#Simstagram: Performativity of Authenticity, Gender and Influencer Identities of The Sims
Players in Instagram's Post-Feminist Lifestyle Culture

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Abstract

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The Sims, a life simulation video game series, has evolved into a platform for gender, femininity, and lifestyle performance on Instagram, known as Simstagram. This study explores how Sims players construct and perform identities within the contexts of game studies, influencer culture, and postfeminist social media evolution. Using digital ethnography and text analysis of 803 posts and 1,163 unique images from 105 accounts, I investigate identity embodiment at the intersection of authenticity, performativity, Instagram's postfeminist influencer culture, and platform affordances. Key findings reveal that Simstagrammers engage in sophisticated identity construction, balancing aspirational content with relatable authenticity by leveraging both the Sims game mechanics and Instagram's platform features. My analysis of the complex interplay between performativity, authenticity, and embodiment in Simstagram reveals a blend of contextual expectations regarding The Sims game and Instagram where Simstagram users create and present their virtual identities in ways that align with the cultural and mechanical expectations of The Sims game, while also adhering to the norms and practices of authenticity valued in Instagram's influencer culture. The concept of "meta-influencers" emerges as a central theme, describing Simstagrammers who embody influencer practices within virtual personas while reflecting upon and playing with influencer culture conventions, hinting at the fundamental idea that anyone has the potential to become an influencer. My research contributes to understanding how individuals navigate and create meaning in complex digital ecosystems, reflecting and contributing to broader influencer culture while offering a unique lens to examine contemporary gender representations and identity construction in digital spaces.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

  I remember the first time I played *the Sims* when I was ten years old. The excitement of building my dream house with just a few clicks, having a child in five minutes of playing and watching my kitchen burning in flames was breathtaking for a young girl like me. And I played all four versions of the game and its many extension packages in my childhood bedroom with the smartest, richest, most beautiful, and most skilled Sim version of me. The Sims, a life simulation video game series, was initially released on February 4, 2000, and has since had four main iterations: The Sims, The Sims 2, The Sims 3, and The Sims 4 (EA, 2023). Released on June 2, 2009, The Sims 3 achieved an outstanding milestone by selling 1.4 million copies within its initial week, marking the most successful launch in the history of Electronics Arts, a prominent global game company (Terdiman, 2009). According to the production company of the Sims, Electronic Arts, a total of 1.4 billion hours of the Sims 4 were played, and 436.5 billion Sim characters were created in 2022 (EA, 2023). However, some players do one other thing while playing the game: they create Instagram accounts for their Sims characters and create an identity to live their dreamy influencer lives on social media, a subgenre that the Sims community has named *Simstagram*. One example among the many that feature in this thesis includes, *baddiexsimmer*, who becomes a model and a singer, gets rich, creates a fashion brand, shares influencer links with her audience, gets pregnant and even becomes a guest on Jimmy Fallon's show on the Sims world and shares all of her personal and business life like a *real* influencer on Instagram (Baddiexsimmer, 2022). It is important to note a definition here: Throughout this research, the word "real" will be used mainly to refer to off-game life, the lived experiences and the social media presence of humans, as opposed to the virtual world and characters within The Sims game. While acknowledging that gameplay experiences and social media expressions are indeed 'real' in their own right, this distinction is necessary to differentiate between the created worlds of Simstagram and The Sims, and the offline life experiences of social media users. Many accounts like @*baddiexsimmer* have a robust virtual Sim friend and follower network on Instagram. They have been forging a new reality by blending and connecting social media with the gaming world. This convergence occurs at the intersection of the performance of femininity and influencer-inspired lifestyles, as well as within the two intermediate spaces of media. These spaces either enable or hinder the ideal and authentic self-representation while engaging in role-playing.

Feminist and gender game studies scholars have long recognized The Sims as a significant game for women's media use, attracting female and queer users unlike any previous digital game (Gee & Hayes, 2010). The Sims allows players to create their own space, embody aspirational or entirely different identities, and express love freely. In a landscape of gendered and marginalized media platforms, the game offers an inclusive, diverse, and optionally anonymous space for authentic self-representation.

Since its 2010 launch, Instagram has grown to two billion monthly active users by 2023 (Statista, 2023), becoming a platform that shapes new norms of femininity through visual content, network creation, and performativity (Chen & Kanai, 2021). The concept of "influencer creep" (Bishop, 2023) describes how influencer practices have permeated beyond traditional boundaries, eroding the distinctions between personal and professional self-presentation. The Simstagram community exemplifies this meta-influencer concept. While The Sims doesn't inherently require feminine expression, its community often reinforces gender norms and beauty standards, reflecting broader societal expectations (Chen & Kanai, 2021). Instagram's affordances enable users to create and perform authentic identities, aligning with influencer culture's emphasis on self-branding and personal narratives. This convergence of gaming and social media platforms contributes to the rise of meta-influencers like Simstagrammers, who leverage both spaces to cultivate their online personas.

Overall, my research asks three questions to understand the subculture of Simstagram, their reality of mean-making and their community culture, starting with the main question, "What is Simstagram?" Taking the intense influence and community of the Sims and Instagram, or Simstagram, in relation to gender expressions, this study poses the following sub-questions: "In what ways do the Sims players use Instagram for performances of authenticity and femininity?" and "How do Instagram and its affordances as a platform appear to shape the Sims players' self-representation within the context of lifestyle influencer culture via Simstagram?" The second question will explore the representation and performances of the Sims players to reflect their authentic cues and femininity cues on Instagram via their created social media identities, rich narratives and built character in the game. Moreover, it will scrutinize this combination of Instagram and the Sims as another alternative space to connect the Sims players in the context of post-feminist influencer culture and spark the conversation about the potential of influencer culture among the Simstagram community. Then, the third question will specifically examine

Instagram and what it affords the Sims players from a platform studies perspective to understand how the combination of platform influences and user practices shapes and alters Simmers' self-representation and identity performances.

My research makes two significant novel interventions in the fields of game studies, platform studies, and influencer studies. Firstly, it maps the previously unexplored territory of Simstagram, a unique intersection of gaming culture and social media practices that has not been systematically researched in media studies or game studies before. By examining this emerging subculture, my study provides valuable insights into how virtual gaming experiences are translated and performed within social media contexts, expanding our understanding of contemporary digital cultures and practices. Secondly, this research introduces and develops the concept of the "meta-influencer", building upon existing theories such as "influencer creep" (Bishop, 2023) and "influencer imaginary" (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). This concept offers a new framework for understanding how individuals embody and reflect upon influencer practices within virtual spaces among game, reality, and social media performance. Meta-influencing is a conceptual framework that encapsulates the phenomenon wherein individuals, through virtual avatars or game characters, embody and enact influencer practices within the liminal spaces between digital gameplay, lived reality, and social media performance, thus broadening the potential for influence and merging the distinctions between virtual and real-world social dynamics. By interweaving these concepts with platform studies, this research illuminates the complex interplay between platform affordances, user behaviors, and the evolution of influencer culture in digital spaces. These contributions not only enhance our theoretical understanding of digital cultures but also provide practical insights into the evolving landscape of online identity performance and community formation in the context of gaming and social media convergence.

The following chapters provide a comprehensive exploration of the Simstagram phenomenon. The literature review and theoretical framework chapter delves into key concepts, situating this research within the existing scholarly discourse on game studies, social media, and influencer culture. The methodology chapter details the digital ethnographic approach and textual analysis methods employed in this study, including the ethical considerations of researching online communities. The first analytical chapter, "What is Simstagram?", maps out this unique subculture, exploring its characteristics, creative processes, and major subcategories such as celebrity, family, intimacy/sexuality, and activism. Finally, the second analytical chapter

examines authenticity, performativity, and embodiment within Simstagram, offering insights into how users construct and perform identities, navigate influencer culture, and create meaningful narratives within this unique digital space. This chapter also explores how Instagram's affordances shape self-representation and community dynamics among Simstagrammers. Throughout these chapters, the concept of the "meta-influencer" is developed, contributing to our understanding of evolving digital cultures and practices at the intersection of gaming and social media.

Key findings reveal that Simstagrammers engage in sophisticated identity construction and performance, balancing aspirational content with relatable authenticity. My study highlights the complex interplay between performativity, authenticity, and embodiment in Simstagram, where users craft intricate narratives that represent virtual and real social connections. The concept of "meta-influencers" emerges as a central theme, describing Simstagrammers who not only embody influencer practices within their virtual personas but also reflect upon and play with the conventions of influencer culture itself. This concept proves useful in understanding how individuals navigate and create meaning in increasingly complex digital ecosystems, reflecting and contributing to broader influencer culture while offering a unique lens to examine contemporary gender representations and identity construction in digital spaces.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The research questions of this study revolve around the Sims players' ways of performing authenticity and forming identities in relation to gamer culture, their gender representations and the influencer culture on Instagram. Along with this framework, how Instagram becomes a mainstreaming and coming-alive platform with its affordances for the Sims player community and how Instagram and the Sims, or Simstagram, together signify a unique bridge for the players' authentic meaning-making of their performativity and embodiment of their characters are significant aspects that this study observes. In line with these subquestions, this research contributed to and intervened in the media studies literature in three areas: gender and gamer culture, gender and influencer culture, post-feminism and influencer beauty culture and platform affordances and identity.

Literature Review

Gender and Gamer Culture

Today's gamer culture cannot be imagined without its significant impact on the realization of gender both in online and offline worlds. Regarding the dominance of male-identified gamers in gamer culture, gaming platforms are highly characterized by gender-specific attributes, and games are mostly gendered technologies (Gray, 2017). Comparing player behaviors and habits of different genders, although women do engage in gaming, their average amount of play tends to be less than that of men in the same age group (Gray, 2017). However, as a collective, women exhibit substantial variations in their playing time, preferred genres, specific interests, and motivations for gaming participation (Yates & Littleton, 2001; Schott & Horrell, 2000). By incorporating Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" into the feminist framework of "technologies of gender,", Royse et al. (2007, p. 560) also point out a deeper comprehension regarding the diverse ways in which individual women or groups of women encounter video game playing. This approach enables us to better grasp the distinct patterns of usage and attitudes towards games and game culture that emerge among women and queer people, highlighting the significant variations that exist among different individuals. Acknowledging the variety in game playing across genders other than men, it is possible for individuals to assume a variety of desired identities within the virtual realm. This leads to a sense

of liberation in terms of exploration and progress that may not always be equally accessible to women and queer people outside of games (T.L. Taylor, 2003).

While some women and queer people prefer to play male-dominant games in their own ways, other women play occasionally or sporadically and prefer more 'gender neutral' games such as The Sims (Royse et al., 2007). Although it also has a substantial male player base, The Sims is a game where the majority of players are girls and women (Huguenin, 2019). The shift in the game culture where the games can be played in homes instead of arcade rooms, which Cunningham (2021) named "bedroom culture", brings attention to young girls and women who spend more time at home than males in the gamer community. The domestication of games via this new bedroom culture and the domestic nature of the Sims creates the term, domestic space, where the marginalized gamers feel safer and can express their true selves (Beavis & Charles, 2005). The understanding of domestic space creates a gendered politics around the term that points out the constructional feminization of domestic spaces in games for women gamers and how it "portends the possibilities of alternative ways of constructing identities." (Beach & Bruce, 2002, p.149). Even though it is claimed as 'gender neutral,' the Sims is more associated with women and, more recently, queer community due to its socially associated domestic game mechanics such as building a house, having a family, and having a child (Gee & Hayes, 2010). While it is not always so easy to have control of your own performativity and way of living in society as a woman, the Sims creates an alternative virtual world for being anyone, while still subject to the game's features, functionalities and one's legibility within the game's culture.

As Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) extensive research on virtual worlds such as Second Life further reveals, virtual worlds "allow participants to embody themselves, usually as avatars, such that they can explore and participate in the virtual world" and possibly the extension of those virtual worlds such as social media platforms (p. 7). Also, this new character can be built and played as utopic and ideal since there are no limitations while choosing a gender and social identity, which increases the performativity and self-expression of the users on social media. Especially for teenagers, it is observed that multiple gendered identities are experimentally constituted and maintained through instances of gameplay in particular kinds of social contexts and locations (Beavis & Charles, 2005). Many interviews and anecdotes from the Sims community also show that the independent and inclusive aspect of the Sims' game tools allows the creation of self-expressive and authentic characters that can be risky to reflect in real life due

to social pressures and obligations (Marshall, 2019). This freedom of self-expression for the players in the Sims is especially important for my research because Simstagrammers' choice of gender representations and performance in the game is significant for understanding what the Sims and Instagram together mean for them to embody those identities.

Gender and Influencer Culture

The freedom of choice and customization that the Sims enables the players embrace helps them to live a personal dream within Simstagram; it can be becoming the best model in the world sharing their beauty tips on social media, becoming a queer rights advocate in town, or adopting traumatized children with their partner in their nostalgic cottage life. Before going into details about the Sims and Instagram's platform-specific importance for influencer culture, it is necessary to explore the definitions of influencers and their culture along with their connection with gender within the context of authenticity, performativity and embodiment.

Allan S. Taylor (2022) introduces two perspectives to examine the concept of authenticity within influencer culture: the perceived authenticity of the influencer themselves, or the sense of authenticity experienced by the audience consuming their content. These two perspectives serve as guiding frameworks for my research, which aims to investigate how the follower-following interactions that Instagram afford to its users influence the Sims players' influencer-like performance on social media. As A.S. Taylor (2022) further defines, the act of influencing inherently involves a performative process that must be consistently maintained to create an authentic connection with the audience. This is achieved by consistently showcasing behaviours and promoting products for viewers to emulate and imitate. From the non-influencer's side, they aspire to personify the influencer, but as this is an unattainable goal, it initiates a repetitive cycle of never-becoming and the influence persists as long as an audience member remains engaged in this cycle of never-becoming, adopting the influencer's desires as their genuine wants and needs (A.S. Taylor, 2022). This tension of never-becoming between influencer and non-influencer is relevant to understanding the Sims players' influencer identity as they break the chain by embodying their Sims character's identity as an influencer to embody the influencer culture.

As another word to understand the influencer identity and its practices, Senft (2008) uses the term "microcelebrity" to encompass a series of self-promotion techniques that individuals are now more frequently employing on the internet due to societal and financial pressures. Moreover,

by engaging in microcelebrity, people gather specialized following relationships, striving to establish close and personal connections with niche audiences. Later on, Driessens (2013) elaborates on the definition of microcelebrity as celebritization of performativity and culture through mediatization, personalization, and commodification, which the Sims and Instagram constitute a solid platform combination to "celebritize" the culture of the Sims players and their reality through targeting their performativity. Then, Marwick (2015) defines being a microcelebrity on social media as a mindset and a set of self-presentation techniques prevalent on social media, where users strategically craft profiles, engage with followers, and disclose personal details to gain more attention and enhance their online reputation. The feelings of becoming a "microcelebrity" to a niche group of people can be also observed in users, which also affects the authenticity of those identities because it involves "a curation of persona that feels authentic to the followers" to perform a desired life to others (Marwick 2015, p.114). From an alternative perspective, Marwick and boyd (2011) describe the act of influencing as "backstage access" as establishing an intimacy between the participant and their followers, publicly acknowledging the fan base, and employing language and cultural references to foster connections and affiliations with the followers. More critically, unlike early social media practices where the influencers can have control over their level of celebritization, Raun (2018) shares the current manner in which the influencer practices have been reconciled with commodification that can be understood by exploring how intimacy, disclosure, and emotional labour—illustrated through transgender vlogging in his example—have been capitalized upon. This shift is an important layer of influencer culture that points out the commodification of femininity, womanhood and queer content that is also highly visible in the Simstagram influencers and community.

Since Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018) identified "authenticity" and "beauty" as the most important traits for influencers to possess, these characteristics likely play a crucial role in building trust and attracting followers in the highly visual and personal nature of social media platforms. This relation can help further understand how the Sims players create their social network as an influencer and a Sims persona in the context of Instagram's beauty culture. This category also encompasses queer influencer culture, as Chen and Kanai (2021) examine a privileged group of gay men who dominate the beauty realm, effectively fulfilling the paradoxical expectations of authenticity, individuality, and femininity in a manner that is

"equally, if not more, captivating [than female influences]." While considering gender and influencer culture together, considering the previous discussion on gamer culture and gender, Duffy's (2017) framework on feminized consumer culture becomes pivotal for my research. While the activities that influencers perform are presented as mere entertainment and social interaction, she argues that numerous young women engage in content creation and promotion not solely for enjoyment but with a strategic mindset, aiming for career advancement (Duffy, 2017). The key elements of her concept of aspirational labour are characterized by narratives emphasizing creative expression, the establishment of relationships in both online and offline realms, and modes of individualized self-expression that simultaneously disclose and conceal conventional feminine consumer behaviour (Duffy, 2017). Moreover, as Duffy and other influencer studies scholars are draw on, Hochschild's (2012) concept of "deep acting" emphasizes influencers' need to engage in emotionally convincing performances by actively inducing or suppressing feelings to sincerely portray appropriate emotions for their audience, rather than merely going through the motions. Apart from aforementioned type of labors, media scholars, particularly those in feminist media studies, have characterized a form of personal expression and explained popularly feminized qualities of online work that is linked to the feminist discourse on the internet (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Baym, 2019; Wissinger, 2015; Abidin, 2016). Banet-Weiser (2018) emphasized that the dissemination of popular feminism on social media relies on numerical metrics like followers, likes, and retweets, as well as financial gains from the sale of popular feminist merchandise and the emergence of popular feminist brands and businesses within the influencer economy. Importantly, feminist expressions and politics deemed "brandable" depend heavily on glamour, in which influencer culture works to conceal and mystify the inherent sexism, racism, and misogyny embedded in the algorithms and design of these platforms by promoting a curated, glamorized version of feminism that often prioritizes aesthetically pleasing and marketable messages over addressing systemic problems, thereby creating an illusion of progress that distracts from the underlying discriminatory structures built into social media algorithms and platform designs (Crawford, 2013; Noble, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Considering social media as an open-ended creative space and as a capitalized influencer culture that forms of sexism and gender biases are embedded in, my research seeks to uncover how those dynamics function together or conflict with each other within Simstagram.

Post-feminism and Influencer Beauty Culture

The notion of post-feminism articulated by Rosalind Gill (2007), characterized by a shift from collective political action to individual empowerment and choice, often manifesting through consumer culture and self-branding, is crucial for exploring the Simstagram community. This framework is important to explore how Simstagrammers, as virtual influencers on Instagram, engage in personal branding and self-presentation, where their value and influence are intrinsically tied to their ability to embody and perform idealized femininities and beauty standards (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007). Influencers, particularly those identifying as female and LGBTQ+, navigate a landscape where their success is contingent upon adhering to and commodifying conventional notions of femininity and attractiveness (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007). By creating virtual personas and lifestyles that align with post-feminist ideals of individual empowerment through consumerism and self-branding, the Simstagram community has the potential to exemplify an important focus group for the manifestation of this sensibility within influencer culture on Instagram (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis of popular feminism being commodified is particularly relevant for examining how Simstagrammers may use feminist rhetoric to promote virtual lifestyles and products, creating a paradox where empowerment is intertwined with consumerism. McRobbie's (2009) insights on media representations emphasizing individualism and choice while reinforcing gender norms can illuminate the duality present in Simstagrammers' virtual personas, where they promote empowerment through beauty and lifestyle choices that often adhere to conventional standards of femininity. By exploring the Simstagram community through the lens of post-feminism, this research offers a deeper understanding of how influencer culture on Instagram perpetuates and reinforces the commodification of feminist ideals, the paradox of empowerment through consumerism, and the reinforcement of traditional gender norms within a digital context.

More specific to the beauty culture of social media, Dobson's (2015) research underscores the pressures on young women to conform to idealized standards of beauty, perpetuated through social media (Dobson, 2015). This pressure is amplified in the influencer economy, where beauty and aesthetics are commodified, and success is often measured by one's ability to attract and maintain a following through visual appeal. Sophie Bishop's (2023) concept of "influencer creep"

is particularly relevant here and will consist of one of the foundational analyses of Chapter 5. Bishop (2023) describes how the practices and norms of influencers—such as self-branding, platform optimization, and performing authenticity—have permeated various domains beyond traditional influencers. This "creep" influences how individuals present themselves online, even if they are not professional influencers, blurring the lines between personal and professional self-presentation. Similarly, Arriagada and Bishop's (2021) notion of the influencer "imaginary" further expands on this idea, suggesting that the aspirational aspects of influencer culture shape how individuals envision their own potential for success and self-expression. This imaginary is a powerful force in shaping the behaviours and aspirations of social media users, including those who engage with platforms like Instagram.

The post-feminist implications surrounding sexuality and nudity on social media and the gaming culture are profound. The influencers often emphasize beauty, aesthetics, and personal branding in their virtual personas, reinforcing the connection between femininity and being an influencer (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). This reflects the broader post-feminist trend of individual empowerment through consumerism and self-presentation, which can manifest in the commodification of sexuality and the body (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The prevalence of sexuality and nudity within the Sims and Instagram exemplifies the paradoxical nature of post-feminist ideals. While promoting individual empowerment and self-expression, these practices can simultaneously reinforce traditional gender norms and objectification, potentially contributing to body image issues among followers, particularly young women (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). The Sims, as a game rooted in femininity, provides a unique context for exploring these issues, highlighting the ways in which post-feminist ideals and influencer culture intersect and reinforce each other. As the following chapters will explore, the Simstagram community, equally, provides a unique lens to examine the complex interplay between post-feminism, influencer culture, and the commodification of sexuality and the body in digital spaces.

Platform Affordances and Identity

Before connecting identity formation with the concept of platform affordances, it is important to specify the definition of platform affordances that I found related with my research. As Bucher and Helmond (2018) emphasize, using different conceptions of affordance can have a significant impact, as it sets specific boundaries on what can be understood about affordances and

their initial accessibility. Hence, as Nagy and Neff (2015) have introduced, the concept of 'imagined affordance' is a form of accessibility of the platforms that encompasses the material, mediated, and emotional aspects of human-technology interaction more effectively. According to Nagy and Neff (2015), traditional notions of affordance fall short in addressing the complexity of cognitive and emotional processes. Merely identifying the action possibilities of a social media platform based on its features is inadequate because users' perceptions, beliefs, and expectations shape their approach and actions regarding the technology. In fact, these imagined affordances may not only influence users' interactions with social media platforms but also play a performative role in shaping the platforms themselves (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Consequently, this performative role that platforms afford allows many users from marginalized publics to form a performative ideal identity on social media.

Especially for the women and queer communities, the marginalization coming from both online and offline realities puts pressure to find a solidarity and support system for demarginalizing these identities with shared practices, shared spaces, shared identities and interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2019). Digital media has the capacity to separate selves from bodies due to their virtual nature when this effort is made through online platforms. As Baym (2019) further discusses, "When there is nobody attached to behaviour, the authenticity of behaviour becomes less clear" and the identity becomes disembodied (p.107). In that scenario, as a "god game" where you can have infinite possibilities to create and come into being (Beavis & Charles, 2005), the Sims becomes a way of finding a new body in the virtual world to reembody the identity. Later in the literature, Baym (2019) emphasizes the importance of a "sense of space" in womxn's and feminist communities within digitally mediated communication environments. In this study, Instagram and the Sims appear as two main platforms that afford that "sense of space" to the players to embody certain identities and have authentic relations with others. The sense of space also helps marginalized communities such as women and queer people to domesticate the technology to feel safe, important and accepted (Baym, 2019). On the other side, as a simulation, role-playing and world-building game, the Sims holds multiple aspects of a desirable platform for its users. In Gee and Hayes' (2010) study on women, education, and The Sims, the game creates an affinity space, a loosely organized social and cultural learning environment built on shared passions and interests rather than societal norms. Within The Sims, players have the freedom to explore multiple identities simultaneously, unlike their real-life constructed personas. However,

The Sims' significance isn't solely explained by its inherent qualities. It serves as a backdrop for players' interactive and performative actions and can be customized to align with their specific goals (Sihvonen, 2011).

In the disembodied and reembodied equation of creating a Sims character and making it "real" to reflect self-identity and authenticity, the preference of platforms is important, as Baym (2019) further states, "Our ability to construct an online identity, whether authentic, fanciful, or manipulative is limited and enabled by the communicative tools or affordances, a platform makes available and our skill at strategically managing them" (p.59). Bucher and Helmond (2018) stress that different concepts of affordance significantly impact our understanding, setting specific boundaries on what we grasp about affordances and their accessibility. For the purpose of this study, affordance is conceptualized as 'imagined affordance,' which encompasses material, mediated, and emotional aspects of human-technology interaction more effectively (Nagy and Neff, 2015). Traditional affordance notions, according to Nagy and Neff, fall short in addressing cognitive and emotional complexity. However, this study does not directly access the internal states of Simmers; I cannot ascertain their exact imaginations and feelings. Instead, I infer these internal states from their expressions and actions within what they solemnly share on Instagram.

Twenty-three years after the Sims' first release in 2000, gamers have been online across social media platforms to share their experiences, including on Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit. In my brief observation in preparation for this main study on how different platforms are being used by gamers, especially the Sims players, it is seen that they use Twitter for more of a portfolio to showcase their creation and gamer skills, they use YouTube mainly to share their game mechanics skills and real-time playing with other people. Some Sims players, like other gamers, create challenges on YouTube like creating 100 babies, surviving in the Sims without any money, etc. (Plumbob Tea, 2022). And for almost a decade, Tumblr was a platform for the Simmers to govern the players' creative performances and allowed policing of the aesthetic choice of the Sims players (Deller, 2015). The different usage patterns of Instagram and other platforms like YouTube by The Sims players highlight how platform-specific affordances shape user practices and content creation. As the following chapters will demonstrate, Instagram's unique features and capabilities provide a distinctive environment for players to explore identity performance, network building, and virtual persona embodiment through The Sims (Chen & Kanai, 2021). These platform-specific affordances facilitate a more complex narrative beyond

game mechanics and stories, aligning with real-world influencer practices. This remediation of The Sims on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, offers new opportunities for players to engage with the game and its community in ways that differ significantly from in-game experiences or representations on other platforms.

Instagram affords users to instantly capture and share their everyday activities. The visual language used on the platform is primarily influenced by personal experiences (Gibbs et al., 2014; Manovich, 2017). An important term to refer to Instagram is "platform vernacular" (Gibbs et al., 2014) which refers to the various communication styles and genres that emerge from the continuous interactions between users and the platform itself. These genres are dynamic and represent shared sets of communicative conventions, shaped by the specific capabilities offered by the platform and how users make use of these capabilities. Various instruments for expressing identity, such as self-descriptions in status updates and 'about me' sections, profile pictures, and photo collections (Carr, 2017; Zhao et al., 2008), have been examined as means of constructing ethnic and cultural identities. Engaging in social interaction by performing constructed identities plays a significant role in the usage of Instagram (Lup et al., 2015) along with visual representation compared to text when it comes to expressing oneself. The increasing popularity of sharing social photographs stems from the human need for social connection, as users are driven to share their perspectives and experiences with others (Zappavigna, 2016). Hence the affordance of visual personal experience sharing and creating personal and community connections via this function on Instagram is an important affordance that my research will examine on the Simstagram community.

Although Instagram prioritizes immediate photo sharing, its capabilities for photo editing, particularly through filters, encourage users to publish images that deviate from their original form (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). These images are often meticulously crafted and extensively customized to suit individual preferences, which creates a suitable space for the Sims player to perform their identities by sharing their virtually created avatars and environments. This feature of Instagram is highly examined in Leaver's (2017) study in the context of the "real" self-expression trend of the platform and identity control with movements such as "real-name web" (p.151). As Leaver (2017) explains, major online companies and platforms such as Instagram and Google have been advocating for a shift from pseudonyms to legal names as the default identities. In contrast, there are significant networked communities who use Instagram as an

anonymous platform by sharing their avatars and creating alternative stories within the platform. In that sense, my research considers practices of engaging in anonymity and pseudonymity on a platform that has progressively fostered the anticipation of users revealing their genuine names and displaying their actual faces. Since Simstagram accounts connect with each other via a hashtag, #Simstagram, it is important to refer to how this affordance functions and what it means in the literature. By enabling users to curate thematic content, hashtags play a role in the creation of a dynamic and user-driven taxonomy of online interaction and context (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Zappavigna (2015) further identifies three primary roles of hashtags: framing experiences through content labelling, facilitating interactions by conveying a particular stance and serving as markers of metadiscourse. The importance of hashtags lies in their ability to systematically organize content, facilitate community engagement by connecting users with shared interests, and enhance discoverability by making it easier to find relevant information within digital spaces.

Finally, it is important to highlight that self-representations and identity performances on Instagram are not solely influenced by its affordances but also by the platform's prevailing norms, commercial activities, and policies which give rise to certain identity performances. Marwick's (2015) understanding of "Instafame" reveals how the norms, practices and commercialized activities and policies of Instagram can afford certain identity performances for the users as well. She explains how microcelebrity practices are also driven by the attention economy, a marketing concept that attributes value based on a person or content's ability to get attention in a media-saturated and information-rich environment (Marwick, 2015; Fairchild, 2007). So, we can infer that social media facilitates microcelebrity as it allows individuals to occupy celebrity status, even with a relatively small audience, by utilizing technologies commonly used by superstar musicians, athletes, and actors along with gamifying some affordances of social media to the extent that an economy of social media commerce has emerged, in contrast to the past where celebrity status was primarily a characteristic of a person, whereas in the internet era, microcelebrity is an active pursuit or activity undertaken by people (Leaver, 2017; Marwick, 2015). Especially relevant with my research, Marwick draws attention to the marketing jargon of "aspirational" content which refers to desirable things people wish to possess but often cannot and further discusses how predominantly young Instagram users often find aspirational content that bears a resemblance to the opulent and extravagant lifestyles of celebrities and affluent individual. She conceptualizes this aesthetic as *Instafame,* which "is not egalitarian but rather

reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is reinscribed in a visual digital medium." (Marwick, 2015, p.141). In summary, The intersection of Instagram, The Sims, and user practices in 'Simstagram' creates a unique digital environment that reveals how players perform identities and engage with influencer culture through the game's remediation on social media platforms.

Theoretical Framework

      Based on the literature review that is covered in this research, the authenticity and performativity of virtual identities that the Sims players embody on Instagram in line with the conceptualization of gender and platform affordances of Instagram establish the main theoretical frameworks of this research. This study is driven by three main theoretical areas of inquiry: authenticity, performativity, and embodiment.

<u>Authenticity</u>

      Mediated interactions and communications through social media affect how people represent themselves as authentic via their accounts and preferences. While earlier perspectives on authenticity focus on the personal aspect of being authentic, such as Rousseau's (1992) authenticity framework as a derivation from the so-called natural self, Heidegger's (1996) framework of authenticity as a choice of one's natural existence and identity, and Sartre's (1992) perspective on authenticity which requires taking full responsibility of one's own life and choices, the idea of authenticity has seen a revival in modern culture. Firstly, it is important to recognize that authenticity is an active state that requires action rather than inaction. It cannot simply be undone or disregarded, as emphasized by Goffman (2022) in his argument that the self is constantly performed. This realization highlights how everyday performances have permeated our use of social media. Secondly, authenticity is a socially constructed concept that is deeply influenced by the social interactions and norms prevalent on social media. Rather than being solely determined by individual will or intention, authenticity is a collaborative effort between the user and the audience, involving co-creation (A.S. Taylor, 2022).

      In light of the collective construction of authenticity, it is clear that authenticity is performative and carries social, cultural, or political implications when achieved. So, it is crucial to view authenticity as a tool employed to attain specific objectives, having a performative impact

on both the content creator and the audience. While Varga (2012) defines authenticity as a "social technology" to highlight its inseparable connection to the environment and the others in the community, Marwick and boyd (2011) point out that 'the authentic' is characterized as a socially constructed concept that is contextually specific and varies significantly across different communities and time periods. Vannini and William's (2020) authenticity definition in the cultural context as a way of shared practices and being connected in a community will be helpful for this research to explore how networked communities create authenticity on social media. Salisbury and Pooley (2017) extend the idea that authenticity is socially constructed and manifested on social media by investigating the attributes considered as markers of authenticity. Their research reveals that social networking sites depend on their capacity to be seen as authentic and to foster genuine self-expression among their users (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). Even though the word "genuine" reflects the intimate connection among users, authenticity should not be solely understood as a state of being genuine or true. The association of authenticity with these terms arises from the performative impact it has, creating a sense of reality for the individual experiencing it (A.S. Taylor, 2022). As A.S. Taylor (2022) further explains, this kind of authenticity produces observable external effects, it enables both the user and the audience to perceive it within a socially constructed reality. Overall, the theoretical framework of authenticity is crucial in my research to comprehend how Simstagrammers create self-representations that appear authentic both within the game and the Instagram environment.

Performativity

The term "performative" is employed here drawing on its original meaning as outlined by Austin in his speech-act theory (1975), where he defines "performatives" as utterances that embody an action within the act of being spoken. When asserting that social media is performative according to Austin's definition, it does not imply merely putting on a performance, but rather that performativity actively accomplishes or brings about something in the present moment of its viewing or referencing. Consequently, as I discussed previously, authenticity can be reconceptualized as a form of an iteration–a performance–involving recognizable languages, whether visual, verbal, or textual, that have social, cultural, or political implications or effects (Austin, 1975). Derrida (1988) agrees with this perspective and, while critiquing Austin's notion of performativity, argues that language goes beyond mere action. According to Derrida, language

and its performances rely on established references and follow a repeatable pattern. Similarly, Erving Goffman's (2022) impression management framework highlights the performativity aspect of creating authenticity by interacting with society. According to Goffman, individuals engage in various strategies to present themselves in a favourable light, control the way others perceive them, and maintain a desired social identity. His framework emphasizes the performative nature of social interaction that can be seen on social media today, where individuals act as if they are playing a role on a stage, carefully curating their behaviour, appearance, and communication to create a specific impression (Hogan, 2010). In line with Goffman's perspective, Rettberg (2014) states that constructing and performing one's identity is no longer a solitary introspective process, but rather an ongoing development publicly displayed before an imagined audience via a continuous feedback loop of data, ultimately aiming to attain a sense of authenticity in self-presentation. While taking the act of performance to the point where performativity is a way of communication with others, how Simstagrammers perform authenticity is especially important to understanding their mean-making and integration into the influencer culture of social media.

The interplay of performativity, authenticity and influencer culture is one of the highlights that Duffy and Hund (2019) express to understand how the digital neoliberal economy of those microcelebrities works. They highlight the pressure to showcase one's work and lifestyle for a digital audience, which is often seen as necessary for success in the neoliberal digital economy (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Another discussion on the performativity and "realness" or "genuine experiences" are conducted by A.S. Taylor, (2022, p.11) by stating that the performative influence of social media resides in its ability to be perceived, or felt as though, it is 'really happening' to its audiences. She specifically underlines that this phenomenon can be observed in fan cultures, which can be directly connected to the Sims fan base as players, for whom social interactions across the game and social media, such as by sharing memes, together afford a different version of realness. In light of this, it becomes crucial to critically evaluate the performative nature of content creation on these platforms.

Embodiment

Throughout my research, embodiment is an important concept for understanding the Sims player's relation to their self-made digital bodies and their performativity on Instagram.

Especially early research on embodiment in media explored how the body is presented in both non-immersive and immersive virtual environments by utilizing avatars, which are digital representations of users (Ratan, 2013; Riva et al., 2017; Nowak & Fox, 2018). For example, Ratan (2013) applied Damasio's (1999) framework to explain how avatar embodiment affects players' perception of self-presence. Ratan (2013) defines self-presence as "the extent to which some aspect of a person's media use is relevant to the self" (p.323). This perception of self-presence within the avatar is an important function of embodiment through digital avatars for the Sims players as well since the Sims provides players with a sophisticated means of creating and controlling their own avatars. Connecting to these avatars is the concept of 'digital embodiment,', Nakamura's (2020) work explains that digital embodiment goes beyond the physical body and encompasses the avatar, persona, or digital representation that a person adopts in online spaces. This digital representation is not merely a reflection or extension of the physical self but becomes a significant aspect of one's identity and self-expression in the digital realm along with the fact that digital embodiment is shaped by cultural, social, and technological factors (Nakamura, 2020). Online platforms, video games, virtual reality, and social media all contribute to how users construct and experience their digital identities by regularly providing specific affordances and constraints that influence the way individuals present themselves and interact with others (Nakamura, 2020). Similarly, Castronova (2005) argues that experiencing a sense of self through digital bodies on an experimental level holds the same amount of power as embodying those identities in real life. Approaching embodiment and the body, whether digital or real, as a tool, he explains that the physical body serves as the means for the mind to perceive sensations and interact with the surrounding environment and the avatar body in virtual spaces fulfills this purpose exclusively (Castronova, 2005).

Specific to the role of gender in digital embodiment, Gray (2017) stresses that the physical body cannot be disregarded, as a significant part of the real-world self is projected into virtual spaces. From their perspective, it is essential to go beyond the digital realm and carefully reconsider its potential and limitation to empower marginalized groups both online and offline (Gray, 2017). Highlighting the fact that in seemingly liberating spaces where individuals have the freedom to shape their identities, gender, race, and other aspects of identity still end up being reaffirmed and imposed on their physical identities, and especially queer and womxn communities, those who have not openly expressed their sexual orientation in physical spaces,

may not have potential to intertwine their real-life identities with their digital bodies because of the existence of gender policing in online game platforms. As T.L. Taylor (2002) mentions from a gender-neutral perspective, in multi-user virtual worlds, presence is not solely established through the inclusion of a self-representation. Rather, it is through the active utilization of the body as a medium for the dynamic performance of identity and social interactions that users achieve a sense of being "made real" and experience immersion (T.L. Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, the interaction between the player and the aesthetics generated through this interaction can be seen as analogous to the symbiotic relationship between an audience and a theatrical performance (Burn, 2006). Additionally, examining how Sims players embody their avatars during gameplay and their presence on Instagram provides insights into their relationship to Instagram's influencer culture. My research also considers variations relating to embodiment and its impact on performativity, identity, and authenticity when exploring the connection between the Sims game mechanics and Instagram.

In summary, in this chapter, I explored the key areas of literature and theoretical frameworks relevant to this study. I first examined gender and gamer culture, highlighting how games like The Sims provide alternative spaces for identity exploration and expression, particularly for women and queer individuals. The discussions on gender, beauty and influencer culture along with related postfeminist discourse emphasized the performative nature of authenticity and the commodification of femininity within social media platforms. Finally, I discussed the concept of platform affordances, particularly 'imagined affordance,' to understand how users' perceptions and interactions with technology shape their experiences, embodiment and identity formation. Together, these areas provide a comprehensive foundation for my research for analyzing the intersection of The Sims, Instagram, and the unique cultural phenomenon of Simstagram.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to understand what Simstagram is, how virtual identities and their performativity of authenticity and femininity are reflected on Instagram, and what Instagram affords for The Sims players, digital ethnography plays a critical role in my research process as an umbrella term for my research methodology. This research combines digital ethnographic observation involving a flow-oriented approach with text analysis to examine the community. Over a period of 4 months, I immersed myself in the Simstagram community and this process involved systematic data collection, coding, and analysis of visual and textual content. Additionally, I engaged in observation of multiple accounts' regular sharing rhythms by creating an anonymous research account, allowing me to experience firsthand the practices and norms of the community. This multi-faceted approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of the Simstagram phenomenon, providing rich data on the intersection of The Sims gameplay, Instagram affordances, and influencer culture.

Digital Ethnography

Regarding the long history of ethnographic research methods in social science, the term "digital" has redefined the medium and boundaries of ethnographic research with its complexity. After identities are presented digitally via social media, being digital becomes more than just existing in a situation; it is a process of becoming integrated into the digital and creating a culture because of "our ongoing acquaintance over time" with online platforms which can respond to individuals' characteristics "with the same degree of subtlety (or more than) we can expect from other human beings." (Negroponte, 2000, p.164). Thus, to explore a new culture or community that is formed and connected digitally, digital ethnography is a functional and multifaceted tool to use in qualitative research. Even though there is significant research on the Sims as a virtual world and as a revolutionary game especially in defining gender roles in gamer history, there is no specific study on the culture of Simstagram which combines the dynamics of an offline virtual world and online social media platform. Thus, digital ethnography becomes a guiding tool for my research to explore how, why and in what ways Simstagram culture occurs on Instagram.

By adopting digital ethnographic methods, I am influenced and inspired by Annette Markham's contemporary approaches and understanding of digital ethnography. Markham (2020) defines ethnography as "an approach that seeks to find meanings of cultural phenomena

by getting close to the experience of these phenomena." (p. 4). In my research, the performativity of femininity and lifestyle culture by the Sims player on Instagram is a convenient element to get "close to" by conducting digital ethnography. Moreover, Markham (2020) suggests three heuristics as frameworks while embedding the research into some methodological nuances: the internet as a medium or tool for networked connectivity, the internet as a venue, place or virtual world, and the internet as a way of being, which my research touches upon all three nuances due to its complex nature, which considers both the game and Instagram. The first heuristic derives its roots from media studies and cultures of connectivity and the second heuristic borrows the dimensionality of placeness, aspects that the game studies and virtual environment scholars such as Boellstorff, Nardi and T. L. Taylor generally focus on (2012). Even though I am exploring a social media phenomenon, its baseline originated in a virtual world. Thus, I believe that digital ethnography helps me to position my research betwixt and between networked society and immersive environments since I study the people and characters of a particular offline game in an online and connected platform. Lastly, Christine Hine's (2020) three aspects of the contemporary digital world that make it highly valuable for digital ethnography are "embedded, embodied and everyday". Hine (2020) defines the Internet as *embedded* within multiple contexts and frames of meaning, and Simstagram has complex layers in which I try to find meaning. Then, she underlines that the Internet is seamlessly integrated with *'embodied'* experiences (Hine, 2020), which emphasizes the researcher's and their participants' active and reflexive engagement with both the physical and digital worlds during the ethnographic research process. Especially in the context of online communities and digital spaces, Hine (2020) suggests that researchers should pay attention to how the participants' bodies and senses are engaged in their online activities, which involves understanding how digital interactions, such as sharing a photo, liking a story, or gesturing in comments, are entangled with broader social and cultural practices. From the same perspective, the Sims players' engagement in the game and on Instagram makes the concept of (re)embodiment essential to understanding the digital existence of those identities in the influencer culture of Instagram. Finally, Hine (2020) emphasizes the *everyday* appearance of digital life, which is well-connected to the research regarding the lifestyle culture of Instagram that requires a regular rhythm from the users. Since the two main elements of my research are a virtual world and their networked publics on social media, I only observe what Simstagrammers choose to perform on social media instead of having direct communication with the target group.

This ethnographic observation fulfills my aim to understand the origin and dynamics of this culture and also to understand what Instagram affords for it.

More specifically, I follow a flow-oriented approach that was first described by Annette Markham and Katherine Gammelby (2020) as a method that allows the researcher the flexibility to play with the idea of being a spy while trying to unravel a complex network as opposed to an object-oriented approach that limits the researcher within concrete timeframes and data points. They position the flow-oriented approach as "a creative remix of longstanding principles of constructivist grounded theory, symbolic interaction, and postmodern ethnography, with a strong foundation of feminist epistemologies" (Markham & Gammelby, 2020, p. 20). The approach supports that making sense of digital culture is not merely about analyzing tangible data points but also about making sense of ephemeral connections and entanglements that exist between and beyond such elements along with any observation, and reflexive and question-driven selection of data in the research process (Markham & Gammelby, 2020). So, the researchers' selective interpretation, experiences and flow give dynamism to the object of analysis. In my research, I approach Simstagram with the same explorative and curious framework that gives me more space to make sense of a virtual culture on a popular platform. As a final note, it is important to acknowledge that traditional ethnographies typically involve extended periods of immersion in a culture, often spanning years, and utilize a mix of methods including interviews and observation. However, given the scope and time constraints of this study, as well as my specific research questions, I found that a shorter duration of ethnographic observation was effective. This approach, sometimes referred to as 'rapid ethnography' (Millen, 2000) or 'focused ethnography,' (Knoblauch, 2005) allowed me to conduct a targeted exploration of the Simstagram community while still providing valuable insights into the cultural practices and dynamics within this digital space.

Data Collection Process

The methodology for data observation and collection in this research involved a comprehensive approach to studying the Simstagram community on Instagram. On September 10, 2023, I created a new researcher account, adhering to the flow-oriented approach suggested by Markham and Gammelby (2020). I left the account blank, with a randomized name, birthday, and an anonymized email address solely used for this research. Initially suspended, the account

became active within 5 minutes after providing a phone number and passing the "I am not a robot" test. The account was dedicated to tracking the Simstagram community, utilizing the Instagram features of searching by hashtag and following related accounts that appeared in hashtag searches I used the hashtag #Simstagram as the starting point to identify the networked community and observe their behavior, as it was the origin of how I initially encountered this community, inspiring my research. It's worth noting that while other hashtags exist, #Simstagram proved to be the most comprehensive, covering the largest set of accounts and posts related to this community. This single hashtag was sufficient for capturing the breadth of the Simstagram phenomenon, making additional hashtags unnecessary for the scope of this study.

A two-week observation period commenced from September 10 to September 26, 2023. During the first week, potential users appearing in the #Simstagram search were observed daily, while in the second week, observations were conducted every other day after establishing a rhythm. Observational field notes were taken on story sharing and context, follower and following profiles, and networked connections to understand how the community used Instagram. From September 20 to September 24, 2023, data collection sheets were prepared. One database was created for the selected accounts as the first step of data collection, and another database was created for their content as the second step. The metadata to be collected was finalized based on the observations. The user metadata included user profile link, username, name on the profile, account type, bio description, age (if mentioned), hashtags used in the bio, links in the bio, mentions of other accounts, other social media platforms, number of posts, followers, and following, story sharing (yes/no), sexual identity/gender terms used, and retrieval date. The content metadata included data-coded name, post link, usernames of the owner(s), location (if any), sound (if any), mentions of other usernames, number of comments, likes, important themes noted, retrieval date, and the date of the post.

On September 26, 2023, the first phase of data collection started, focusing on user information. In total, 119 account metadata were collected based on their appearance in the #Simstagram search and their connections with the initially selected accounts to understand the network within the community. During the second phase of content collection, 14 accounts were either deactivated or had their content deleted, resulting in a final dataset of 105 accounts. The researcher followed each account in the database to observe their stories frequently, without

leaving likes or comments on posts or stories, providing insights into the network connections within the Simstagram community. All accounts were public and purposefully selected.

The second phase of data collection, focusing on content, commenced on October 23rd, 2023, and continued until November 12, 2023, during which 1,163 unique images from 803 posts and 57 stories were collected. Data collection ceased at this point due to content saturation; for the last four days of collection, I observed that the types of posts being gathered were consistently similar to those already in the dataset. This repetition indicated that the sample had become sufficiently representative for analysis, suggesting that further data collection would not yield significant new insights. The sampling was based on Instagram metrics, such as the most liked content and the most followed accounts, along with accounts that consistently performed identity. This approach allowed me to focus on the most influential and engaging content within the Simstagram community, providing insights into the most successful strategies for identity performance and audience engagement. The data collection focused on accounts and creations from a critical lens that explored gender, authenticity, performativity, embodiment, and influencer aesthetics as dominant themes in Simstagram content and activity. Friendship connections and co-sharing of posts were also considered to understand the network within the community.

Data Analysis

In this analysis, I categorized accounts within the Simstagram community based on user behavior, demographics, and content patterns, utilizing the aforementioned dataset of 803 posts and 1,163 unique images from 105 accounts. This categorization is crucial for understanding the diverse ecosystem of Simstagram, as it reveals insights into community identification, engagement levels, and the interplay between platform affordances and user practices, ultimately enriching our comprehension of digital identity construction in this unique space. This approach aligns with the concept of "blended data," which emphasizes the value of combining different types of data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media phenomena (Croeser & Highfield, 2021). By integrating quantitative metrics with qualitative observations, we can "critique and complement" our dataset, addressing potential biases and enhancing the depth of our analysis (Croeser & Highfield, 2021).

For the close analysis of the data that I collected with flow-oriented digital ethnography methodology, textual analysis served as a highly suitable method, which consists of posts and stories shared by Sims players on Instagram. As McKee (2003) emphasizes, textual analysis aims to understand how audiences make sense of various forms of media texts and the role these texts play in shaping cultural meanings. In the context of the Simstagram community, the meaning-making process of the audience is crucial, as it is equally important to understand how they interpret the meaning and message of the posts they engage with. McKee (2003) rejects the notion of a single "correct" interpretation of a text, arguing that texts can have multiple valid interpretations based on the cultural contexts and experiences of different audiences. This perspective is particularly relevant for the Simstagram community, where players from diverse backgrounds may interpret and make sense of the shared content in unique ways. Again, McKee (2003) highlights the significance of considering the context, genre, and modality of a text when conducting textual analysis, as these factors influence how audiences interpret and make sense of the text. Furthermore, McKee (2003) presents textual analysis as a methodology for gathering and analyzing information in academic research, involving the researcher making educated guesses about the most likely interpretations audiences might make of a given text. This aligns with the research objective of understanding how the Simstagram community "make[s] and share[s] sense about the world [they] live in," a process that is central to textual analysis (McKee, 2003, p. 144). By employing McKee's approach to textual analysis, I conducted a rigorous analysis that considers the complexities of audience interpretations, cultural contexts, and the multifaceted nature of the Simstagram community's posts and stories. This method provides a framework for exploring how these media texts participate in the construction of authenticity, performativity and identity formation within the community. t's important to note that McKee's approach does not involve direct audience research or polling; rather, it relies on the researcher's informed interpretation to infer the meaning conveyed and the most probable interpretation of a text based on cultural and contextual understanding.

For the analysis of user content, visual analysis, and qualitative data coding of emergent themes, the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA was employed as a powerful tool. MAXQDA proved invaluable for conducting textual analysis because it permits the systematic qualitative coding of posts from both textual and visual perspectives. This functionality includes the ability to upload images and videos along with their associated descriptions, transcriptions,

and comments. By leveraging MAXQDA's capabilities, this research was able to explore how Instagram influences users' performances of authenticity, identity, and gender within the Simstagram community. The software's robust features facilitated a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted media content, enabling the identification and analysis of recurring themes, patterns, and discourses that shape the community's engagement with influencer culture, self-presentation, and gender norms on the platform.

Ethical Considerations

Before delving into the ethical considerations of this research, it's crucial to address my own positionality as a researcher in relation to the Simstagram community (Markham, 2020). As a cis woman and an avid Sims player during my childhood, who regularly uses Instagram, I possess certain insider knowledge that enhances my understanding of the community's dynamics. This familiarity with both the Sims and Instagram cultures allows me to interpret nuances that might be missed by an outsider. However, I am also an outsider in that I am not a participant in the Simstagram community itself. This dual position of insider-outsider presents both advantages and challenges. It allows me to approach the research with a degree of cultural competence while maintaining a critical distance. I am acutely aware that this positionality influences my interpretation of the collected data and shapes my ethical approach to the research. Throughout this study, I have strived to balance my insider knowledge with an outsider's objectivity, constantly reflecting on how my background might influence my analysis. This self-awareness has led me to apply particular care in my ethical considerations, ensuring that I respect the community's boundaries and protect participants' privacy, even as I leverage my insider understanding to provide deeper insights into the Simstagram phenomenon.

Conducting research on online communities raises important ethical considerations, particularly regarding privacy, consent, and the protection of personal rights. In this study, the data collection process involved gathering visual content, including posts and stories, from the Simstagram community on Instagram. Since the platform does not provide a feature to download public posts directly, I collected this data by taking screenshots. My research focused on the online data that is available publicly and I conducted my research on accounts that are public, not private. Thus, since my research process does not involve any direct human participants and human interaction, I did not need institutional ethical approval (Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

To address ethical concerns surrounding privacy and consent, I implemented several measures. Throughout the thesis, most visual data presented was anonymized, such as usernames with black lines, ensuring that no personal information about the Sims players or their virtual influencer accounts was disclosed. This step was crucial in securing the privacy of the individuals involved and preventing the unauthorized use of identifiable information. Furthermore, recognizing that many accounts maintain a separation between their Sims avatar personas and their main creator/human identities, I focused solely on the crafted accounts specifically designed to portray the lives of their Sims characters. This approach prevented the inadvertent inclusion of any personal information without explicit permission (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). For that reason, I included some usernames in cases where they appeared to be fictitious and unrelated/untraceable to a user's offline identity. These accounts had no information, tags, or mentions about the gamer's real identity, making them completely anonymous. In such cases, I deemed it ethically acceptable to include these usernames.

Additionally, I meticulously documented the retrieval dates of all collected data, establishing a clear audit trail and ensuring transparency in the research process. To further uphold anonymity and protect personal rights, I disguised any other profiles that were commented on or mentioned within the collected posts, ensuring that no identifiable information was included without proper consent. By implementing these ethical measures, I aimed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Simstagram community's authentic and networked performativity while prioritizing the ethical principles of privacy, consent, and the protection of personal rights. This approach not only upholds research integrity but also demonstrates respect for the online communities under study (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

In summary, this chapter has outlined the comprehensive methodology employed in this study to explore the Simstagram community. The research utilized a multi-faceted approach, combining digital ethnography, textual analysis, and quantitative analysis to gather and interpret data. Digital ethnography involved immersive observation and interaction within the Simstagram community, leveraging Instagram's features to track and analyze public accounts and posts. Textual analysis, guided by McKee's framework, allowed for an in-depth examination of the content, focusing on how users construct and perform identities. The quantitative analysis provided key insights into user behavior, demographics, and content patterns, revealing the dynamics of the community. The findings from this methodology are presented across the next

two chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on the main characteristics of Simstagrammers, offering a detailed subcategorization based on the content and metadata collected. This analysis provides a foundational understanding of the community's structure and diversity. Chapter 5 explores the intricate connections between authenticity, performativity, and embodiment within Simstagram's beauty and postfeminist influencer culture. This chapter incorporates data on aesthetics and examines how platform affordances shape these dynamics, offering insights into how Simstagrammers navigate and construct their identities within this unique digital space.

Chapter 4: What is Simstagram?

In this chapter, I explore my first research question, "What is Simstagram?", by breaking down into the structures and dynamics of this subcommunity concerning the identity creation and influencer culture mechanisms of Instagram. In this way, my research subject will be well-defined and recognized for the further questions that are aimed to be answered in this research. It was especially important to include this question as an introductory research point in the first place for two main reasons. First, in the literature of game and media studies, even though different gamer communities have attention regarding their significant social media presence, the Sims community's existence on Instagram has not been researched or highlighted before. So, this becomes a niche and untouched territory for me to acquaint myself with the Simstagram community in my research to be able to elaborate their dynamics with my theoretical concepts. Second, my research will be incomplete and two-dimensional without helping the audience understand who Simstagrammers are and what their behaviors are. Otherwise, my fundamental perspective on how they interface with the influencer culture of Instagram to create their virtual identities and networked community would be inadequate to be explored. During this chapter, I define some of the major characteristics of the Simstagram community that appeared in my data along with preliminary discussion of their identity creation and authenticity. Including a highlight of the similarities between real-life influencers' and the Simstagram community's social media behaviors, the chapter concludes with prominent subcategories of the Simstagram community in my database.

"Simstagram" refers to a community of players who share content as Sims characters, typically acting as if they have an existence outside of the game on the social media platform Instagram. This community often includes Simmers (fans of The Sims) who create and share screenshots, videos, stories, custom content, and other creations related to various topics, especially beauty, fashion, luxurious lifestyle, and relationships that may take place both in the Sims world and the real life. Similar to the vernacular term "Instagrammer" to refer to someone who is an active Instagram user and shares regular content, the Simstagram community calls each individual a "Simstagrammer" to imply the same behavior for the accounts of the community. As stated earlier, the initial point of data collection in this research is based on the usage of #Simstagram. During the time of data collection, there were more than 3 million posts available on Instagram that use #simstagram. Today, while hashtags may not be the primary affordance

chosen by influencers or ordinary users on Instagram, they hold significant importance within the Simstagram community, in construction of the boundaries of this community. This underscores the significance of hashtags as facilitators of belongingness and networked relationships within the Simstagram community, as evidenced by users' voluntary tagging of their posts with the aforementioned hashtags. In my research, the hashtag #Simstagram provided an excellent starting point for data collection and observing this subculture's dynamics on Instagram. As Highfield and Leaver (2016) emphasize further, searching for hashtags is a crucial feature that serves as a fundamental starting point for examining platform activity. As such, Instagram research can be characterized as 'search as research,' highlighting the significance of the initial hashtag query in shaping the final analysis and findings (Rogers, 2019). Thus, it clearly signals that the community that the Sims players created on Instagram means a belongingness and networked relationship for them so they voluntarily choose to tag their posts with these aforementioned hashtags. In this chapter, first, I will explain the major subcategories of thematic clusters observed within the Simstagram community, including celebrity, family, intimacy and sexuality, and awareness/impact/activism. Then, the characteristics of the Simstagram community will be discussed, such as the consistent performative process, self-promotion and commodification, connection with the audience through personal sharing, and the emphasis on beauty culture. Finally, I will delve into each of the major subcategories in detail, exploring their unique aspects, narratives, and implications within the Simstagram community.

Characteristics of Simstagram

Before delving into the details of the characteristics of Simstagram, it is crucial to understand the creative process behind the content shared by Simstagrammers. What they present on Instagram is not merely direct screenshots from The Sims game. Instead, they invest significant effort, game design skills, and creativity to craft the final output of their posts. Simstagrammers transcend the boundaries of The Sims' game mechanics, utilizing elements beyond its reach to construct intricate narratives. They meticulously design environments, clothing, and avatars that surpass the offerings of the game's default packages. To achieve this, they employ various design tools such as Blender and Adobe Photoshop, often sharing their creations with fellow gamers through links in their bios. While The Sims game serves as a foundation, there are notable continuities and discontinuities between the game and the content

shared on Instagram. Simstagrammers skillfully blend elements from the game with their own creative visions, resulting in a seamless fusion of virtual and imagined realities. This process involves a multistep procedure, where players first conceptualize their desired narratives, design the necessary assets, capture in-game footage, and then meticulously edit and enhance the visuals using aforementioned external software. Overall, the journey of Simstagrammers begins with their passion for the Sims game, but it evolves into a creative endeavor that transcends the game's boundaries on Instagram. Through their dedication and artistic expression, they craft immersive digital worlds that not only mirror but also redefine the conventions of influencer culture.

First, I would like to share several key insights revealed by the quantitative analysis of the Simstagram community dataset, which provided valuable information about user behavior, demographics, and content patterns. The dataset comprised 803 posts and 1,163 unique images from 105 accounts, providing a comprehensive view of the community. Notably, 97% (n=779) of the collected posts were tagged with #simstagrammer, while 85% (n=683) used #thesims, indicating strong community identification. The number of posts per account varied widely, ranging from 3 to 1,059. Follower counts ranged from 54 to 16,100, averaging 1,282, while following counts spanned from 43 to 5,233, with an average of 664. Table 1 shows a summary of these demographic variables. These numbers reveal a highly engaged and interconnected community within Simstagram. The high percentage of posts using community-specific hashtags suggests a strong sense of collective identity among users. The wide range in post frequency and follower counts indicates a diverse ecosystem of users, from casual participants to highly active content creators. The relatively high average follower count compared to following count suggests that many Simstagrammers have cultivated substantial audiences, potentially positioning themselves as microcelebrities within this niche community.

Table 1: Quantitative Analysis of Data (Hashtags, Account Activity, Follower & Following)

Dataset Overview	# Count	Hashtag Usage	# Count	Account Activity	# Count
		#simstagram	779	Minimum Posts Per Account	3
Dataset Overview	# Count	#thesims	683	Maximum Posts Per Account	1059
Total Posts Analyzed	803				
Unique Images	1163	Follower Demographics	# Count	Following Demographics	# Count
Unique Accounts	105	Minimum Followers	54	Minimum Following	43
		Maximum Followers	16100	Maximum Following	5233
		Mean Followers	1282	Mean Following	664

As can be further seen in Table 2, demographic analysis revealed accounts presenting Simmers with an age range of 18 to 36 years, with a mean of 25. Gender representation showed a predominance of women, with 58 accounts using she/her pronouns, compared to 16 using he/him and 4 using they/them. LGBTQ+ representation was evident in 10 accounts, with 6 using the rainbow flag emoji. Ethnic diversity was observed, with specific mentions of African (5), Indian (4), Iranian (1), Korean (7), Jamaican (1), Caribbean (1), and Afro-American (15) identities, while 44 accounts appeared to be white.

Table 2: Quantitative Analysis of Data (Age, Gender, Account Type, Ethnicity, Locations)

Age Distribution			Gender Representation (Pronouns)				Account Types		
Min	Max	Mean	He/Him	She/Her	They/Them	LGBTQ+	Personal	Institutions	Brands
18	36	25	16	58	4	16	69	27	9

Ethnic Representation (# of accounts)								
	African	Indian	Iranian	Korean	Jamaican	Carribbean	Afro-American	White
	5	4	1	7	1	1	15	44

Mentioned Locations (# of recurrence)										
New York	Los Angeles	France	Beverly Hills	Italy	Las Vegas	Mexico	Thailand	Dubai	Seychelles	Greece
107	48	45	37	26	8	4	3	2	2	1

Concerning other metrics presented in Table 2, the dataset revealed a diverse array of account types and geographical representations within the Simstagram community. Notably, 27 accounts were identified as representing organizations and institutions, such as adoption centers,

non-profit organizations for women, gyms, yoga centers, and architecture firms. Additionally, 9 accounts were categorized as product brands, primarily focusing on luxury fashion, sports apparel, and beauty products. This diversity in account types suggests a rich ecosystem within the Simstagram community that mirrors real-world commercial and institutional structures. The location data provided further insights into the virtual geography of Simstagram, revealing 13 distinct settings referenced across the dataset. New York emerged as the most frequently mentioned location with 100 references, followed by Los Angeles (48 mentions) and Paris (45 mentions). Other notable locations included Beverly Hills (37 mentions), Milan (26 mentions), and Las Vegas (8 mentions). The prevalence of these cosmopolitan and glamorous settings aligns with the aspirational nature of influencer culture. Less frequently mentioned but still significant were exotic locations such as Dubai, Seychelles, and Tulum, each appearing 2-4 times in the dataset. This quantitative overview of account types and location preferences provides a solid foundation for understanding the composition and characteristics of the Simstagram community, offering valuable context for subsequent qualitative analysis and interpretation of user behaviors and content trends.

Performativity, Self-promotion, and Commodification

In the data that I collected and observed for this research, the profiles analyzed reveal a surprising breadth of categories within the Simstagram community, exceeding my initial expectations, as this fusion of influencer culture from Instagram and The Sims' game mechanics mirrors the dynamics of real-life influencer culture. Within this digital space, there's a proliferation of content predominantly centred around feminine and queer themes, emphasizing self-promotion, beauty, and fashion. Simstagrammers intricately craft personas that glorify and idealize celebrity lifestyles, often adorned with excessive branding and the representation of popular culture items and trends. This intricate replication of real-world influencer culture within a virtual environment underscores the complexity and diversity of narratives woven by Simstagram creators. The main patterns that I noticed in relation to influencer culture and lifestyle content of the Simstagram community are consistent performative processes, self-promotion and commodification, and connection with the audience by personal sharing and beauty. While these key concepts of influencer culture will be introduced and exemplified here, relevant theories and literature reviews will be applied to critically examine the underlying

dynamics, motivations, and implications surrounding these patterns observed within the Simstagram community's lifestyle and influencer content.

First, the Simstagram community has a consistent behaviour of content sharing and regularly showcasing the daily life of the virtual Sims character, which provides a smooth continuity of their narrative and storyline. This consistency is mainly maintained by the Instagram posts, along with sharing multiple Stories in a day. Even though my primary focus during online ethnography was observing and collecting Instagram posts that they share, I also conducted field observation of their story-sharing behaviors for two weeks of my data collection process. Based on this observation, while their posts are more related to their daily lives, items that they want to promote or partnerships that they have, their stories are more prone to notifying followers about a new Instagram post that they shared, sharing memes that belong to the real-life events or participating several trends that shape the story sharing habits of Instagram users in general. For example, as a Simstagram influencer and singer, *@thesyirerose* shares her personal characteristics such as her pronouns, age, residency, nationality, relationship status and number of tattoos and piercings on her body in a collective story trend to engage with their followers as can be seen in Figure 4.1. Instagram introduced the "Add Yours" feature in 2021, allowing users to create public story threads with custom prompts that others can respond to with their own stories (Instagram, 2021). This feature streamlines the process of sharing stories by allowing users to contribute to public story threads with custom prompts, enabling widespread participation in viral trends and fostering a sense of community around shared experiences or templates. In the past, the "Character About Me" story trend in Figure 4.1 has evolved from previously sharing similar information like demographics, interests, and preferences via email or forum threads. Now, with Instagram's high reach and the "Add Yours" feature, everyone can participate using the same template, fostering a sense of belonging. As a Simstagrammer, stating details like nationality or residence humanizes these characters and lends them an influencer-like persona. For instance, while the Sims game itself has no concept of nationalities, in Figure 4.1, the character explicitly states her nationality as "Filipina and Samoan". Similarly, mentioning a place like New York City, which doesn't exist in the game world, adds a layer of realism to their virtual influencer identity in the subculture of Simstagram.
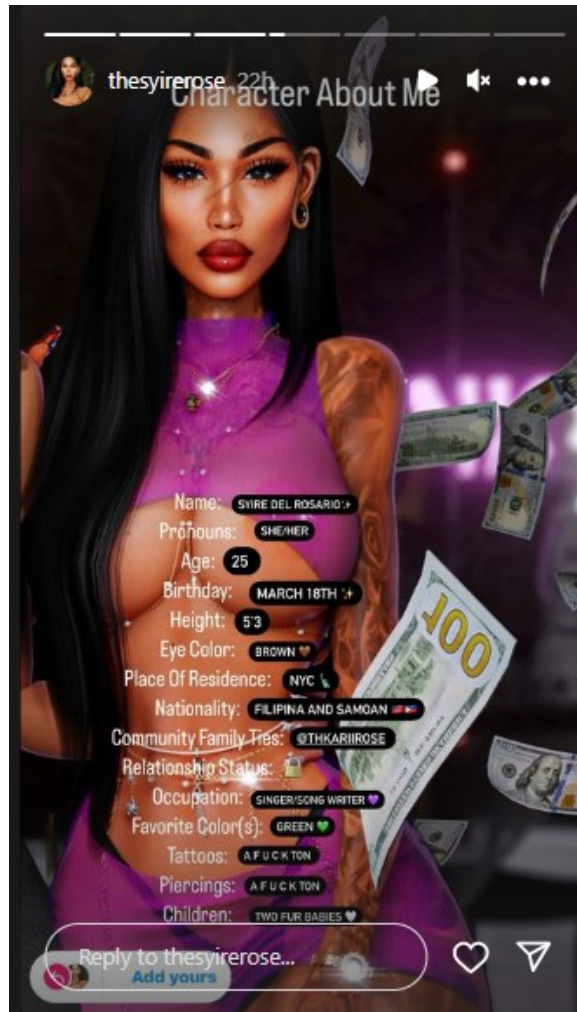
Figure 4.1. @thesyirerose, Retrieved on October 28, 2023.

This example not only shows how the user is strategically engaging with her followers on Instagram, but also reveals her strategy to identify a virtual Sims character in the real influencer world since the information on place of residence or nationality does not exist on the Sims world, but they are significant topographical and sometimes socioeconomic indicators of our world. Relatedly, the Simstagram users feel the necessity of daily engaging with their followers to be more "influencer", also to be more "real" and "alive" with the real-life characteristics that they attribute themselves in consideration of their virtual Sims bodies. This behavior directly conforms to A.S. Taylor's (2022) perspective on influencers' constant maintenance of performativity in the form of sharing content. A.S. Taylor (2022) argues that influencing is a continuous performative process aimed at maintaining authentic audience connections. This entails consistently displaying behaviors and endorsing products for viewers of the Simstagram community to replicate and the

influence endures as long as audience members engage in this cycle going around playing the Sims game and imagining an identity beyond the game through Instagram, adopting the desires of influencers as their own genuine wants and needs (A.S. Taylor, 2022).

One important aspect of this performative process for Simstagrammers includes following trends and rapidly applying them to their Instagram identities, as we see one of the examples in Figure 4.1. Very similar to current trends that are visible on social media posts, the Simstagram community adapts themselves to create a new narrative to use popular culture elements on their posts. Considering the data collection dates of this research, one of the most prominent popular culture trends that the Simstagram community highly engages in is the advertisement of the premiere of the Barbie movie in 2023. In the total number of unique posts collected, the concept of Barbie occurred, was mentioned or used as a brand on different products and clothes, 375 times. For instance, a model and an influencer *@naya_sims4* shares the premiere gala of the Barbie movie with promoting how the significant color of the Barbie, pink, makes life so much better in Figure 4.2. Very similarly, a male K-pop band, *@soulrevival.official*, attends the same event and shares their red carpet moments with a highlight of the color pink and their association with Ken because of their gender by stating *"Everything was so pink and fabulous! We had lots of fun, pretending to be Kens!"* in Figure 4.3. Both examples show how the Simstagram community creatively integrates elements from popular culture, such as the Barbie movie, into their influencer characters on Instagram, adding a realistic touch to their narratives. By incorporating references to the Barbie movie, Simstagrammers infuse their performative personas with a sense of glamour and beauty as a commodity, enhancing the allure of their digital presence. At this point, it is important to clarify that these were not sponsored posts, as the integration of Barbie movie references appears to be an organic creative choice by the Simstagrammers rather than a paid partnership. This mimicry of the influencer economy on Instagram by Simstagrammers, encompassing the creative process they undertake to craft their digital personas, the strategic selection of brands and specific items featured in their posts to cultivate an aspirational aesthetic, and their adept utilization of various platform affordances provided by Instagram to amplify their reach and engagement, warrants further in-depth examination in Chapter 5. An analysis of how these virtual influencers emulate real-world influencer marketing tactics, from content curation and personal branding to leveraging authentic relationships with their audience, shed light on the underlying motivations and implications at

play within this unique online community. Overall, these examples of Barbie movie usage set a perfect basis for exploring the interplay between the Simstagrammers' creative expression and the commercial aspects they mimic from mainstream influencer culture, which reveals the blurring boundaries between authenticity, performativity, and commodification in social media spaces.

Figure 4.2. @naya_sims4, July 23, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Figure 4.3. @soulrevival.official, July 25, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Not only does the Simstagram community share their lifestyles on a daily basis, but they prominently feature self-promotion and the promotion of both real-life and imaginary brands on Instagram, which has become a defining characteristic of their online personas. Among 1,603 unique posts, 1,328 of them contain at least one brand that is tagged on the image and positioned strategically to attract the attention of the brand's followers. The top five representations of real life brands that the Simstagrammers used in the dataset are the Starbucks logo, Apple products such as iPhone and MacBook, Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Chanel. In terms of the imaginary brands, the categories are similarly based on fashion, skincare and make-up products. This practice aligns with the concept of microcelebrity as outlined by Driessens (2013): by strategically curating their online presence to promote brands, both real and fictional, Simstagrammers actively participate in the mediation and commodification of their digital identities, contributing to the intricate interplay between personal branding and commercialization in the digital age.

Simstagrammers leverage the commodification and promotion of brands on Instagram as a pathway to forging connections with their audience through personal sharing. As Marwick (2015) defines, microcelebrities are adopting specific mindsets and self-presentation strategies to manage profiles, engage followers, and share personal details to gain attention and improve one's online image. In the context of the Simstagram community, unlike real-life accounts, the virtual platform offers boundless opportunities for narrative creation, contingent upon the players' proficiency in visual communication. Moreover, unlike real-world limitations, these brand promotions and commercialization acts in Simstagram are executed without monetary expectations, free from the constraints of business networks and financial resources (Marwick, 2015).

Finally, as can be seen in the previous examples, the emphasis on beauty culture in the Simstagram community is overarching as a characteristic of the users. No matter what their gender or Instagram account types (personal, business, creator) are, they tend to commodify and satisfy the expectations of the beauty culture of Instagram, and social media in a more general sense. Simstagrammers harness the concept of beauty as a defining theme, intertwining it with commodification practices within the networked culture of Instagram. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018) underscore the significance of "authenticity" and "beauty" as pivotal traits for influencers. This correlation sheds light on how Sims players strategically construct their social networks in

the Simstagram community, embodying both influencer personas and Sims characters within Instagram's beauty-centric culture. Through carefully curated aesthetics and content, Simstagrammers navigate the landscape of authenticity creation while simultaneously cultivating a dedicated follower audience, exemplifying the intricate interplay between beauty ideals, authenticity, and social influence in digital spaces (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). Moreover, in the Simstagram community, the culture of beauty particularly envelops profiles belonging to women and gay men, reflecting the gendered dynamics prevalent within Instagram's beauty culture. This emphasis on beauty aligns with societal norms and expectations, where women and gay men are often subjected to heightened scrutiny and pressure to conform to conventional standards of attractiveness (Marwick, 2015). By catering to these beauty ideals, Simstagrammers not only engage with the prevailing aesthetic norms but also participate in the perpetuation and reinforcement of gendered beauty standards within the digital realm. During data analysis, combining popular trends of Instagram and beauty culture, one of the emerging trends was about Posting an AI-generated rendering of oneself in the style of a high school yearbook photo. The trend, which is not embedded in Instagram's filter, uses a paid AI tool to show users what their yearbook photos might look like in the '90s with a few different high school clique aesthetics, including the popular kid, sporty kid, smart kid, and grunge kid (Silva, 2023). While the highly successful businessman and model, *@tony_revato,* shares the outcome of this filter with a nostalgic caption in Figure 4.4, a business women and influencer *@monti.brunson* shares her own AI-generated images by highlighting that she was a cheerleader during her high school years in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.4. @tony_revato, October 15, 2023. Retrieved on November 8, 2023.

Figure 4.5. @monti.brunson, October 16, 2023. Retrieved on November 8, 2023.

As the AI-driven 1990s high school yearbook trend intersects with the beauty culture of Instagram by offering users an opportunity to reimagine themselves within nostalgic aesthetics associated with high school cliques, the Simstagrammers also experiment with different beauty styles reminiscent of popular and beautiful/handsome personas, aligning with Instagram's emphasis on visual perfection and curated aesthetics. As is seen in the examples, Simstagrammers captured this trend to further enhance their online personas utilizing beauty as a means of self-promotion and commodification. By embracing and showcasing these nostalgic beauty transformations, Simstagrammers can attract more followers, engage with their audience, and potentially collaborate with brands seeking to tap into the allure of '90s nostalgia and beauty culture on Instagram. Thus, the AI yearbook trend not only reflects the broader beauty culture of Instagram but also signifies Simstagrammers' strategic use of beauty for self-promotion and commodification within their digital narratives. The concept of beauty and its evolution as aspirational labor in the Simstagram community will be further explored deeply in the upcoming two chapters.

Major Subcategories of Simstagram

This final segment of the chapter aims to introduce the primary thematic clusters observed within the Simstagram community, as discerned through comprehensive data collection and analysis. These categories encompass distinct thematic clusters that characterize the diverse array of content and narratives present on the platform. The identified categories include celebrity, family, intimacy and sexuality and awareness/impact/activism. Each category represents a unique facet of Simstagram culture, highlighting the varied interests, priorities, and motivations of its members. Moreover, it's noteworthy to acknowledge that while these categories serve as primary classifications, many Simstagram accounts often exhibit a blend of two or more categories, reflecting the fluidity and complexity inherent in digital identity construction and expression within this dynamic online community. Through an exploration of these main categories, this chapter aims to provide insight into the nuanced landscape of Simstagram, offering a comprehensive understanding of its diverse ecosystem.

Celebrity

The subcategory of "celebrity" epitomizes a diverse array of individuals, including models, musicians, actors and actresses, micro influencers, and business people, who have amassed considerable followership and acclaim through their lifestyle, professional pursuits, and entrepreneurial ventures. This segment stands as one of the most densely populated and influential within the Simstagram community, leveraging the platform's influencer and beauty culture to craft compelling digital identities. In the dataset, 543 unique posts are coded in this category which makes up 67% of the total amount of posts.

Model celebrities, for instance, not only grace the virtual runways of beauty contests and fashion shows but also meticulously curate their feeds to promote self-care products and fashion trends, perpetuating prevailing beauty standards. Through strategic partnerships with model agencies and well-known magazine covers such as Vogue and Cosmopolitan, they embody the epitome of glamour and allure, reshaping traditional notions of beauty within the Simstagram community. One very popular model, Martha Mathu, *@martha_manthu*, presents herself as the winner of the Miss Sims 2023 Beauty Contest. She is immensely famous among the Simstagram community, with frequent mentions and tags on the posts of other accounts. Martha is currently on a tour traveling to multiple countries, and in Figure 4.6, she is seen in Paris, France, attending

events with the clichéd wish to "change the world" and promote "world peace." However, beyond her public appearances, Martha imaginatively gets partnerships from multiple Sims brands that other players have created. She strategically adds references to these imagined brand collaborations in the description of her posts, as can be seen in Figure 4.6. This practice of "imaginatively" creating fashion ideals for her followers is a way for Martha to emulate real-world influencer marketing tactics without any monetary exchange implications observed in the digital ethnography analysis. By showcasing these fictional brand partnerships, Martha cultivates an aspirational aesthetic and reinforces her status as a fashion icon within the Simstagram community.

Figure 4.6. @martha_mantu, October 26, 2023. Retrieved on November 9, 2023.

Similarly, musicians and actors within this category immerse themselves in the performative aspects of their craft, using Instagram as a stage to showcase their talents, connect with fans, and unveil professional milestones. By cultivating close ties with real-life celebrities and participating in talk shows, they blur the lines between virtual and tangible fame, embodying the quintessential influencer ethos. In the Simstagram community, *@honeylovesims* has been a

popular musician since he was 12 years old, reminiscent of the early career beginnings of real-life artists like Justin Bieber. It is very common among Simstagram singers to indirectly reference and draw inspiration from their real-world counterparts. He chooses to celebrate his new albums and scenes from his world tour concerts called "Lovebud" with his audience on Instagram in Figure 4.7. In the post description, *@honeylovesims* adopts a poetic and grateful tone to express his feelings towards his "Lovebug" concert tour around the world. With a sense of awe and appreciation, he conveys his gratitude to his fans for their unwavering support, which has enabled him to embark on this global journey and share his music on an international stage. In Figure 4.7, *@honeylovesims* is depicted in Greece, welcoming and entertaining a massive crowd of adoring fans. The image captures the electrifying atmosphere of his concert, with thousands of audience members cheering and singing along, creating a powerful connection between the virtual musician and his dedicated followers. This scene encapsulates the essence of Simstagram's ability to transcend the boundaries of the digital realm, allowing creators to craft immersive imaginary experiences that resonate with their audience on a profound level in the ways they replicate offline events and activities.
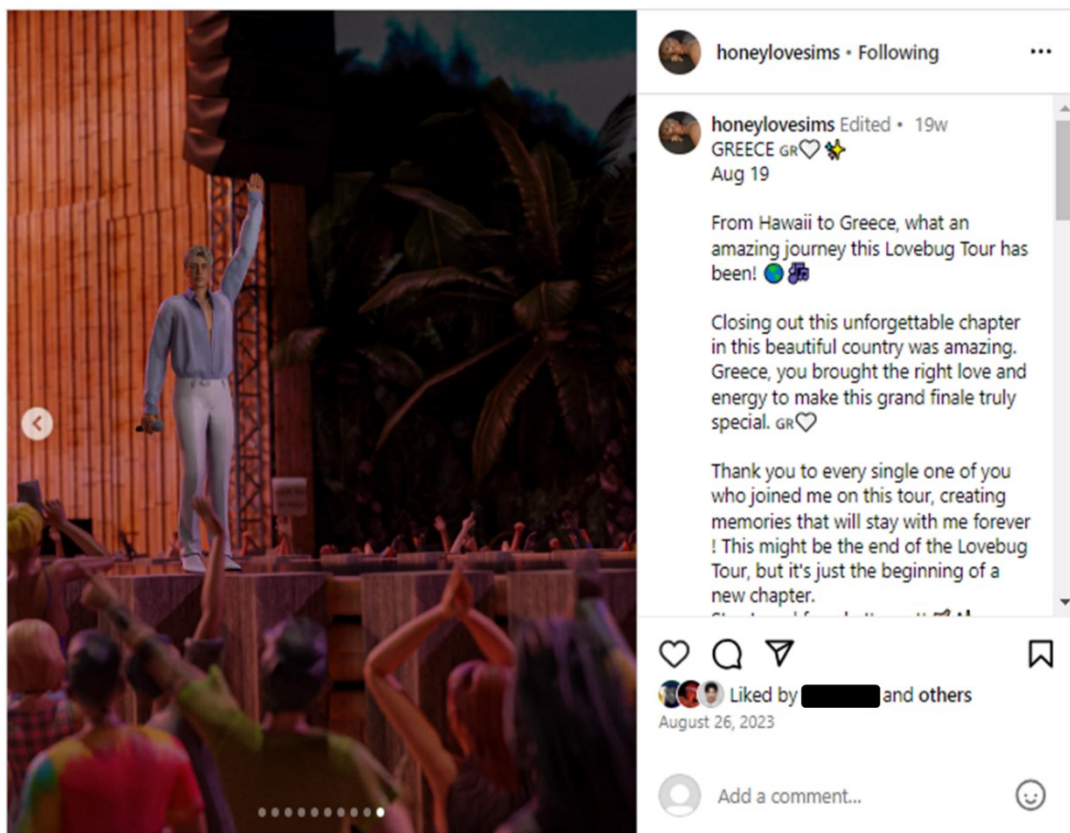

Figure 4.7. @honeylovesims, August 26, 2023. Retrieved on November 9, 2023.

As another category, the concept of "micro-influencers" is a significant aspect of the Simstagram community, reflecting the broader microcelebrity culture on social media platforms like Instagram. Microinfluencers within the Simstagram community are accounts that have amassed a considerable following and influence through an organic and grassroots approach, rather than conventional routes to fame. Based on Marwick's (2015) earlier definition of microcelebrity, microinfluencers skillfully navigate the beauty culture of Instagram, seamlessly integrating brand promotions into their content while maintaining an air of authenticity and relatability. Danita, *@danitahakim*, is a popular influencer in Simstagram community who is also a mother and a wife. She likes to share her daily life in an aesthetic way, including celebrating her son's birthday, going to a basketball match as a family, or simply wishing a good morning to her followers while showcasing her iPhone and MacBook, applying her eye patches as part of her skincare routine, and cuddling with her cat in Figure 4.8. In this particular image, she wears her pajamas, presenting a very home-like look that includes a level of nudity as a way to use sexuality with commodified femininity on Instagram, which will be explained later in Chapter 5. The description accompanying the post simply states, "Good morning," reflecting a casual and organic interaction with her audience. One comment replies to this spontaneous greeting, *"Aww good morning, what good are you eating?"* demonstrating that the follower feels a sense of closeness and comfort in communicating with Danita daily, fostering a deeper connection. Through their intimate portrayal of everyday life and strategic curation of online presence to promote both real and fictional brands, microinfluencers like Danita redefine the boundaries of influencer marketing, aligning with Driessens' (2013) concept of microcelebrity and actively participating in the mediation, personal branding and commodification of their digital identities. Their ability to leverage the influencer culture of Instagram while maintaining an authentic and relatable persona exemplifies the nuanced dynamics of microcelebrity within the Simstagram community.
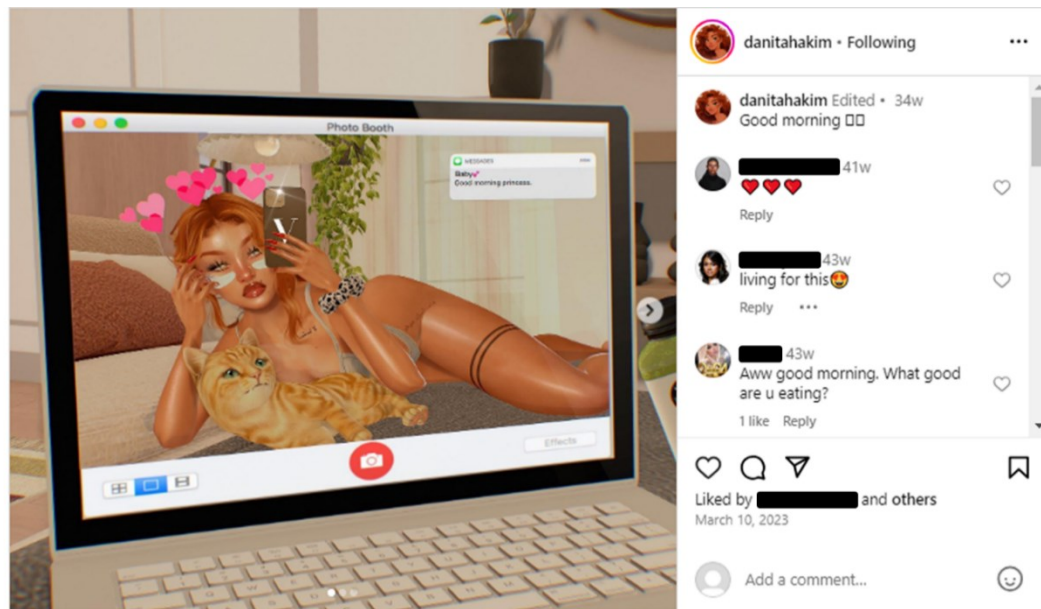
Figure 4.8. @danitahakim, August 10, 2023. Retrieved on November 8, 2023.

Meanwhile, business people within the celebrity category leverage their entrepreneurial skills to get attention and admiration on Instagram. Whether launching startups, luxury hotels, or beauty brands, they harness the platform's visual allure to showcase their success stories and inspire aspirants within the Simstagram community. Through strategic partnerships and philanthropic endeavors, they not only cement their status as influencers but also leaders of social causes with non-profit organizations, reshaping perceptions of beauty and success in the digital age. Among the 52 entrepreneur accounts identified in the dataset, *@jenniferpravia* stands out as one of the most prominent, boasting a substantial follower count and high levels of engagement through likes and comments. In Figure 4.9, Jennifer is captured on camera delivering the opening speech for her newly launched luxury hotel in the heart of New York City. Her appearance exudes a fashionable and polished aesthetic, carefully curated to align with the aspirational lifestyle she embodies. The caption accompanying the post reveals Jennifer's heartfelt gratitude and a sense of accomplishment, as she expresses to her audience that her dreams have finally come true. With a tone of humility and appreciation, she acknowledges the unwavering support and belief of her followers, crediting them as integral contributors to her entrepreneurial journey. Jennifer's speech not only celebrates the grand opening of her hotel venture but also serves as a powerful testament to the perseverance and determination required to achieve success in the business world. By sharing this milestone moment with her audience, she reinforces her position

as a role model and inspiration within the Simstagram community, encouraging others to pursue their ambitions with unwavering dedication. The image itself captures the essence of Jennifer's personal brand, seamlessly blending luxury, sophistication, and a touch of glamour. From the backdrop of the hotel's lobby to her attire, every detail is meticulously crafted to reinforce the aspirational lifestyle she represents, resonating with the desires and aspirations with which her followers would love to engage with.

Figure 4.9. @jenniferpravia, April 27, 2022. Retrieved on November 10, 2023.

In essence, the Simstagram community remixes traditional and contemporary norms of fame and beauty culture on Instagram, offering a kaleidoscopic tapestry of identities that transcend conventional boundaries. Through a fusion of creativity, identity-forming, and authenticity, Simstagram celebrities redefine the contours of digital fame, embodying a new paradigm of influence and aspiration within the virtual realm.

<u>Family</u>

In the Simstagrammer community, the "family" subcategory encompasses a range of themes centered around parenthood, pregnancy, adoption, and child illness. This segment mirrors real-life influencers in its utilization of family life, family content, and particularly motherhood as concepts to be shared and celebrated on social media platforms. Parenthood content delves into the experiences and lifestyle adjustments that come with raising a child, offering insights into the joys, challenges, and responsibilities of being a parent. Motherhood, in particular, holds a prominent presence within the dataset, reflecting the pervasive influence of maternal narratives in both the Simstagram community and broader social media culture and the game. For example, *@lakeside.sims* is a young mother who dedicates the majority of her content to sharing the narrative of motherhood, encompassing both the difficulties and beauties that come with it. She spends a significant portion of her posts constructing an ideal family life, encouraging her followers to embrace parenthood and glorifying this journey. Her content actively engages with special family days and celebrations, as seen in Figure 4.10, where we witness a scene from her kitchen with her children preparing for Easter. The caption mentions how happy the children are thanks to the playful activities they do together as a family. By sharing these intimate moments, *@lakeside.sims* not only showcases the joys of motherhood but also reinforces the importance of engaging in festive traditions and creating cherished memories with loved ones. Her content serves as a source of inspiration for her followers, painting a picture of domestic bliss and the rewards of dedicating oneself to family life. Through her strategic storytelling and visual narratives, *@lakeside.sims* contributes to the idealization of motherhood within the Simstagram community, fostering a sense of aspiration and encouraging her audience to embrace the challenges and triumphs that come with raising a family.

Figure 4.10. @lakeside.sims, April 6, 2023. Retrieved on November 9, 2023.

Pregnancy serves as a significant aspect of family content within the Simstagram community, with a multitude of accounts sharing diverse representations of all stages of pregnancy, including the highs and lows. In the dataset, a total of 426 accounts had shared pregnancy-related content at various points in time. From pregnancy fashion and gender reveals to the raw realities of body changes and postpartum struggles, Simstagrammers document their pregnancy journeys, resonating with audiences seeking relatable and supportive online communities. As a visually powerful example, another mother in the Simstagram community, *@kaceyanders_* shares bravely her moments of pumping breast milk for her newborn during the challenging postpartum period, confessing that she feels down and overwhelmed. In Figure 4.11, she is seen pumping while her friends have come over to help her clean the house and allow her to rest a bit. Through this candid post, *@kaceyanders_* vocalizes the importance of seeking support from others during the postpartum phase, which can be an incredibly demanding and emotionally taxing time for new mothers. The image itself captures a sense of vulnerability and authenticity, as *@kaceyanders_* embraces a level of nudity to showcase a "mother" look at her life at home as a woman caring for a newborn. By being transparent about the hardships of postpartum and the need for assistance, she not only attracts followers who resonate with this reality but also fosters a sense of community and solidarity among other mothers navigating similar experiences. This raw and honest depiction of motherhood challenges societal

expectations and serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of self-care, support systems, and destigmatizing the struggles that often accompany the postpartum journey.

Figure 4.11. @kaceyanders_, March 1, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Adoption emerges as another noteworthy category within the family subject, with dedicated accounts showcasing adoption stories and profiles of children awaiting adoption. These accounts facilitate interactive engagement by providing online surveys for potential adoptive parents, reflecting the Simstagram community's affinity for constructing and nurturing virtual families, akin to the gameplay mechanics of The Sims. *@darlingangeladoption* stands out as the main adoption center, boasting the highest follower count in the Simstagram community. The children reside in their care center, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to be adopted into loving virtual families. Figure 4.12 captures a poignant moment, depicting six children celebrating their adoption process by the same family. The caption heightens the emotional impact, revealing that one of the children spoke to her new mother for the first time after the adoption, expressing heartfelt gratitude: "Thank you miss not giving up on us." This touching scene not only

showcases the community's dedication to creating meaningful family narratives but also highlights the emotional depth and storytelling prowess of Simstagrammers in crafting compelling adoption journeys that resonate with their audience.

Figure 4.12. @darlingangeladoptions, September 22, 2023. Retrieved on November 11, 2023.

Additionally, the subcategory of child illness addresses poignant issues within the Simstagram community, as parents candidly share their children's disabilities and syndromes to raise awareness and foster support. Through magazine covers, interviews, and personal stories, Simstagrammers navigate sensitive topics, emphasizing the importance of family support and resilience in virtual family constructs. This intersection of real-life challenges and virtual community building underscores the Simstagram community's capacity to foster empathy, advocacy, and solidarity among its members. One of the magazines that covers child illnesses and disabilities, *@glowingboutique.co*, shares a collection and normalizes the usage of medical devices such as respiratory tubes with the motto *"It's Going Tubie Okay"* in Figure 4.13. It's important to note that this magazine is a fictional Simstagram magazine created within the virtual community and not an actual real-world publication.

Figure 4.13. @glowingboutique.co, October 6, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Intimacy/Sexuality-Related Groups

Intimacy and sexuality-related groups within the Simstagrammer communities encompass couples who explore romance, incorporating elements such as marriage and divorce into their relationships. Alongside heterosexual relationships, this category also includes LGBTQ+ couples, reflecting diverse romantic and sexual experiences within the community. The romance category within this context encompasses the sharing of relationship milestones, such as marriage proposals, divorce news, engagements, and weddings, which serves to familiarize audiences with the user and highlights how Instagram shapes and promotes relationships. Sharing personal stories related to intimate connections becomes integral to being popular in the Simstagram community, mirroring broader influencer culture on Instagram. Exemplifying the intimacy and sexuality category within the Simstagram community, the couple *@jonah_c_brunson* and *@monti.brunson* share a deeply personal and romantic moment from their marriage in Figure 4.14. The caption, written from Jonah's perspective, expresses his lifelong desire for a loving family and a partner who accepts and cherishes him unconditionally. With heartfelt gratitude, he thanks their followers for their support, acknowledging the community's role in witnessing and

celebrating their journey. The image captures the couple's wedding day, a pivotal milestone in their relationship, where Jonah proudly declares, "And today, I changed her name." This statement carries profound emotional weight, symbolizing their commitment to one another and the merging of their lives as a married couple. Through 'his post, *@jonah_c_brunson* and *@monti.brunson* not only share their personal love story but also invite their followers to partake in the intimate celebration of their union, fostering a deeper connection with their audience and reinforcing the power of vulnerability and authenticity within the Simstagram community.

Figure 4.14. @jonah_c_brunson, October 6, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Within the subset of LGBTQ+ relationships, gay Sims men relationships dominate, serving as a reflection of queer influencer culture. Chen and Kanai (2021) highlight this dynamic, observing a privileged group of gay men who dominate the beauty realm while navigating the paradoxical expectations of authenticity, individuality, and femininity in a captivating manner. A popular gay male couple, *@nemzxi.o* and *@gabx.drl*, are happily married and have a child together. They regularly post their personal lives and relationships on Instagram, including their adoption story, their first Christmas as an LGBTQ+ family, and their romantic vacation in Thailand, as shown in Figure 4.15. *@nemzxi.o* and *@gabx.drl* both share their family lives along with their intimate life, acting as if they are transparent in their sexual and intimate narrative. This subset of the couple category thus represents a unique facet of both Simstagram and

Instagram's influencer culture, showcasing the intersection of personal identity, intimacy, and digital influence within LGBTQ+ communities.

Figure 4.15. @nemzx.o, December 3, 2022. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

In addition to relationship milestones, intimacy and sexuality-related groups within the Simstagrammer communities on Instagram often depict intimate moments between couples, including kissing and touching different parts of the body, which are part of the broader spectrum of sexual content and nudity. Social media platforms have played a significant role in promoting and commodifying such displays of intimacy, as they generate engagement and attract followers (Baym, 2019). Simstagrammers, seeking to emulate the dynamics of influencer culture, incorporate these intimate moments into their content as part of their performative influence over their audience, as can be seen from a popular gay male account's, *@jakepaults4,* "unforgettable" moments in a bathtub after their jetlag with his partner in Figure 4.16.

Figure 4.16. @jakepaults4, October 9, 2022. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

As can be seen in previous examples, it is important to note that the highly sexualized or nude clothing/outfits commonly featured by Simstagrammers do not necessarily accord with the in-game attire options available in the Sims game. While the game offers a range of clothing styles, including some revealing or form-fitting options, the level of nudity and overt sexualization seen in many Simstagram posts goes beyond what is typically possible within the game's built-in customization tools. Instead, this trend of sexualized and nude Sim avatars seems to be more aligned with the broader influencer culture prevalent on Instagram. Simstagrammers draw creative and narrative inspiration from the aesthetics, self-presentation, and commodification of sexuality that are commonplace among real-world influencers on the platform (Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2018). By showcasing these intimate interactions and related sexual clothing selections, Simstagrammers push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or mainstream attire for their virtual characters and they aim to captivate and entice their followers, leveraging the allure of romantic and sexual connections to maintain engagement and enhance their online presence. This communication between the virtual world of The Sims

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and the norms of Instagram's influencer ecosystem highlights how players are not merely confined to the game's mechanics but are actively shaping their Sim narratives through the lens of social media culture. The sexualized Sim avatars become a form of creative expression and personal branding, mirroring the ways in which real influencers leverage their bodies and sexuality as a commodity within the attention economy of platforms like Instagram. Overall, this strategic integration of intimate and sexual content underscores the performative nature of Simstagrammer identity creation, as they navigate the delicate balance between authenticity and audience appeal within the digital realm.

Awareness/Impact/Activism

The last category of the Simstagram community, awareness and activism, encompasses a diverse array of social issues such as women's rights, children's illnesses, poverty, ageism, urban vs. rural life, health access, food access, mental health, and more. Despite being a relatively small category, it is a notable one due to its significant impact in promoting awareness and advocacy within the Simstagram community. This category highlights the community's diversity and commitment to addressing a wide range of pressing social issues, bridging the gap between the virtual world of The Sims and the real world. While these social issues may not exist within the simulated environment of The Sims as a game, Simstagrammers recognize the importance of using their digital platforms to advocate for positive change and promote social justice in the real world. After her win of the Miss Sims 2022 Beauty Contest, *@alicia_leslie4s*, a popular model and influencer within the Simstagram community, took a world tour to use her platform and voice to help raise awareness for various communities in need. In Figure 4.17, she is seen in Portland, a location inspired by the real world but non-existent in The Sims game, drawing her followers' attention to her new community project that focuses on the health of pregnant women and their newborns. Smiling alongside doctors, including a virtual Sims doctor *@jacob_volkov1700*, *@alicia_leslie4s* leverages her influence to shed light on this important cause, exemplifying the power of Simstagrammers to drive positive change and advocacy efforts within their digital communities. It is important to note that beauty contests and impact/awareness initiatives are highly connected in the world of Simstagram. Winners of prestigious beauty pageants leverage their newfound platform and influence to advocate for global causes and drive positive change. By combining their aspirational beauty with impactful

messaging, they commodify their image to raise awareness and garner support for important issues. Overall, through their posts, stories, and engagement with followers, Simstagrammers contribute to a culture of awareness and activism, fostering dialogue and action on issues that impact communities globally. Instagram serves as an empowering space for Simstagrammers to amplify their voices and advocate for meaningful societal change, demonstrating the potential of social media platforms to be catalysts for positive impact and social transformation. While Simstagrammers contribute to raising awareness on various issues, it's crucial to approach this phenomenon critically. Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng (2023) highlight the complexities of digital activism in social media spaces. They argue that the hypervisibility of social justice content can lead to the commodification of activism, where performative gestures often overshadow substantive change. This "woke capitalism" can result in the co-optation of activist language for brand building, potentially diluting the impact of genuine advocacy efforts (Sobande et al., 2023). In the context of Simstagram, the adoption of activist discourse may serve more as a strategy for increasing visibility rather than driving meaningful change. Therefore, while Simstagrammers' efforts in raising awareness are noteworthy, their actual effectiveness in driving societal change remains questionable and warrants further investigation.

Figure 4.17. @alicia_leslie4s, June 15, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Simstagram represents a unique intersection of gaming and social media, facilitated by the compatible nature of The Sims game and Instagram's affordances. While the preceding discussion has outlined key categories within the Simstagram community, it's crucial to acknowledge the visibility of inter-categories, including diverse social classes, nationalities, genders, and locations. Although not examined in detail due to the limitations of this study, their presence underscores the richness and complexity of the Simstagram landscape. Accordingly, the Simstagram community exhibits several key characteristics, including a consistent performative process, self-promotion and commodification, connection with the audience through personal sharing, and an emphasis on beauty culture. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that Simstagrammers strategically leverage popular culture elements, such as the Barbie movie, to enhance their digital narratives and align with influencer practices. All these phenomena reflect broader postfeminist ideals, dissolving the distinction between reality and simulation while empowering users to actively shape and participate in digital culture. As Simstagram continues to evolve, its significance in understanding the symbiotic relationship between media, gaming, and digital identity construction becomes increasingly evident, offering valuable insights into contemporary forms of online engagement and sociality.

Chapter 5: Authenticity, Performativity and Influencer Dynamics of Simstagram

In this chapter, my aim is to delve deeper into the exploration of the second and third research questions outlined in this thesis, namely, "In what ways do the Sims players use Instagram for performances of authenticity and femininity?" and "How do Instagram and its affordances as a platform appear to shape the self-representation of the Sims players' within the context of lifestyle influencer culture via Simstagram?" Building upon the foundation laid in the first chapter, where I defined the unique universe of Simstagram, this chapter focuses on unraveling the intricate narratives of authenticity, performativity, and embodiment within the influencer culture of the Simstagram community. At the heart of this examination lies the narrative that everybody on the social media is a potential influencer. As explained earlier in the literature review chapter, Bishop (2023) introduces the concept of "influencer creep" to describe how influencer practices have permeated domains beyond traditional influencers, including self-branding and authenticity performance. As this concept of influencer creep and its implications across various creative industries and forms of labor are unpacked and analyzed in greater depth throughout this chapter, the dynamics of the Simstagram community give rise to the pivotal framework of the meta-influencer examined herein. In this research, I am defining "meta-influencer" as an individual who not only adopts influencer practices but also consciously performs and reflects upon the role of being an influencer, creating a layered narrative that simultaneously embodies and comments on influencer culture. This concept reflects the potential of social media, where everyone has the potential to be an influencer by engaging in self-presentation, brand promotion, and narrative construction. This concept underscores the significance of amateurism and performativity within the community, where individuals wield influence and shape digital narratives through their authentic yet curated portrayals. By supporting this concept of performativity, the Simstagram community exemplifies a unique form of authenticity that transcends the virtual and constructed nature of its members' identities and narratives. This authentic nature stems from the collective efforts of Simstagrammers to create a shared reality, where virtual identities and narratives are intricately woven together through a network of communication, collaboration, and shared experiences. Drawing from Marwick and boyd's (2011) notion of "backstage access," Simstagrammers foster intimacy and connection with their followers by publicly acknowledging their fan base and leveraging shared language and cultural references from both The Sims and Instagram's influencer culture. This strategic use of

backstage access contributes significantly to the authentic nature of the community. Moreover, by leveraging common language, cultural references, and shared experiences from The Sims and Instagram's influencer culture, Simstagrammers cultivate connections and affiliations with their followers, creating a palpable sense of authenticity within the community.

Supporting that perspective, I scrutinize how authenticity is negotiated, performed, and perceived within the Simstagram landscape, where users navigate the delicate balance between projecting an idealized self and revealing glimpses of their gamer selves. Moreover, I explore how the affordances of the Instagram platform serve as a bridge, connecting the themes of self-representation and influencer culture between Chapters 4 and 5. As I navigate this digital terrain, I unravel the ways in which Instagram's features and functionalities shape the self-presentation strategies of Sims players within the evolving landscape of lifestyle influencer culture on Simstagram. Additionally, while the influencer economy has yet to establish a solid foothold within the Simstagram landscape, its nascent presence remains crucial for understanding user behaviors and the evolving dynamics of gender representation within the community. As this research delves into the rich data of the Simstagram community, it becomes evident that this digital space holds immense potential for further growth and innovation, where users continually redefine the boundaries of influencer culture and digital self-expression through a sustained cycle of imitation, exchange, and elements of a gift economy among Simstagrammers. In the following chapter, I will first examine the concept of authenticity and how it manifests within the Simstagram community, drawing connections to influencer culture and the performative nature of online identities. Then, I will explore the role of Instagram's affordances in shaping self-representation and the adoption of influencer practices among Sims players. Concluding with an analysis of the nascent influencer economy within Simstagram and its implications for gender representation and user behaviors within this unique digital space.

Simstagram and Being a Simstagrammer

The behavior and platform usage patterns exhibited by Sims players on Instagram are shaping them into influencer-like identities, fostering the emergence of the Simstagram community. As elucidated in the previous chapter, influencer culture profoundly impacts Sims players, influencing their content creation strategies, engagement tactics, and aesthetic preferences. Consequently, Sims players actively adopt and adapt influencer practices within the

Simstagram space, contributing to the community's collective identity as a hub for digital self-expression and creativity. Through the intricate blend of simulation, creativity, and social interaction, The Sims offers players a multifaceted platform for self-expression and storytelling (T.L. Taylor, 2003). Departing from conventional gameplay paradigms, The Sims prioritizes open-ended exploration and user-driven narratives, enabling players to exert a profound influence on their virtual experiences (Juul, 2003). This empowerment fosters a deep sense of ownership and creativity among users, who actively shape the virtual worlds within the game. Instagram has evolved into a prominent digital canvas for self-presentation and visual communication, enabling users to express their identity, interests, and experiences through curated images and videos (Senft, 2013). The parallel between The Sims and Instagram lies in their capacity to empower users to construct and share narratives, albeit in different mediums, fostering a sense of agency and creativity in both virtual and digital realms.

In my extensive dataset, a compelling trend emerges: the pronounced emphasis on self-representation and personalized narratives through the virtual bodies of Sims avatars. Each post serves as a canvas for users to craft intricate stories and convey their individuality through the visual medium. Whether through meticulously designed virtual avatars, curated settings, or thoughtfully composed scenes, these elements collectively contribute to the rich tapestry of self-expression within the Simstagram ecosystem. Moreover, the pervasive use of visual communication underscores the community's inclination towards conveying messages, emotions, and experiences primarily through images rather than text. This visual-centric approach not only enhances the immersive nature of the platform but also facilitates seamless engagement and interaction among community members, fostering a vibrant and dynamic online space where creativity knows no bounds.

For instance, one of the famous New Yorker musicians in the Simstagram community, *@j0johana*, masterfully curates her visual narratives, emphasizing aesthetic details over textual storytelling. In Figure 5.1, she transports her audience into a meticulously crafted contemporary living space, where every element contributes to a specific lifestyle aesthetic. The focal point of the image is a group of fashionably dressed individuals lounging on a contemporary space, exuding an air of effortless cool. Their relaxed poses and stylish attire immediately convey a sense of urban sophistication and youthful energy. On the left side, a skateboard casually leans against the wall, subtly hinting at an active, adventurous lifestyle. This subtle prop not only adds

depth to the scene but also reinforces the notion of a carefree, rebellious spirit that often accompanies the artistic persona. Strategically placed candles and potted plants add warmth and a touch of nature to the space, creating a cozy and inviting ambiance. The reflection of these elements on the adjacent wall suggests the presence of a large window, allowing natural light to filter in and enhance the overall mood. Perhaps the most intriguing detail is the glimpse of another person outside the frame who is being passed the cigarette that's in the *@j0johana*'s hand, extending from the edge of the frame. This subtle inclusion adds a layer of mystery and intrigue, hinting at an off-camera presence and fostering a sense of intimacy within the scene. Through this carefully curated visual narrative, *@j0johana* not only showcases her artistic sensibilities but also cultivates a distinct lifestyle aesthetic that resonates with her audience. By minimizing textual elements and allowing the visual details to take center stage, she invites her followers to immerse themselves in the world she has constructed, leaving room for interpretation and personal connection.

Figure 5.1. @j0johana, September 24, 2022. Retrieved on November 10, 2023

Since the Sims is a game that has its own unique language, which is called Simlish, the virtual characters cannot speak the existing languages of our world. That's one of the reasons why image sharing instead of sounds and videos is more popular in the Simstagram community. Through its emphasis on visual storytelling and user-generated content, Instagram fosters community-building and cultural discourse (Light et al., 2016). Moreover, Instagram's interface encourages practices of surveillance, self-presentation, and social comparison among its users (Abidin, 2016). As Instagram users curate their digital identities through carefully crafted visual content, utilizing features such as filters and hashtags to express creativity and engage with diverse audiences (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011), the Simstagrammers are defining their community by hashtags and finding their friends through Instagram affordances such as the network of followers created around #simstagram. The Sims, like Instagram, has become a cultural phenomenon and unique artifact, attracting diverse players while reflecting and influencing contemporary social norms and lifestyles through its emphasis on customization, agency, and social dynamics (Gee, 2010).

Simstagrammers, particularly those who regularly share content and personal narratives featuring their virtual Sims bodies, engage in a meticulous creative process that extends far beyond mere gameplay. While the game itself may not always resemble the polished posts shared on Instagram, a significant amount of creative labor goes into crafting these digital narratives. This process involves creating custom fashion items and sculpting idealized virtual bodies within the base game, integrating various mods to enhance gameplay, capturing screenshots, and refining the images using image manipulation software such as Blender or Photoshop (Gee, 2010). In essence, Simstagrammers are not simply playing the game; they are constructing an entire imaginary virtual life within their minds and utilizing their gaming and design skills to bring it to fruition for sharing on Instagram.

For instance, as can be seen in Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3, a wedding scene observed in the real Sims game may appear drastically different when shared within the Simstagram community, featuring enhanced realism, lifelike aesthetics, and fashionable elements. Figure 5.2 is an example screenshot of the Sims game while being played live. When it is observed, it can be clearly understood that there is no edit or manipulation in the game; it is pure game mechanics played in the world of the Sims. However, in Figure 5.3, which is another image from the same post I analyzed in Figure 4.14 in the previous chapter, we observe a departure from what the Sims

game typically provides to its players. The lighting, clothing choices, makeup, hairstyles, poses, and environment resemble a mimicry of a real wedding shot, with facial expressions that convey heightened emotions and intimacy beyond the game's capabilities. In essence, the scene that *@jonah_c_brunson* shares aligns more closely with the expectations of Instagram's platform vernicular, reflecting the aesthetic standards for posts deemed worthy of sharing and garnering likes within the influencer community. Upon closer examination, the scene portrays a traditional, lavish wedding setting that adheres to societal norms and ideals of beauty, wealth, and whiteness. The bride and groom both exhibits conventionally attractive features and slim, toned physiques, conforming to prevailing beauty standards. Their attire, a pristine white gown and sleek tuxedo implies an air of luxury and expense, signifying a certain socioeconomic status and access to high-end fashion. Moreover, the backdrop of the wedding venue itself is grand and elegant, adorned with intricate floral and natural arrangements and overall aesthetic light choices that evoke a sense of exclusivity and affluence.

Figure 5.2. Ashcroft, September 3, 2023. Retrieved on April 24, 2024.

Figure 5.3. @jonah_c_brunson, September 30, 2023. Retrieved on November 10, 2023.

Moreover, as is analyzed earlier in Figure 4.14, the caption of Figure 5.3 accompanying the post further solidifies the narrative of a traditional, romantic union, with the groom expressing his lifelong desire for a family and a partner who cherishes him unconditionally. Moreover, by quoting the caption,

> …my whole life, I wanted a family. A partner who saw all of me just as I am, and cherished me for it. Someone to love our children and to build a life with. Well, I found her. And today, I changed her name. @monti.brunson, you are the light my soul needed to heal. And I can't wait to now start eternity.

@jonah_c_brunson constructs a narrative that resonates with conventional ideals of love, commitment, and familial bliss. The caption's reference to "sharing our perfect day" with followers and expressing gratitude for their "love and support" further underscores the performative and aesthetic nature of this virtual wedding, as it is curated and presented for public consumption, much like influencer content on Instagram.

Back to the comparison of Figures 5.2 and 5.3, bridging this discontinuity between the game and Instagram sharing is a notable aspect of Simstagrammers' influencer journey, highlighting the transformative power of creativity and digital self-expression within the Simstagram community. This stark contrast not only emphasizes the distinct skill set and expertise of these creators compared to the average user but also underscores their journey as

influencers within the Simstagram community. Indeed, their ability to craft intricate narratives and visually stunning content reflects years of honing their skills as players, contributing to the authenticity and depth of their digital personas. This skillset plays a pivotal role in shaping the unique storytelling approach adopted by Simstagrammers, facilitating the seamless sharing of their narratives with others and further solidifying their status within the influencer landscape.

Overall, within the realm of Simstagram, each account in my data demonstrates patterns of microcelebrity behaviors and trends, leveraging the game mechanics of The Sims and the affordances of Instagram across a myriad of contexts explored in the previous chapter. These contexts include family building, business ownership, sports and fitness, beauty contests, and high schooler teenage lifestyle, among others. Collectively, these platforms serve as dynamic arenas where players navigate the complexities of digital self-expression and influencer culture. To fully convey the players' expression of authenticity, their connections through networks, and their embodied identities within The Sims universe, Instagram offers a distinctive and vibrant setting with numerous features actively utilized by players. It is within this digital space that Simstagrammers exercise their creative agency, forging meaningful connections, and constructing elaborate narratives that resonate with their audiences.

Authenticity: Bridging the Gap Between Influencer Imaginary and Influencer Creep

To better understand how the Simstagram community becomes a networked public on Instagram, it is important to understand the relationship between their source of authenticity and the nature of Instagram. As A.S. Taylor (2022) mentioned in her work, authenticity doesn't solely rely on individual will or intention; instead, it's a collaborative endeavor between the user and the audience, characterized by co-creation. In the community of Simstagram, 105 accounts that are active in the database are following at least ten other accounts in the database, and 750 posts out of 803 have mentions of other Simstagrammers in the community network. Considering the similarities and imitative tendencies of their Instagram usage to real-life influencers, this close communication and collaboration is a strong indicator to infer that their networked public is serving the authentic nature of the Simstagram community more than what they share and create individually.

Marwick and boyd (2011) describe influencing as providing "backstage access" to foster intimacy with followers. In Simstagram, this concept involves recognizing the fan base and using

shared language and cultural references from both The Sims and Instagram's influencer culture to build connections within the community. In the context of Simstagrammers, the concept of "backstage" takes on a unique form, as it exists within the constructed virtual world of their Sims characters. This backstage can be interpreted as performances that mimic the tropes of real-life influencers sharing seemingly unpolished or intimate moments. For instance, back in Figure 4.8, *@danitahakim* shares a moment from her morning with a cozy and effortless tone, presenting a carefully crafted "backstage" glimpse into her virtual life. Similarly, Simstagrammers might post about their Sims characters not wearing makeup or engaging in mundane activities, creating an illusion of authenticity and relatability within their fictional narratives. These constructed "backstage" performances deepen perceived intimacy between Simstagrammers and their audience, mirroring real-world influencers' strategies for cultivating authenticity and connection.

The concept of 'authenticity' within the realm of beauty influencers is inherently gendered, equally reflecting nuanced understandings of what constitutes authenticity within the context of Simstagram. Partly due to its alignment with commercial interests, the term 'influencer' carries a gendered connotation, evoking femininity, as noted by Hund (2023). While some engage in fictional narratives within the Simstagram community, their behavior and actions collectively embody commercial ideals such as tagging luxury brands in their posts, acting like they are giving interviews to highly popular magazines and promoting several products as part of their daily lives. Within the framework of these arguments on authentic influencer labor, authenticity within influencer culture is not only gendered but also constitutes a form of creative labor. This is why, as I mentioned earlier, Bishop's (2023) concept of "influencer creep" plays a pivotal role in my analysis, offering a contemporary framework that aptly elucidates this research's viewpoint on the mechanisms behind authenticity within the Simstagram community. Bishop's (2023) concept of "influencer creep" elucidates the pervasive impact of influencer cultures on creative labor. In the Simstagram community, creative labor is essential, as every post requires imagination, gaming skills, and graphic design abilities. Simstagrammers embrace strategies used by influencers to increase visibility on social media, as seen in the examples. However, in Simstagram, this process relies solely on imagination, without financial motives. The community fully adopts the influencer creep model to cultivate authenticity. Over time, creative work becomes increasingly shaped by platforms' norms and expectations. For Simstagrammers, the primary reward lies in visibility within the community, with platform

affordances taking precedence over monetary gain in their everyday lives. Likes, comments, and shares serve as the currency of recognition and validation within this digital landscape.

In Bishop's (2023) concept of influencer creep, the notions of self-branding and the performance of authenticity are particularly significant in elucidating the dynamics of Simstagram. Drawing parallels with examples between artist influencers and Sims players on Instagram, this research reveals the intricate interplay between self-presentation, digital identity, and creative expression within these online communities. First, in influencer culture, self-branding integrates promotional norms into artwork and maintains a positive demeanor across platforms (Bishop, 2023), a practice mirrored in the Simstagram community where members engage in emotional labor to invoke a range of emotions in viewers, from upbeat and joyful sentiments to those that pull at the heartstrings. Through this nuanced approach to emotional performance, Simstagrammers aim to create a more authentic and relatable persona, mirroring the complex emotional landscape of real-life influencers and their audiences.

The phenomenon of "influencer creep" is vividly exemplified by *@miekowatson*, a popular microinfluencer and beauty brand business owner with an impressive following of 1,227 accounts, surpassing the average in the dataset. In Figure 5.4, she explicitly announces the availability of a new collection of lingerie from her imaginary Sims brand, *@mybeauty.sims*, actively encouraging her followers to purchase these products. While this post constructs a concrete example of self-branding, it is crucial to note that there is no actual physical or virtual store where followers can acquire these products, either in person or through their Sims characters. The fictional and imaginary nature of this commodification and self-branding underscores the power of the Simstagram community in enabling players to engage in "as if" scenarios and portray idealized lifestyles, all in an effort to promote the narrative of their character within the beauty culture of Instagram. Simstagrammers like *@miekowatson* have seamlessly adopted the strategies and practices of real-world influencers, blurring the lines between virtual and tangible realms. Through the strategic curation of their digital personas and the promotion of imaginary products and brands, Simstagrammers like *@miekowatson* contribute to the commodification of their virtual identities, mirroring the dynamics of the influencer economy. This blending of fantasy and reality not only reflects the profound impact of influencer

culture on creative expression but also highlights the malleability of digital spaces in accommodating and amplifying these emerging cultural phenomena.
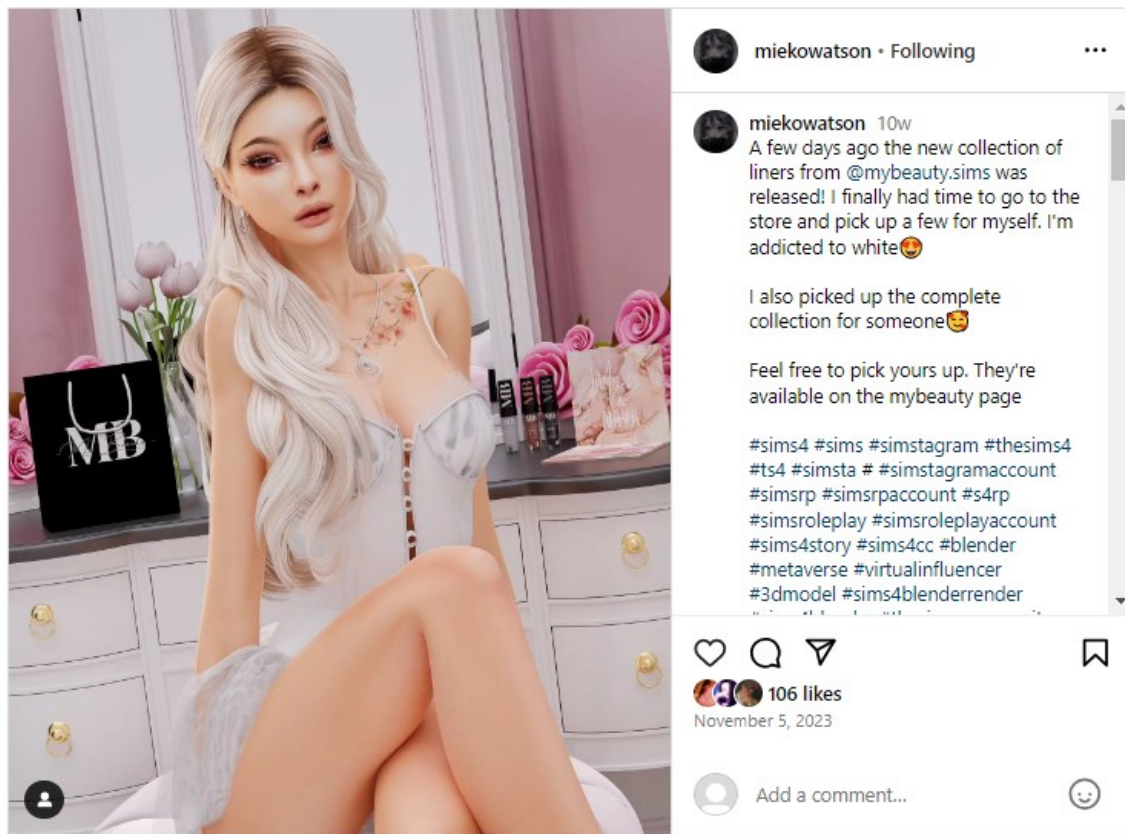

Figure 5.4. @miekowatson, November 5, 2023. Retrieved on November 10, 2032

Additionally, The concept of self-branding within influencer creep, characterized by fostering positive emotional connections with audiences and the gendered pressure to convey emotional authenticity in commercialized social media spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2019), is notably exemplified in the Simstagram community, where creators extend their feminized, idealized world from The Sims to Instagram by combining game visuals with written narratives, thus incorporating emotional elements into their storytelling that transcend the game's linguistic limitations. This emotional labour is crucial for influencers as they strive to cultivate authentic connections and maintain their personal brand, aligning with the performative nature of the Simstagram community's content creation and audience engagement strategies. Considering the imaginative nature of Simstagram accounts, from avatar creation to adding narratives, locations, drama, and product placements, deep acting becomes a tool consciously or

subconsciously utilized in their daily Instagram usage (Hochschild, 2012). Bishop's (2023) exploration of influencer creep as a balance between authenticity, aspiration, and commercial viability is mirrored in the Simstagram community, where members use The Sims as a cultural reflection tool, diverging from the game's original intent to embody influencer expectations.

A notable illustration within my dataset underscores the profound nexus between commercialization and emotional authenticity. Depicted in Figure 5.5, *@ira_phai*, a successful business woman and social entrepreneur, shares a poignant moment from an award ceremony, wherein she receives the award of "humanitarian of the year." In her post, she strategically engages in self-branding by attributing her achievement to her endeavors throughout the year, encompassing various partnerships, entrepreneurial ventures, and societal contributions. Moreover, she also expresses strong positive emotions in her narrative, showing gratitude, happiness, and love towards her husband for his constant support. Beyond mere self-promotion, this award announcement transcends into a genuine emotional exchange, fostering an authentic connection between the user and her followers. This example vividly illustrates the meta-influencer concept, where Simstagrammers are not just playing The Sims, but are actively engaged in playing at being influencers. It's important to note that this award is completely fictional, as there is no other account representing an institution that bestowed this honor upon *@ira_phai*. This fabrication of achievements further underscores how the gamer is simultaneously playing The Sims and playing at creating a successful influencer narrative within the game's extended universe on Instagram.

The caption starts with "[social media post]" – a practice specific to this user when she shares majority of her posts on Instagram. This caption is specifically used for the posts where @ira_phai speaks from a first-person narrative, allowing her to directly address her audience and share her experiences in her own voice. Interestingly, there are only a few posts in her profile that are not labeled with "[social media post]," and these are the ones where the gamer becomes the narrator of *@ira_phai*'s life stories, adopting a third-person perspective by using the pronoun "she." This deliberate shift in narrative voice creates a distinct separation between the character's direct communication and the gamer's omniscient storytelling, adding depth and complexity to the digital persona being crafted on Simstagram. Notably, *@ira_phai* draws networked connections with other accounts through the Instagram's feature of mentions, creating and showcasing a networked life in front of her followers. By mentioning the accounts of her husband

and best friends, she reinforces the sense of community and shared experiences within her digital narrative. Furthermore, her mention of God is an interesting aspect, as it aligns with the microcelebrity practice of speaking to niche audiences, in this case, appealing to religious or spiritually inclined followers. Many influencers strategically incorporate religious or spiritual elements into their content to resonate with specific audience segments, fostering a deeper sense of connection and relatability (Evolvi, 2021). Through this multifaceted approach, @*ira_phai* not only engages in self-branding and promotion but also cultivates an authentic emotional bond with her followers. By seamlessly blending personal narratives, networked connections, and niche audience appeal, she exemplifies the intricate dynamics of influencer culture within the Simstagram community. Overall, Figure 5.5 highlights how Simstagrammers, as meta-influencers, are actively engaged in a dual layer of play: they are simultaneously playing The Sims and playing at being influencers, turning the very act of influencing into a game within the broader game of The Sims.

Figure 5.5. @ira_phai, October 16, 2023. Retrieved on November 11, 2023.

As can be seen in the example above, Bishop's (2023) research findings closely mirror the results of my own data analysis in self-branding and emotional authenticity. Bishop's (2023) finding that participants experienced positive reception and high engagement when sharing emotive topics such as anxiety, grief, or unemployment aligns with my observations in the Simstagram community, exemplified by a highly interacted post in my dataset receiving 45 comments in Figure 5.6. In this post, *@lakeside.sims* openheartedly shares about her child's surgery journey and the potential implications of the illness. Her post begins with a trigger warning, signaling to followers that the content ahead delves into emotionally weighty territory, specifically addressing the themes of surgery and the implication of death by stating *"TW [Trigger Warning]: surgery and implication of death"*. Adding such trigger warnings is a common practice on social media platforms, demonstrating awareness and consideration for followers' emotional well-being, which reflects a growing recognition of the potential impact of sensitive content on viewers. By providing these warnings, content creators like *@lakeside.sims* allow their audience to make informed decisions about engaging with potentially distressing material, thereby fostering a more supportive and empathetic online environment. In the post itself, she openly discusses the family's profound fear and vulnerability surrounding an upcoming surgical procedure, emphasizing the heavy emotional burden they carry. It is imperative to underscore once more that the narratives depicted are entirely fictitious, particularly within the framework of the Sims game, where the mechanics do not encompass scenarios involving illnesses or the peril of losing a child due to such maladies. Nonetheless, they embody an imaginative vulnerability and authentic labor designed to foster emotional engagement (Abidin, 2016; Baym, 2019; Bishop, 2023; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2015).
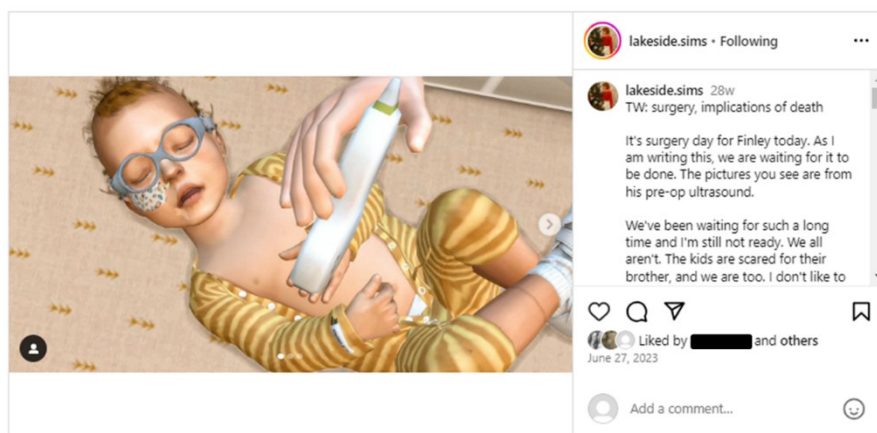

Figure 5.6. @lakeside.sims, June 27, 2023. Retrieved on November 9, 2023.

Platform Affordances and Simstagram

In both scholarly discourse and my own dataset, the concept of platform affordances emerges as a dynamic interplay rather than a unilateral imposition of algorithmic mechanisms. Indeed, platform demands and cultures intricately shape the embodied nature of artistic production, a phenomenon evident in the Simstagram context where users' behaviors and game experiences are intricately intertwined with Instagram posting practices. Bishop's (2023) concept of influencer creep aligns with Goffman's (2022) framework, highlighting how content creation practices shape art worlds and platform affordances through performativity of authenticity. This nuanced, context-dependent authenticity, intertwined with economic and cultural exchanges, is evident in the Simstagram community's strategic blend of high-stakes drama and everyday content, mirroring Instagram's influencer culture and demonstrating the mutability of 'authentic culture' in pursuit of social media visibility. For example, *@ira_phai*'s performance of authenticity through "careless" and "everyday" fashion choices is a deliberate strategy to create a sense of relatability and intimacy with her audience in Figure 5.7. In her post depicting illness, she strategically employs elements such as a headband and a housecoat to convey a less polished, more vulnerable appearance. Unlike the real world, where individuals might genuinely lack time or energy to present themselves ideally online when unwell, *@ira_phai*'s choices are carefully curated within the Simstagram context. The inclusion of dish detergent and cleaning items in the background further enhances this constructed authenticity, deliberately moving away from purely aesthetic compositions. These elements of amateurism are purposefully incorporated to reflect a realistic home environment, fostering a sense of familiarity and authenticity with her followers. By presenting herself in a seemingly unguarded state, *@ira_phai* skillfully navigates the balance between aspirational content and relatable, everyday moments.

Figure 5.7. @ira_phai, September 23, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

This example strongly aligns with Abidin's (2016) concept of "calibrated amateurism," where influencers carefully cultivate an image of relatable imperfection and accessibility to foster perceived authenticity. Similarly, Pooley's (2010) notion of "calculated authenticity" underscores how influencers strategically construct and maintain an authentic persona through selective self-disclosure and the curation of personal narratives, a dynamic mirrored in the Simstagram community's portrayal of virtual lives. Thus, the Simstagram community intricately imagines their player experiences, crafting an ideal self through creative manipulation of the game mechanics and external design tools, a process informed by the influencer culture prevalent on Instagram.

Understanding Simstagram's authenticity requires examining platform affordances as a reciprocal relationship between user behavior and platform features. Bishop's (2023) "influencer creep" and Arriagada and Bishop's (2021) "influencer imaginary" concepts illuminate how cultural practices and self-commodification intertwine with technical aspects, initially shaped by developers but refined by users, within Instagram's influencer culture. In the Simstagram context, this imaginary transcends mere self-commercialization, encompassing the imagined utilization of platform features endemic to the influencer culture prevalent on Instagram. An illustrative example lies in the significance of location tagging on Instagram, which extends beyond

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conventional geographic indicators. In contrast to outside users who may use location tags for informational purposes, the Simstagram community imbues these tags with symbolic meaning reflective of influencer lifestyles. Given that the Sims game lacks real-life locations, users employ famous city names symbolically, each representing distinct facets of the influencer identity. Some specific locations tags serve as narrative tools, allowing Simstagram players to construct and share authentic moments reflective of their idealized influencer lifestyles, showcasing their imagined income and lifestyle choices to their followers on Instagram.

For example, location tags like Beverly Hills and Los Angeles evoke images of luxury living. In Figure 5.8, *@appleofyouriris*, who is a multi-millionaire and a fashion icon, shares her luxurious "self-care" shopping day on a Saturday in front of Dolce & Gabbana in Beverly Hills, California. She holds several shopping bags from another expensive brand, Yves Saint Laurent and wears casual yet alluring clothes with big eyeglasses, which really indicates to her followers that this life style is a very ordinary, affordable and regular part of her life. As can be seen from the Google Maps photos in Figures 5.9 and 5.10, the similarities between the recreated version of the Dolce & Gabbana storefront and the real-life Beverly Hills location are noticeable. The palm trees, colors of the building, and architectural details have been meticulously mimicked during the Blender and creative design process by the Sims player, demonstrating their ability to accurately re-create locations to a certain degree of accuracy. This attention to detail in replicating real-world locations ties into the influencer culture and performativity prevalent in the Simstagram community. By carefully crafting virtual environments that mirror luxurious and aspirational settings, Simstagrammers like *@appleofyouriris* engage in a form of digital world-building that aligns with the aesthetics and lifestyles portrayed by real-life influencers. Through the strategic use of location tags and the recreation of iconic destinations, these virtual influencers construct narratives that resonate with the aspirational and performative nature of influencer culture. By presenting a lavish shopping day in Beverly Hills as an ordinary occurrence, *@appleofyouriris* reinforces the notion of a glamorous and affluent lifestyle, inviting her followers to immerse themselves in this curated fantasy.

Figure 5.8. @appleofyouriris, October 15, 2022. Retrieved on November 9, 2023
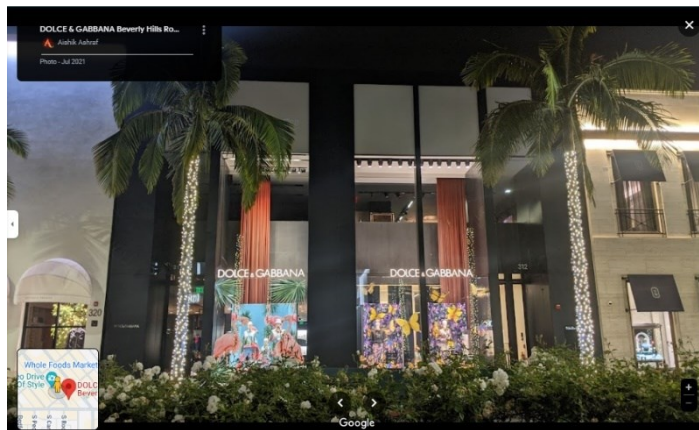
Figure 5.9. Google Maps (2023) Dolce & Gabbana Beverly Hills Rodeo Drive Store. Available at:

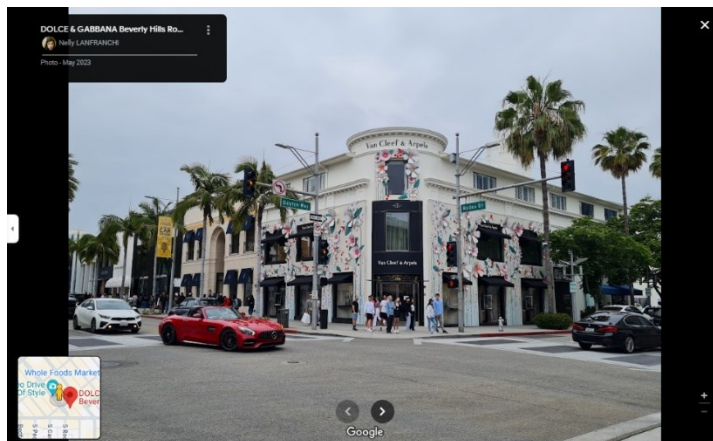*https://maps.app.goo.gl/anb7apV1iYjE6Pbt7 (Accessed: 10 June 2024).*

Figure 5.10. Google Maps (2021) Dolce & Gabbana Beverly Hills Rodeo Drive Store. Available at:

https://maps.app.goo.gl/8Cv6cgzJMnrDFSDb6 (Accessed: 10 June 2024).

Likewise, Paris and Milan symbolize the epitome of fashion and beauty commercialization within the Simstagram universe. Paris serves as the predominant location for beauty contests, while Milan hosts various fashion shows. It is customary among Simstagram users to feature iconic landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower and to showcase fashion shopping experiences along the streets of Paris. As can be seen in Figure 5.11, Miss Sim Beauty 2023, *@martha_mantu*, shares her moment in Paris with a huge smile on her face and wearing her crown as a symbol of Paris becoming the capital of fashion and beauty. Due to its real-world reputation as a hub for haute couture and luxury fashion, Simstagrammers create an authentic connection between their virtual Sims and the aspirational lifestyle associated with Parisian fashion culture. This location affordance not only adds depth to their posts but also enhances the authenticity of their influencer personas, aligning them with the glamour and sophistication commonly associated with the fashion industry.

Figure 5.11. @martha_mantu, October 26, 2023. Retrieved on November 10, 2023

While not directly paralleled, New York embodies entrepreneurialism and a "work hard, play hard" ethos within the Simstagram community. Here, individuals exude both fashion-

forwardness and a sense of urban cool, portraying a lifestyle where they not only look stylish but also know how to fully embrace life. However, amidst the glamour, the hustle and bustle of New York also suggests a dedication to career success, whether it be in business or entertainment. This unique blend of ambition and chic urban living becomes a source of inspiration and personal narrative for Simstagrammers, as they infuse their virtual Sims with the same energetic spirit and drive seen in the bustling streets of the city.

One of the prominent entrepreneur influencers in my dataset is *@jenniferpravia*, who recently opened her new hotel, the "Pravia Hotel," in New York City. She expresses her deep emotions of gratitude and amazement to her followers, remarking, *"I have my own hotel in NYC I can't believe it."* as can be seen in Figure 5.12. This heartfelt sentiment underscores the magnitude of her achievement and resonates with her audience, showcasing the culmination of her hard work and dedication with an emphasis on the fact that these success stories happened in the city of New York, which offers opportunities that everyone dreams of. The details of the post are quite interesting. First, the child holding *@jenniferpravia*'s hand symbolizes the postfeminist nature of showcasing one's hard-won achievements while simultaneously embracing motherhood, a dynamic that resonates with influencer culture. This juxtaposition of professional success and maternal identity reflects the multifaceted roles and aspirations that many women navigate in contemporary society. Second, the presence of two bodyguards standing in the background reflects the luxurious and security needs associated with being a successful, famous, and wealthy individual. This detail adds a layer of realism and authenticity to the fictional narrative constructed by the Sims player. By incorporating elements such as bodyguards, the user creates an imaginary world that mirrors the experiences and lifestyles of real-life celebrities and influencers, blurring the lines between virtual and tangible realms. The inclusion of these details not only enhances the visual storytelling but also speaks to the intricate world-building efforts undertaken by Simstagrammers. They craft narratives that resonate with their audience's aspirations and fantasies, drawing inspiration from the glamorous lives of influencers and public figures. By seamlessly blending elements of success, luxury, and family, *@jenniferpravia*'s post encapsulates the multidimensional nature of the personas cultivated within the Simstagram

community, reflecting the complex interplay of personal and professional identities that characterize contemporary influencer culture.

Figure 5.12. @jenniferpravia, April 27, 2022. Retrieved on November 7, 2023

Also, exotic destinations like Seychelles, Thailand, and Mexico are perceived by the Simstagram community as luxurious vacation spots offering an escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Although none of my users permanently reside in these places, they frequently showcase them as dream vacation destinations where they plan trips and honeymoons. The narratives shared by Simstagrammers often depict these locations as fairytale getaways, emphasizing the beauty and tranquility of their surroundings. However, it's worth noting that these posts typically focus on the idyllic aspects of these destinations, with little representation of local culture or intimate stories from residents. This analysis of locations and depictions of travel within the Simstagram community relates to the broader literature on influencer travel and the genre of travel photos on Instagram, which has been accused of vapidness and a lack of authenticity (Germann Molz, 2021). Similar to real-world influencers, Simstagrammers curate an idealized and romanticized portrayal of travel destinations, prioritizing aesthetically pleasing

visuals over genuine cultural immersion or meaningful connections with local communities (Germann Molz, 2021). This tendency aligns with the critiques leveled against the influencer travel industry, which often perpetuates a superficial and commodified representation of places, reducing them to mere backdrops for self-promotion and aspirational content (Germann Molz, 2021; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). When we take a look at Figure 5.13, *@kaceyanders_* shares some posts from Mexico, highlighting a girls' vacation to celebrate one of her friend's birthdays. The scene depicts four girls on the beach, taking photos of each other in stylish swimwear, having fun, and enjoying the sun. In the description, she expresses feeling sexy and grown-up during the vacation, spending time with her friends in a luxury resort, which aligns with the aforementioned notions of the influencer travel industry norms.

Figure 5.13. @kaceyanders_, August 15, 2023. Retrieved on November 8, 2023

Overall, the concepts of "influencer creep" and "influencer imaginary" offer valuable insights into understanding authenticity and dynamics within the Simstagram community. These examples illuminate the intricate relationship between cultural practices and technical affordances in Simstagram, where users creatively adapt The Sims and Instagram features to

construct narratives blending virtual and real-world influencer practices, demonstrating how platforms are shaped by both engineers and power users (Leaver, 2017). A notable aspect of the Simstagram community is the users' tendency to post photos in a series, mimicking the influencer approach of sharing multiple images to provide a comprehensive glimpse into their imaginary world. Since visual content creation and engagement are paramount, utilizing the platform's affordances for multiple image sharing becomes a crucial aspect of their influencer narratives. Furthermore, the diversity in the Simstagrammers' caption styles not only spins the narrative of their lives (family, business) but also reflects the everydayness of being on Instagram, such as indicating a "late post" or giving photo credit to someone else. These practices extend beyond mere influencer mimicry and encompass broader Instagram norms, highlighting the intricate interplay between platform affordances and user behaviors within the Simstagram community. These features are particularly relevant for the Sims players who navigate between authenticity and commercialism, strategically positioning themselves as both professionals and amateurs in the influencer culture (Abidin, 2016). Moreover, the influencer imaginary concept illuminates how individuals within the Simstagram community justify the commodification of self and knowledge, drawing parallels between their imaginative creations and the branding strategies employed by real-world influencers (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). By designing their game settings to strike a balance between amateurism and professionalism, Simstagrammers emulate the influencers' journey, creating a unique space where authenticity and commercialism intersect to define their online presence and identity.

Microcelebrity Identities and Embodied Performances in Simstagram

Instagram's microcelebrity culture has redefined identity creation, where individuals curate meticulously crafted personas to cultivate followings and influence in the purpose of becoming a "celebrity" on social media. In this digital landscape, each post becomes a brushstroke in the portrait of the self in-between authenticity and performance (Manovich, 2017). In the world of Simstagram, this phenomenon is directly adapted to the identity creation and behaviors of the virtual Sims characters that have personal accounts on Instagram by replicating and remixing the rules of being an influencer on social media. Simstagrammers adhere to the principles of identity construction observed on Instagram, demonstrating conformity to shared practices, identities, and interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2019). The robust follower-following

cycle within the Simstagram community, as observed in my dataset ranging from 63 to 10350 followers per account, underscores the active engagement and interaction prevalent within the community. With an average number of likes at 134 and an average comment count of 7 per post, the Simstagram community exhibits a vibrant and participatory dynamic. It is important to highlight that the majority of accounts leverage Instagram's affordances to hide their like counts, which is a feature that the account owner should adjust from the app settings, a strategic move that shifts the focus away from quantitative metrics and towards the qualitative aspects of content and community engagement. This practice not only aligns with broader trends in social media usage but also reinforces the Simstagram community's emphasis on authentic self-expression and meaningful connections over mere numerical validation.

This dynamic ecosystem also thrives on mutual support, creative exchange, and shared appreciation for virtual storytelling. For instance, Simstagram users frequently engage with accounts they follow through comments, providing feedback, encouragement, and constructive criticism on each other's posts. Additionally, mentions play a pivotal role in fostering connections and collaborations within the community, as users tag and acknowledge fellow creators in their posts, thereby amplifying each other's reach and visibility. Referring back to Figures 5.5 and 5.13, it can be clearly observed that *@kaceyanders_* from Figure 5.13 mentions *@ira_phai* from Figure 5.5, as they went to Mexico together to celebrate *@ira_phai*'s birthday. This serves as a great example of how Simstagrammers perform their identities through networked authenticity and connected communication and narrative cycles, facilitated by the affordances of Instagram. By mentioning each other in their respective posts, *@kaceyanders_* and *@ira_phai* establish a networked connection, reinforcing the authenticity of their shared experiences and narratives. This interconnectivity allows them to weave a cohesive story across multiple accounts, leveraging Instagram's features such as mentions and tagging to create a sense of community and validate their virtual experiences. The ability to reference one another's posts and events further enhances the perceived authenticity of their narratives, as it mirrors the interconnected nature of real-world social circles and shared experiences.

Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple characters within individual narratives adds depth and complexity to the storytelling process, allowing users to weave intricate plotlines, explore diverse perspectives, and cultivate a sense of community among their virtual avatars. Within my dataset, there are a total of 15 couples whose accounts and narratives have been meticulously

observed. These couples not only portray their own unique identities but also incorporate various elements such as newborn children, siblings, and other family members into their narratives. As their stories unfold, these additional characters enrich the plot, adding depth and complexity to their virtual lives portrayed on Simstagram. Overall, these interactive practices not only enhance the immersive experience of the community but also nurture a supportive and interconnected network where creativity flourishes and friendships blossom. Within the context of digital ethnographic research, there is no certain way to say whether different users are connecting in these ways or if it's the same user 'playing' multiple accounts and having them interact. Sometimes, a gamer shares their Blender designs in a shared folder in their bios, and we can interpret that way that someone owns multiple accounts. Either way, the intention of showing the audience that there is an organic connection and genuine friendship on Instagram with other virtual characters is more important in my research as a way of performing the authenticity created through the networked nature of Instagram.

The notion that "avatar bodies don't exist in isolation. They exist in context" (T.L. Taylor, 2002, p.42) underscores the desire of Sims players to immerse themselves in a platform where they can witness the lives of other avatars. The Simstagram community exemplifies this connectedness in influencer culture, where users seek recognition and association with microinfluencers on platforms like Instagram (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). Senft's (2008) concept of 'microcelebrity' describes this celebritization of culture, which the Simstagram community leverages to fill the gap left by The Sims' offline nature, utilizing Instagram's social interaction and visual representation capabilities. Instagram serves as an ideal platform for Sims players, fulfilling T.L. Taylor's (2002) observation that presence-initiating actions are tied to social communication. Driven by the desire for social connection (Zappavigna, 2016), Instagram complements The Sims franchise by offering a space for creative expression, relationship-building, and individualized self-expression. The integration of The Sims with platforms like Instagram represents an innovative extension of the game's mechanics, facilitating activities beyond gameplay, including design, production, and even commodification within the influencer culture of the Simstagram. Morever, Duffy's (2017) concept of aspirational labor within microcelebrity culture, emphasizing creative expression, relationship fostering, and feminine consumer behaviors, aligns closely with The Sims' gamer profile, appealing to a predominantly female audience by providing a platform to explore and enact various aspects of femininity,

including fashion, relationships, and domesticity. Thus, the connection between influencer culture and The Sims lies in their mutual reinforcement of gendered norms and expectations, perpetuating narratives of femininity both within the gaming community and on social media platforms like Instagram. Even if the game itself doesn't require normatively feminine gender expression, the user community reinforces it, highlighting how societal expectations around gender roles and presentations transcend the virtual boundaries of the game world.

Simstagrammers navigate identity creation through a unique lens, leveraging the virtual nature of Sims bodies in their accounts. By embodying "virtual identity" across both virtual social media profiles and Sims bodies, they transcend the confines of physicality to explore multiple identities simultaneously. In other words, they sometimes use the prebuilt the Sims worlds but more frequently, they prefer to construct the body in the game and create the context and settings of their stories in the off-game world by using real locations, brands, celebrities, and contemporary trends that are also prominent within the general Instagram community. Likewise, while employing these tools in their virtual identity by adopting the persona of influencers, Simstagrammers strategically utilize the commodification of womanhood, femininity, and queer content with the intention of emulating influencer culture (Raun, 2018). Through curated posts and carefully crafted narratives, Simstagrammers integrate these elements to shape their online presence and engage with their audience. Overall, this dynamic allows content creators on Instagram to craft authentic narratives through various accounts and characters, echoing the multifaceted nature of human identity in a digital realm.

The embodiment of avatars within gaming, particularly in The Sims, transcends mere gameplay mechanics to encompass a deeper connection between player and character. In The Sims, players not only control the actions of their avatars but also become deeply immersed in shaping their virtual lives, blurring the boundaries between player and character. This embodiment extends beyond the confines of the game itself, as players seek to share their avatar's experiences and narratives on platforms like Instagram. This connection between embodiment and performativity mirrors a form of theatrical performance, where players actively engage in shaping their avatar's appearance and actions to convey specific narratives and aesthetics (Duffy, 2017). Burn (2006) likens players to actors, highlighting their active role in shaping virtual experiences. This performative aspect extends to Instagram, where Simstagrammers showcase their avatars' lives, transforming the platform into a stage for digital performances. Instagram

becomes the main scene for sharing virtual narratives, while The Sims game serves as the backstage for crafting and refining stories. This symbiotic relationship between gaming and social media highlights the nuanced ways in which players navigate virtual environment and social media interactions, embodying both their influencer selves and their digital avatars to create immersive and engaging experiences.

At the same time, avatars within virtual environments serve as pivotal points where users engage with technological objects to embody themselves in facilitating a sense of presence and embodiment within the virtual space (T.L. Taylor, 2002). This notion extends to platforms like Instagram, where users employ their Sims characters to create and share content, thus transforming the act of using Instagram into an embodied social experience. Similarly, in virtual world games like Second Life, users are granted unprecedented freedom in shaping their avatars' appearance and interactions. However, Martey and Consalvo (2011) note that this freedom is often constrained by social and cultural norms, which dictate acceptable standards of appearance within the virtual community. Despite the apparent freedom, users in Second Life often conform to these norms to avoid social ostracization. This parallels the dynamics observed in the Sims and Simstagram community, where users adhere to Instagram's influencer culture to maintain social acceptance and visibility. Thus, the concept of a "socially acceptable appearance" extends from virtual worlds like Second Life to platforms like Instagram, shaping users' interactions and self-representation in both spaces.

Expanding on the idea of avatar appearance as a form of social coding, we can apply Goffman's (2022) concept of the dramaturgical self to understand how Simstagram users manage their impressions through their avatar's appearance. Just as individuals carefully choose their attire and grooming to shape how others perceive them in real life, Simstagram users meticulously craft their avatar's appearance to influence their online interactions and audience perceptions (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). This performance of self encompasses both bodily attributes and clothing choices, with each element contributing to the avatar's overall impression. Drawing parallels to research conducted on avatars in Second Life, where users tailor their appearance to suit specific social contexts or interactions (Martey & Consalvo, 2011), I observe a similar phenomenon within the Sims community. Users may customize their avatars to project attractiveness for dating scenarios or adopt a more menacing appearance to embody antagonistic roles in gameplay. Additionally, the functional and aesthetic aspects of avatar dress reflect the

context in which they are situated. In game-themed virtual worlds like the Sims, attire may serve both functional and aesthetic purposes, enhancing the avatar's performance within the game environment. Conversely, social-themed virtual worlds such as Second Life predominantly feature dress choices driven by aesthetic considerations, aligning with Goffman's (2022) dramaturgical self-theory. Simstagram users leverage influencer culture to navigate the dual embodiment of their physical and avatar personas, strategically managing impressions to align with social norms and expectations, highlighting the intricate interplay between avatar appearance, social context, and impression management in shaping user experiences within virtual and online spaces.

The Influencer Economy and Gender: Future Potentials in Simstagram

The intersection of influencer economy and gender dynamics holds significant importance in understanding the behaviors and platform usage within the Simstagram community, where individuals engage in self-presentation, brand promotion, and narrative construction within the virtual realm they have created on Instagram. The Simstagram community exemplifies Senft's (2013) and Arriagada and Bishop's (2021) conceptualization of the influencer economy based on gender and "imaginary" narratives of influencing, mirroring how female influencers navigate femininity expectations while leveraging online presence for commercial gain and authenticity. Likewise, Simstagrammers engage in self-branding, promotion, and everyday life commercialization, embodying the dual role of consumption promoters and facilitators of "authentic" sociality within their virtual Instagram personas. This notion aligns with the amateurism and emotional authenticity combined within the Simstagram community, reflecting Hearn's (2008) observation that influencers can function as "product, producer, and consumer." While Simstagrammers may not focus on monetary gain, they adopt Instagram's cultural norms and practices, showing how deeply they engage with the platform's imagined possibilities for self-expression and community building.

The symbiotic relationship between virtual influencers and Simstagrammers holds considerable importance for future developments within digital culture and social media landscapes. Shen (2024) delved into the phenomenon of virtual influencers on Instagram, analyzing their emergence and the consequent implications for commercialization. They emphasized the transformative effect that virtual influencers, computer-generated characters with

curated online personas that engage with real audiences on social media platforms, have on traditional advertising models. This blurring between authenticity and commercial endorsement, they argued, significantly impacts consumer behavior and brand perception, as virtual influencers wield considerable influence over their audiences. These findings resonate strongly with the intersection of gaming culture and social media, particularly within communities such as the Simstagram community. In this context, gamers leverage platforms like Instagram to embody virtual influencers, fading the boundaries between their real selves and their Sims counterparts. By strategically curating content and narratives, gamers navigate the complexities of commercialization and authenticity, mirroring the dynamics observed in Shen's (2024) study on virtual influencers.

While the Simstagram community may not currently monetize their influencer lifestyles in terms of commercializing their posts and imaginary personas on Instagram, they actively employ strategies akin to those seen in influencer culture outside the gaming realm. This suggests that the influencer economy could potentially be a future avenue for the Simstagram community. Despite the absence of direct financial gain, the expectations of the influencer economy have become ingrained in their identities. My dataset reveals a prevalent trend among Simstagrammers, wherein luxury brands are frequently mentioned and tagged in their posts, suggesting a simulated affiliation or partnership with these brands. This behavior mirrors typical influencer strategies aimed at creating an illusion of brand endorsements or collaborations. Additionally, the dataset contains references to 12 distinct player-created brands within the Simstagram community, spanning a wide range of products such as iPhone covers, skincare items, dresses, and makeup products as can be seen in Figure 5.14 and 5.15. These brands, although virtual, serve as proxies for real-world commercial ventures, further emphasizing the community's commitment to integrating commercialization into their Simstagram narratives. For the examples mentioned, some of the Simstagrammers share their Blender accounts on their bios, allowing other Sims players to freely access and utilize the products they have created. These free files sometimes include items that can be integrated into the base game, such as clothes, shoes, home decorations, and foods, enhancing the gameplay experience. Additionally, they offer more visual environmental design templates, such as a place in Paris or a luxury restaurant view in Italy, which other players can use as backgrounds while they edit their posts on design software such as Blender and Photoshop for their own narratives on Instagram. This practice aligns with

the concept of a gift economy, where goods and services are exchanged without an explicit agreement for immediate compensation (Giesler, 2006). However, within the imaginary narrative of their posts, it appears as though they possess physical stores and are actively participating in the influencer economy. This discrepancy between the theoretical underpinnings of a gift economy and the practical portrayal of an influencer economy within the Simstagram community highlights the nuanced interplay between virtual and real-world dynamics. While the sharing of Blender creations adheres to the principles of a gift economy, fostering a sense of community and reciprocity, the constructed narratives on Instagram mimic the commercialized nature of influencer marketing. This gift economy confers credibility upon the Simstagrammer whose designs are used by multiple gamers, akin to word-of-mouth marketing. Other players often mention the designer in their post descriptions or tag their username, effectively transforming the designer Sims players into a brand that others want to incorporate into their narratives - a dynamic strikingly similar to Instagram's influencer marketing culture. This juxtaposition underscores the theoretical and practical differences in economic models operating within the Simstagram realm, where the gift economy coexists with the simulated influencer economy, blurring the boundaries between virtual and tangible realms of exchange and commodification. This dedication to emulating influencer strategies, even within the confines of a virtual world, underscores the aspirational labor undertaken by Simstagrammers and reinforces the notion that commercialization is intrinsic to their quest for authenticity and social currency within the community (Duffy, 2017).
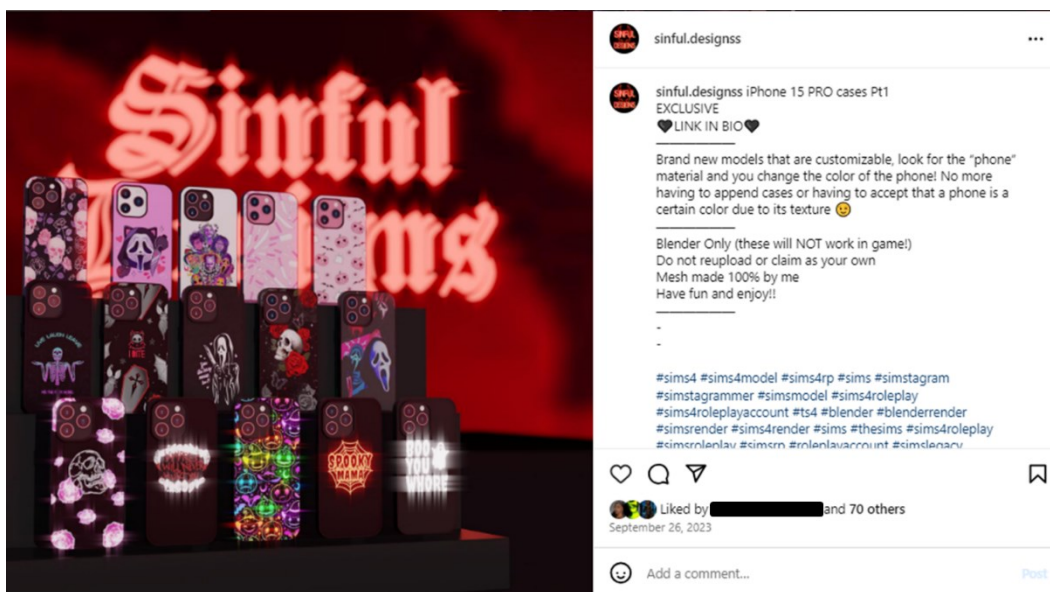

Figure 5.14. @sinful.designss, September 26, 2023. Retrieved on November 9, 2023.
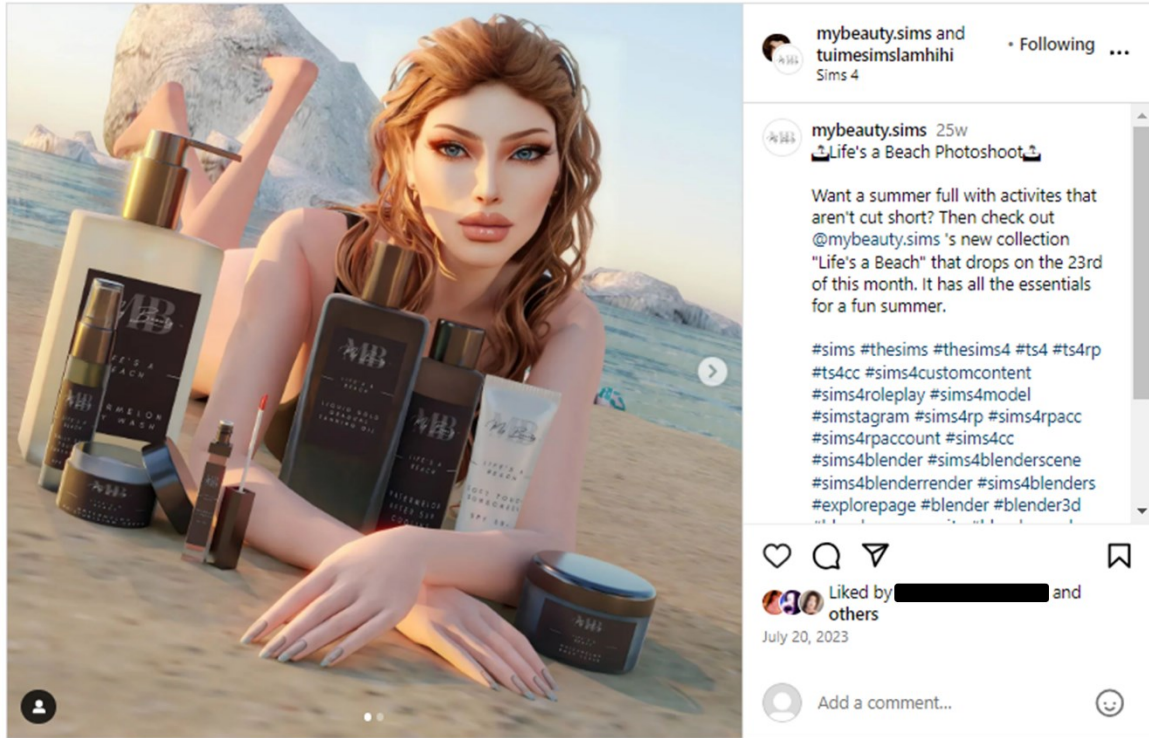
Figure 5.15. @mybeauty.sims, September 26, 2023. Retrieved on November 7, 2023.

Existing research has primarily focused on the identities and self-promotion strategies of digital cultural producers, aiming to convert digital and cultural knowledge into economic capital. However, the Simstagram community's utilization of influencer strategies may pave the way for future monetization opportunities. Seifert and Kwon (2020) shed light on the intersection of commercialization and gender performance among Instagram influencers, highlighting how they strategically conform to gender norms to appeal to their audience and attract brand partnerships. The Simstagram community stands to benefit from the feminine nature of influencer culture, leveraging this strategy to create avatars and Instagram personas that embody fashion and beauty norms, potentially opening avenues for commercialization in the future.

Conclusion

This chapter has delved deep into the intricate negotiations of authenticity, performativity, and embodiment occurring within the Simstagram community. Central to this is the concept of the "meta-influencer", which highlights the significant roles of amateurism and performative authenticity adopted by Simstagrammers. The evidence presented throughout the chapter reinforces that authenticity within Simstagram depends on performances that span both the game

and influencer culture realms. Simstagrammers skillfully blend real-world influencer practices such as branding, content curation, and engagement tactics with their virtual Sims narratives, creating a unique, immersive digital space for creative self-expression imbued with influencer culture aesthetics and norms. This blending of virtual and real-world elements is facilitated by Instagram's affordances, which emerge through the combination of game mechanics and platform features. For instance, the strategic use of location tagging allows Simstagrammers to transport their followers to aspirational destinations, blurring the boundaries between the virtual and tangible realms.

Moreover, the concept of embodiment plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Simstagrammers embody their virtual Sims avatars, transcending the confines of physicality to explore multiple identities simultaneously. This embodiment extends beyond gameplay, as players seek to share their avatar's experiences and narratives on Instagram, effectively transforming the platform into a stage for their digital performances. Additionally, the research uncovers the nascent yet rapidly growing influencer economy within Simstagram, pointing to the community's immense potential for future innovation. While the influencer economy has yet to establish a solid foothold to convert Simstagrammers' activity into profits, its introduction remains crucial for understanding user behaviors and the evolving dynamics of gender representation within the community. The analysis provides key insights into these evolving user behaviors, gender representation dynamics, and the overall digital landscape of lifestyle influencer culture as manifested through the lens of Simstagram. Ultimately, this chapter comprehensively maps how Simstagrammers navigate authenticity, femininity, embodiment, and influencer culture by leveraging Instagram's technical affordances and cultural practices within their distinctive virtual realm. The concept of the "meta-influencer" encapsulates this intricate interplay, highlighting the community's ability to seamlessly blend virtual and real-world elements, fostering a unique space where authenticity emerges from the interconnected nature of their digital interactions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout my study, I have explored the intricate world of Simstagram, where The Sims players create and perform virtual identities on Instagram, blending gaming culture with social media influencer practices. Through a comprehensive analysis of my data, this research has shed light on the complex interplay between authenticity, performativity, gender representation, and platform affordances in the context of post-feminist digital culture. The findings of this study reveal that Simstagrammers engage in a sophisticated process of identity construction and performance, leveraging both The Sims game mechanics and Instagram's platform features to create compelling narratives and personas. Simstagrammers navigate the delicate balance between aspirational content and relatable authenticity, mirroring real-world influencer strategies while adding unique elements specific to their simulated existence.

One of the key insights from this research is the analysis of how authenticity is performed specifically within the Simstagram community. Users create intricate webs of relationships between their virtual characters, often managing multiple accounts to simulate social interactions and family dynamics. This practice not only enhances the perceived authenticity of their narratives but also fosters a sense of community among Simstagrammers, blurring the lines between virtual and real social connections. Through these performances, users carefully craft and present their Sims characters' lives in ways that appear genuine and relatable, despite being entirely constructed. As illustrated in Chapter 4, performances of authenticity within Simstagram must resonate with gameplay practices and narratives while also aligning with the norms of Instagram's influencer culture. In this way, Simstagrammers adhere to, and synthesize, these dual contexts in their authenticity performances. This performative aspect of authenticity is central to the concept, developed in Chapter 5, of the "meta-influencer," which is defined in the context of this key finding. Meta-influencers are Simstagrammers who not only embody influencer practices within their virtual personas but also reflect upon and play with the conventions of influencer culture itself. This concept forms the basis of the thesis, highlighting how Simstagrammers navigate the complex interplay between authenticity, performance, and digital identity construction in a unique virtual-social media hybrid space

My study also highlights the significant role of gender performativity in Simstagram content, revealing a complex interplay between virtual identity construction and societal gender

norms. Users embody idealized versions of femininity and masculinity, crafting Sims characters that reflect or challenge societal standards across virtual families and social circles. Some Simstagrammers engage in hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine presentations, while others deliberately challenge norms through non-binary or stereotype-defying characters. This performance, encompassing physical appearances, behaviors, careers, and social interactions, offers a unique lens to examine contemporary gender representations in digital spaces. Aligning with real-world Instagram influencer practices, Simstagrammers engage with broader discussions on gender identity and sexuality, leveraging platform affordances to create and perform authentic identities. The study demonstrates how Simstagram serves as both a mirror and laboratory for exploring, reinforcing, and challenging societal norms within a simulated environment, while contributing to the broader influencer culture on Instagram.

Platform affordances emerge as a crucial factor in shaping Simstagram content and practices, with users adapting to and creatively exploiting Instagram's features like stories, hashtags, and tagging to enhance their narratives and visibility. Leveraging these features, users create a sense of community and validate their virtual experiences, referencing each other's posts to enhance narrative authenticity and mirror real-world social circles. The inclusion of multiple characters within individual narratives adds depth and complexity, fostering a supportive and interconnected network where creativity flourishes. This robust follower-following cycle, with active engagement and interaction, underscores the vibrant and participatory dynamic of the Simstagram community. By hiding like counts, users shift focus to qualitative content and community engagement, aligning with broader social media trends. These practices not only enhance the immersive experience but also nurture mutual support and creative exchange. The study's findings contribute significantly to our understanding of digital identity construction, virtual communities, and the intersection of gaming and social media cultures. By examining Simstagram through the lenses of performativity, authenticity, and platform studies, this research offers valuable insights into how individuals navigate and create meaning in increasingly complex digital ecosystems, reflecting and contributing to the broader influencer culture on Instagram.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the Simstagram phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The digital ethnographic approach, while effective in capturing online behaviors, was limited to observing publicly shared content on Instagram. Future research could benefit from incorporating Simstagrammers gamer perspective by direct interaction with the gamer to gain deeper insights into their motivations, creative processes, and offline experiences.

This study concentrated solely on Instagram as the primary platform for Simstagram content. Expanding the research to include other social media platforms such as Tumblr, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube could provide a more holistic view of how Sims players distribute and adapt their content across different digital spaces. Additionally, the data collection period was relatively short, potentially missing long-term trends or seasonal variations in content creation. A longitudinal study could offer valuable insights into how Simstagram practices evolve over time. While the study analyzed a substantial number of posts, a larger and more diverse sample could further validate the findings and potentially uncover additional patterns or subcultures within the Simstagram community. Lastly, the research may have been limited by the cultural background of the researcher and the English language used in the analyzed content. Future studies could benefit from a more diverse research team to capture a broader range of cultural nuances.

These limitations present numerous opportunities for future research in the field of Simstagram studies. One promising avenue involves conducting in-depth interviews or surveys with Simstagrammers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their motives. This approach could provide valuable insights into the psychological and social aspects of virtual identity creation and performance. Additionally, comparative studies across multiple social media platforms could shed light on how the Sims content is adapted and received in different digital environments, offering a broader perspective on the cross-platform dynamics of virtual communities. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of Simstagram practices and trends over extended periods would be particularly valuable in understanding the long-term development and sustainability of this unique digital subculture. Furthermore, cross-cultural analyses could explore how Simstagram manifests in different cultural contexts and languages,

potentially revealing diverse interpretations and adaptations of virtual identity performance across global communities. Lastly, investigating the potential therapeutic or educational applications of Simstagram practices in areas such as identity exploration, creative expression, or digital literacy could open up new avenues for applying these virtual experiences in real-world contexts, potentially benefiting fields such as psychology, education, and media studies.

Implications and Impact

The findings of this study have several important implications for various stakeholders across the digital landscape. For gamers and social media users, this research highlights the creative potential of combining gaming and social media practices, demonstrating how virtual spaces can be leveraged to explore identity, build communities, and express oneself in novel ways. This may inspire users to engage more critically and creatively with digital platforms, encouraging them to explore new forms of self-expression and storytelling beyond prescribed uses. Game developers, particularly those working on life simulation games like The Sims, may draw inspiration from the Simstagram phenomenon to incorporate more robust social media integration, enhanced character customization options, or tools that facilitate in-game storytelling and content creation. Social media platforms could benefit from insights into how users adapt and repurpose features for creative expression, potentially informing the development of new features that better support virtual storytelling, character-based content creation, and community building around fictional narratives. For academics, this research contributes significantly to ongoing discussions in digital culture studies, game studies, and social media research, offering a unique case study in the convergence of gaming and social media cultures and providing new perspectives on digital identity construction, performativity, and authenticity in online spaces. Marketers and brands could gain valuable insights from understanding the Simstagram phenomenon, potentially informing new strategies for engaging with virtual influencers and tapping into the creative potential of gaming communities. This research underscores the importance of authenticity and storytelling in digital marketing, even when dealing with entirely fictional personas, highlighting the evolving nature of influencer culture and its intersection with virtual worlds.

In conclusion, my study of Simstagram unveils a vibrant tapestry of digital culture where gaming, social media, and identity performance converge in unprecedented ways. It illuminates

the innovative strategies individuals employ to navigate and shape digital spaces, crafting intricate narratives and fostering communities that blur the lines between virtual and real. The emergence of "meta-influencers" within Simstagram exemplifies the evolving nature of online identity construction, reflecting broader trends in digital culture while presenting novel forms of creative expression. As our digital and physical realities become increasingly intertwined, understanding phenomena like Simstagram becomes not just important, but essential for comprehending contemporary identity formation, social interaction, and cultural production. This research not only enriches academic discourse in game studies, platform studies, and digital culture but also offers practical insights for a wide range of stakeholders – from game developers and social media platforms to marketers – in our rapidly digitalizing world. By shedding light on the complex interplay between platform affordances, user behaviors, and the evolution of influencer culture in digital spaces, my study aims to pave the way for future investigations into the potential academic, practical, and social applications of such virtual-social hybrid spaces. Ultimately, as digital technologies continue to reshape our social landscapes, I believe that the insights gained from studying Simstagram will prove invaluable in navigating the intricate dance between technology, identity, and community in the digital age.

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