagram. To advance Ki et al.'s (2020) notion, we refer to the seminal work of John et al. (2006) about brand association networks in consumer's memory and use network theory to conceptualize how hashtags annotated in relation to the influencers represent associations that followers collectively ascribe to the influencers' human brands, creating a complex brand association network. Hence, this study asks: *how do followers build Instagram influencers' human brands?*

This study brings a methodological novelty by using hashtag network analysis (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) to answer the above question. Instagram mega-influencer Nash Grier was selected as the network access point based on the high number of posts related to his eponymous hashtag, high follower count, and frequent content creation. The Instagram API was used to access a sample of Instagram posts using #nashgrier (N=5000). Hashtags were extracted from captions and the co-hashtag network was constructed using a bigram script written using R software. The network consisted of 4321 unique hashtags and 11439 co-occurrences. The network was visualized and analyzed using Gephi, open-source software for network analysis (Cherven, 2015).

The analysis revealed four major thematic hashtag clusters, reflecting brand associations ascribed to Grier's human brand. The first hashtag cluster represented the influencer's personal brand heritage. Dominant hashtags within this cluster were related to MAGCON, a teen group of internet personalities of which Grier was a member. The second hashtag cluster was strongly associated with the dynastic relations of the influencer, where the dominant hashtags were representing Grier, his brother, partner, and son. The third hashtag cluster represented aesthetics, emotions, and entertainment as influencer brand associations ascribed by followers. This was evident via key hashtags such as #love, #music, and #aesthetic. Surprisingly, the final hashtag cluster demonstrated that followers have associated the influencer's human brand with other mainstream celebrities. This was evident as the influencer's eponymous hashtag has been strongly co-mentioned with celebrity hashtags such as #justinbieber and #arianagrande.

These findings extend the notion of Ki et al. (2020) by revealing brand associations that followers ascribe to a mega-influencer's human brand. For practitioners, influencers' human brand associations emerging from a hashtag network would facilitate the selection of appropriate influencers whose human brand associations are aligned with the firm's brand message.

**Keywords:** Social media influencers, Human brand, Instagram

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