

Identity negotiation in digital environments: A case study of L2 influencers

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## Abstract

### Identity negotiation in digital environments: A case study of L2 influencers

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Identity negotiation has been studied as an important aspect of second language (L2) learning especially within Darwin and Norton's (2016) expanded model of investment which help describe sites of conflict amongst identity, ideology and capital of both the learner and the communities they encounter which include digital spaces. While studies about L2 online identity negotiation have used this model to study how L2 speakers negotiate identity as learners, there is a need to study L2 speakers who present themselves in the digital space outside of the label L2 learner. In this study I interview two social media influencers who described their journey through identity negotiation on social media platforms. Both participants described various points of conflict that were consistent with how identity negotiation functions in Darwin and Norton's expanded model of identity in order to position themselves as legitimate speakers in their context as social media influencers. The results from this study affirm the ways social media allows a place for L2 speakers to use their language outside of the L2 or L2 learner identity.

## Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents, who were the first ones to teach me that the act of simply sharing what you love overcomes limitations.

## Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Dr. Kim McDonough, my supervisor, who provided clear guidance throughout the process of completing my thesis. Her thorough critique and feedback helped make this study stronger and pushed me to be responsible for each section I wrote.

### Author Contribution

I was responsible for researching the literature that helped conceptualize this study. I also designed the study, conducted the interviews, analyzed the data the data gathered and wrote the drafts of this manuscript.

Dr. Kim McDonough provided supervision and feedback throughout the conceptualization, study design, data analysis and all manuscript drafts.

Dr. Teresa Hernandez-Gonzales provided feedback on the study design and thesis drafts.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the most basic things I learned about art is that nothing is perceivable without contrast. The way we perceive an object, changes as light moves around it or even by how the object feels to our senses. We need contrast in all its varying levels to understand the object. It sounded poetic to me at first, but it's very practical. Identity, like any other existing thing, exists because of points of contrasts between an individual and a variety of factors. Darvin & Norton (2016) defined these points of contrast in terms of struggle and conflict which initiate negotiation between one's own identity and what we come into contact with. We negotiate our positioning with a variety of spaces to be able to access what is real or imagined for us to have or reach. And language, being a very social process, is an essential and very active part of identity negotiation.

The learning or use of a second language (L2) is motivated by the desire to attain something (Darvin & Norton, 2016). L2 speakers might like to improve their job opportunities after moving to a new country, or they might like to access their preferred type of media in their L2. They might have an image in their mind of the type of person they could become after reaching a desired L2 proficiency level or picture a kind of community to join. In both communities and classroom spaces, L2 speakers manage social structures and constraints. Norton (2022, p. 2) describes this process to be very involved and provide avenues of empowerment for L2 speakers:

Through human agency, language learners who struggle to speak from an identity position of relative powerlessness may be able to reframe their relationship with their interlocutors and claim alternative, more powerful, identities from which to speak, thereby enhancing language learning.



While social systems can dictate much of what L2 speakers in a way that disadvantages them, Norton posits that they still have avenues to reaching their goals or desires as they invest in their L2. The participants in my study do not always negotiate their identity at points of struggle, conflict or powerlessness, but Darvin & Norton's conceptualization of where identity negotiation happens for second language speakers is strongly relevant when observing L2 speakers experiences outside of the classroom.

An expanding area of study is how L2 learners navigate identity in new digital spaces. The affordances that emerging spaces like social media provide allows L2 speakers to position themselves not just as language learners but as simply speakers in a community with shared interest (Darvin & Norton, 2016). L2 speakers not only participate as members of communities but can also take on roles that facilitate communities and audiences such as in the case of social media influencers (SMI)—the group that this study focuses on. With the expanding number of digital places that L2 speakers can navigate, Darvin and Norton's (2016) expanded model of investment provides a strong conceptualization of the way identity, ideology, and capital work together as L2 speakers make moves to use their language; acknowledging that identity, in its multiplicity, is an unavoidable point of conflict in the social practice of learning and using a language.

Norton's (2015) introduction of investment and later Norton and Darvin's (2016) expanded model of investment led to studies that focus on L2 speakers as learners who negotiate outside of the confines of being a learner through participating in digital spaces like social media. But there is a gap in recent research that does not consider L2 speakers who take on the role of an SMI. Although the concept of influencer in digital spaces has existed since the time of blogging, the actual term social media influencer developed as social media platforms that

focused on short form and long form video such as Instagram or YouTube became more user friendly and popular (Wilkens, 2023). There are many purposes and types of SMIs but in general their goal is to influence opinion or consumption through creating a feeling of relatability. SMI content often includes sharing aspects about their lives, which has led to controversies about “authenticity” (a term used in social media often related to sincerity or realness) and trust, which SMIs can lose if an audience senses something fake or untruthful about the way they are presenting themselves. The most recent controversy concerning authenticity on social media involves the presence of AI-generated content (Wilkens, 2023). It seems that the presentation of identity and how it relates to ideology and capital is a central question in SMIs’ activities.

I originally began following some L2 SMIs social media influencers on Instagram and YouTube out of interest in the cultural information they were sharing. The inspiration for this study came as I watched two of the SMIs take notice of their English-speaking audience and begin to find ways to include and interact with them. Eventually the algorithm on my accounts began suggesting social media influencers who were using their L2 to share recipes and aspects of daily living that were specific and unique to their country. At times they express concern for their own language skills and yet continue to post with the encouragement of their audience.

As I read literature for this study, I have found that while many studies discuss L2 speakers interacting on social media as users, very little has been explored about L2 SMIs. An L2 social media user might share pictures and posts or communicate with followers of their page or other online communities with similar tastes. An SMI makes deliberate choices as to how to create and share content as a way to take on a certain role or position in an audience (Wilkens, 2023). This case study is focused on exploring the ways L2 speakers negotiate their identity or

identities as SMIs, and my goal is to define points of conflict where identity negotiation can be further explored.

## **Chapter 2: Identity negotiation in digital environments: A case study of L2 influencers**

### **Literary Review**

#### **Identity and L2 Learners**

With the emergence of dynamic conceptualizations of language and identity influenced by post-structuralist theories, much of second language (L2) acquisition research has explored the complexities of identity from points of interaction, struggle, and negotiation (Norton, 2022). In broad terms, identity is the way an individual defines themselves in any given context throughout time and space (Canagarajah, 2012; Norton, 2015). A person can manage multiple identities that are contradictory and renegotiate their identity as they interact with different contexts, ideologies and social constructs within and between different communities (Canagarajah, 2013; Gordon, 2012; Norton, 2015; Norton, 2022). From the perspective of L2 research, identity is not something that exists isolated within an individual. Both within themselves and throughout their interaction with others and their environment, L2 speakers construct and negotiate multiple identities as they encounter new experiences and ideologies by participating in language learning actions (Norton, 2015; Norton, 2022; Shi & Guo, 2021). L2 speakers use language to shape and project their identity outwardly, and their identity is in turn affected by others' identity projection (Gordon, 2012; Lam 2000).

Research about L2 speaker identity has largely focused on the roles identity and negotiation play within the context of language learning. Two frequently used concepts are those of identity and investment and their relationship to L2 speakers (Norton, 2022). As Norton (2016) described, language is a "social practice" and occurs when L2 speakers use language to interact with others and negotiate their identity to attain some form of capital. L2 speakers' navigation of language, capital and identity is what defines their investment in their L2.

Norton's conceptualization of investment that is centered around identity and attainment of capital provide a strong framework to understand the multiplicity and variability of L2 speakers' identity within the classroom, which is a controlled environment where learners' interactions are mediated and guided by teachers, curricula, and available learning materials; however, as studies continued it became clear that the dynamic of L2 identity negotiation is even more complex outside of traditional language learning environments and were an important aspect of the L2 speaker's identity negotiation.

L2 speakers who use English in a globalized environment experience points of conflict that differ from those experienced by L2 speakers in a context where most people speak their target language (Norton, 2015; Norton & De Costa, 2018). An area where L2 speakers are increasingly negotiating identities is in digital spaces, which include, but are not limited to, social media (Dovchin, 2020; Norton, 2015).

### **Social media and Expanded Models of Identity**

Because social media is increasingly expanding into important aspects of daily life in many contexts, there is an equally increasing amount of identity negotiation that many people are encountering within this space (Knight & Weedon, 2014). It goes without saying that these are also environments that a growing majority of L2 speakers are engaging in (Baytekin & Su-Bergil, 2021). Darwin and Norton (2016) noted that L2 speakers' access to a larger number of communities with varying social structures via technology means that "the distribution of power in learning and using language no longer rests on the simple dichotomy of native speaker and language learner" (p. 23). Most notably, digital environments such as social media platforms that host more diversely globalized and multilingual communities, including diverse groups of L2 English speakers, and create multiple points of language and cultural contact for L2 speakers

making it possible for them to present, negotiate, and position their L2 identity through video, spoken word, subtitles, or images (Geenen, 2012; Gordon, 2012; Norton, 2015; Norton & Costa, 2018; Norton, 2022; Toohey et al. 2012). Norton (2015) posits that because of the extreme changes and expansion of contexts that L2 speakers now participate in, it is necessary to research L2 investment in many contexts, including digital spaces.

Reflecting on this, Darvin and Norton restructured investment and identity into an expanded model which places investment as the center that is fueled by points of contact between identity, social and/or material capital, and ideology (Norton, 2015; Norton, 2016). Within this model, the definitions of investment, capital and identity as well as the role of language have remained the same (Norton, 2015). “Ideology” are norms in any societal structure including language and ideological assumptions (Norton, 2015). Darvin and Norton (2016) posited that ideology shapes the negotiations L2 speakers undertake between the way they will present and position their identity and the capital they hope to attain. This expanded model provides the flexibility needed to observe L2 speakers in a variety of contexts (Canagarajah, 2013, Darvin & Norton, 2016). The most relevant aspect of this model to the current study is its ability to define the way identity is negotiated when it comes into contact with a digital environment. While this expanded model was still intended to focus on investments L2 speakers make as learners, it also provides the flexibility to observe how they negotiate their identity as participants in social media.

### **Social media and L2 Identity So Far**

When approaching the topic of L2 identity and social media, we can explore how identity is developed as individuals consume or react to content on social media; however, we can also explore L2 identity from the perspective of those who create and facilitate online communities

and create content using their L2 (Kim & Kim, 2019; Sauro, 2017; Wellman, 2020). Though referring to online fandom communities with an emphasis on written content such as fictional writing or amateur subtitling, social media platforms have moved from users reacting to and consuming content towards content which exposes them to many points of struggle in identity as they share and interact with other fellow fans (Sauro, 2017). While Lam (2000) observed a high school student from Hong Kong whose struggles with English in the classroom left him feeling isolated; later in the study, this student used English to create an online fan website centered around a famous Japanese pop singer. As this student shared his identity as a fan through his self-created homepage, he not only attracted other English-speaking friends, but also recreated his identity from outcast to a network facilitator. While Lam (2000) emerged in a time where social media was still somewhat limited, in recent years social media has become a fluid system where individuals and populations can easily jump between platforms and media types and allows L2 speakers even more freedom for identity expression (Shin, 2018). Within the development of social media platforms, the term “social media influencer” emerged which is an ever evolving role varied types of people are populating and exploring (Wilkens, 2023). It is with this in mind that this case study focuses on L2 influencers, a less studied L2 speaker group on digital platforms.

### **Social Media Influencers and Identity**

Social media influencers (SMIs) are participants on social media that are differentiated from other users as “public personas” who share multi-media content that others interact with and facilitate an audience (Malik et al., 2022; Wellman, 2020). Malik et al. (2022) notes that the term “influencer” derives from the notion that they influence some sort of action or emotion in people towards opinions or consumption, and their notable impact on marketing has attracted

research in various fields. It is also important to note that the label “social media influencer” is a label that is either taken on by the SMI themselves or given by others to a specific content creator on social media. Though the exact requisites of what brands a social media user as an SMI varies in framework, it is generally agreed that SMIs, through intentional content posting, have access to and connect with large and diverse groups of people who are actively consuming their social media content across one or more platforms (Malik et al., 2022; Wellman, 2020; Wilkens, 2023). Malik et al. (2022) posited that a key characteristic of SMIs is their purposeful construction of identity to portray personal and relatable communication with their audience. Additionally, Wellman (2020) noted that this communication orbits around “...textual and visual narration of their personal everyday lives...”. Amidst the increasing amount of research being done on identity in the SMI space, there has been little done concerning SMI L2 speaker identity; however, the negotiation of and subsequent narration of SMI identity on social media clearly parallels points of conflict for the construct of identity in Norton’s expanded model of investment.

In her study of SMI body builders and identity, Wellman (2020), found that SMIs “self-branding” included the negotiation of multiple identities as a content creator, expert or online persona, and as a member of several online and physical communities within the bodybuilding industry. She found that bodybuilder SMIs often encountered points of conflict when encountering ideologies about who can be rightfully identified as a bodybuilder at the gym and how their bodybuilder identity relates to ideologies about their identity as an influencer. The way that bodybuilder SMIs negotiated their own identities was central to their access to certain gyms and their online credibility. She summarizes an SMI’s actions by describing the relationship between identity, ideology and capital through their online and real-world interactions. Although



she was studying L2 speakers, Wellman's depiction of SMI identity negotiation is compatible with Darvin and Norton's (2016) expanded model of investment in that SMIs' identities interact with perceived and real capital, ideology through language as they continue building their community.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To summarize, SMI identity has received increasing attention in research and there are some studies that have observed L2 speakers using their L2 to negotiate their own identity in digital spaces. Researchers have also identified the need to redefine models of identity in a way that will help us understand points of contact where L2s fluid and complex identity is negotiated within digital spaces (Norton, 2016); however, there is a gap in research about how L2 social media influencers who are actively creating and seeking interaction with capital and ideologies in digital spaces perceive and negotiate their identity. Social media is an ever-expanding space outside of traditional L2 learning contexts that L2 speakers navigate not just as consumers but also as "influencers" with a variety of identities. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore how L2 English social media influencers negotiate and develop their identity as they use their L2 to create content and connect with their audience.

## **Method**

### **Rationale for the Approach**

Case studies are an important framework to research environments and phenomenon that are complex because they have multiple aspects that work together; furthermore, they are frequently used to research digital environments and tools in both academic and business-related research (Ebneyamini & Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). Dyer (2020) interviewed 45 people about their experiences as social media users. Although not solely focused on SMIs, his study provided

a clear picture of areas of contact for identity negotiation when participating in content creation, posting, and interaction with social media audiences on various social media platforms. He found that participants encountered points of conflict where they negotiated their identity when making content and communication decisions based on the nature or structure of the platforms used, when interacting with audience behavior which is dependent on the structure of the social media platform, as well as the actual interactions with audiences themselves. From these findings the researcher emphasized that research focus less on the actual content posted on social media and explore the decisions made at points of conflict by the participant. Because of his clear outline of points of conflict for social media users that is very relevant to SMIs, I referred to his methodology for this specific study.

### **Sampling**

Sampling on social media has some challenging considerations for researchers to navigate. Social media is filled with ambiguous boundaries which makes it difficult to classify SMIs. It is difficult to choose a sample based on genre alone (travel, lifestyle etc.) since SMIs might create content for one or more genres (Word of Mouth Marketing Association, 2013). The classification of SMIs is often dependent on the purpose of the classification and varies without a strong consensus (Morteo, 2018; WOMMA, 2013). With these inconsistencies it did not seem reliable to limit my sample to SMI type.

It was tempting to review and analyze content posted by L2 SMIs and focus on L2 SMIs who post a certain type of content; however, Dyer (2020) stressed two reasons that this is not feasible when researching social media users. First, social media users use several platforms in a variety of ways. Analyzing content on all platforms is impractical and limiting the analysis of content to one platform could limit insight into the L2 SMIs general identity negotiation. Second,

he stressed the importance of respecting the privacy of social media users. The complex and nuanced relationship between research and public and private actions/interactions on what is technically a public platform should be carefully considered as researchers structure their methodology. While social media users post on public platforms, they do have some expectations on how content on their social media page will be used.

A final aspect to consider about sampling through content posted is the fact that SMIs write content on different platforms with varying purposes such as advertising products or communicating a narrative (WOMMA, 2013). Dyer (2020) found that social media users often considered the audience type they would encounter on different social media platforms and curated their posts accordingly. It was clear that the social media users in Dyer's (2020) study made decisions about how much of their identity they would share and how they would share it. Social media users also negotiated identity by considering their own experiences with social media audiences that interacted with their content. It is clear that most SMI identity negotiation occurs in decisions made before and after posting content. Considering this, I did not use a review of the SMI's content as a part of my data collection, but I did quickly review SMI's content to decide if they could be a potential participant to reach out to if I came across an account that matched my criteria in my own searches.

I originally compiled a list of 20 SMIs who are over the age of 18 who are using L2 English speakers and using English as a second language in their content. This list was compiled from referrals I received from contacts that frequently follow social media or who work in the travel social media industry. I also conducted my own searches on social media and contacted SMIs through the means indicated on their about page. While I initially hoped to conduct interviews with 15 SMIs, it was difficult make initial contact with them. I later learned from

feedback from one of the SMIs who chose not to participate that my initial message sounded too official which could sometimes be seen as a message from a bot to SMIs. I then adjusted my messages to sound a little more “friendly”, with a specific example from a piece of their content, while still including details about the study.

### **General Information About the Participants**

General information about both participants is provided below. Neither participant labeled their content as a certain genre but offered various key topics that they create content around. During the interview both participants focused most of their responses to their experiences since 2020.

#### ***Aiden***

Aiden is an adult male social media influencer living in the United States. Currently he posts content on a variety of social media platforms. As a general idea of audience size, his Instagram page at the time of this study indicates that he has 102, 000 followers. In his daily vocation, Aiden is a pastor and originally began posting long form videos (often 8 minutes or longer) in 2015 towards a Christian audience. In his interview, Aiden discussed his process of posting short form videos (often 5 minutes or shorter) to a more generalized audience where he discusses topics about interfaith, social justice, human relationships, advocacy work and peace making. He participated in one interview.

#### ***Bryan***

Bryan is an adult male social media influencer from Malaysia currently traveling to different countries. He previously worked in the PR field but is currently a full time SMI. Currently he posts content on Instagram and YouTube focusing mainly through short form videos. He currently has 17, 500 followers on Instagram. He began posting in 2018 and for his

interview Bryan focused on his social media influencer experiences from his recent years traveling. Some topics that are included in his videos include cross-cultural experience, travel, and vlogging. He participated in two interviews.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

### ***Interview Procedure***

Referring again to Malik et al. (2022) and Wellman (2020), SMIs negotiate identity to present a persona to an audience. Wellman (2020) also noted that SMIs dealt with themes such as being a “real” or “authentic” fitness trainer or not when considering identity. Research has shown that the idea of being “real” or “authentic” as an SMI is often perceived as a guideline for a credible and trustworthy SMI (Wellman, 2020). I decided to use the ideas of being “real” and “authentic” to elicit conversations about identity during the initial interviews. The question were as follows.

1. As a social media influencer, what are some topics that you create content about?
2. As an SMI, what does “authentic” or “real” mean to you?
3. Do you think that being “real” or “authentic” as an SMI means revealing your whole identity to your audience? Why or why not?

After familiarizing myself with the content of both participant’s initial interview, I contacted them to request a follow up interview. Aiden declined and Bryan accepted. Because of time constraints, the follow up interview was around 32 minutes. The interview was focused on topics that Bryan had mentioned in his first interview such as decisions about content topics and managing and responding to feedback from his audience.

### ***Transcription and Analysis***

The interviews were initially transcribed through Microsoft Word's transcription tool and reviewed manually for any mistakes created by the misidentification of sounds, words, or phrases. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, but fillers and/or repetitions were deleted to add clarity while preserving the speaker's stylistic choices. After transcription, each interview was analyzed for themes related to identity negotiation. Quotes from the transcription were used to provide clarity and context to the themes analyzed.

### ***Positionality and Analytical Framework***

Although I do not consider myself an official SMI, I have engaged in social media beyond just consuming videos. I have created short video content to post while researching and attending workshops over the years about developing narrative styles and video editing. I do not have a large number of followers, and I do not answer comments from people I do not know personally. All my activities on social media up to this time are simply for my own creative outlet and desire to improve different digital skills. My time on social media and coming across videos from L2 SMI content creators and noticing the interesting ways that they connect with their audience is what originally inspired this study. I also feel that my own experiences researching and practicing digital storytelling gives me some insight into the vocabulary SMIs use in their industry and the choices SMIs make as they prepare content. However, I am aware that this could also lead to some bias if I project my own experiences creating content onto the description of the SMIs experience. To avoid organizing themes according to my own experience, I used Norton's investment model as an analytical framework to draw my attention to areas of contrast that the SMIs spoke explicitly about.

Initially, I used the three points of conflict from Darvin and Norton (2016) Expanded Model of Investment—*identity and capital*, *identity and ideology*, *capital and ideology*—as an

analytical framework to identify themes related to identity negotiation and organized these themes or sample quotes into a chart for each participant. Some themes that occurred were discussions about content development, offline SMI related experiences, view count, positive and negative comments from the audience and choosing which part of their identity to present on social media. Afterwards I reviewed the charts to look for similarities and differences between the participants that related to each other. Quotes relating to themes that were mentioned in both Aiden and Bryan's interviews, were then extracted and compared and contrasted. Between the interviews with Aiden and Bryan, three areas of identity negotiation occurred which I will use to organize the results: valuing view count as capital, weighing audience engagement and identity negotiation, and identity negotiation via purpose and developing content.

## **Findings**

### **Valuing View Count as Capital**

The content that an SMI creates can generate capital if it consistently receives a high view count. Consistent high view counts on content can also generate stable visibility, an important form of capital for an SMI since it can give them access to other money making and collaboration opportunities. Although SMIs benefit financially from the content that they make and it does play some role in their content making process, view count also created a space for SMI identity negotiation. For Aiden, view count seemed to present a contrast from where he could make content creation decisions. For Bryan, view count seemed to create a space of conflict.

Because of the function of social media where the SMI shares content first and the audience react afterward; Aiden's process of identity negotiation began when choosing to make a video that differed in topic and audience than his usual content on YouTube. When he opened a

TikTok account and posted a video demonstrating chai making, it was to share a part of his identity that he would be meaningful and valuable to both religious and non-religious audiences.

...the reason why I made it is because I grew up as a Sri Lankan. I was born and raised in Sri Lanka. I lived in the Middle East for a little bit. I'm what they call a third culture kid, spent most of their life in significant parts of their life in different parts of the world and so, yeah. And so, I started to make tea. Tea was a big part of my life growing up and so I taught people how to make it....

Aiden later explained that this specific video received a significant number of views and comments, so he continued making similar videos based on the view count. I later reached out to Aiden and asked if the view count had been less than desired, would he have shared his message in a different way. He responded that he most likely would have wanted to continue sharing his message but find a different way so that his message connected with his audience. To Aiden, chai making was a part of his identity that he wanted to use to connect with an audience, but if the view count did not reflect that connection, then he would have moved on to create content in a different way.

Having said that, even though Aiden were to change his content because of a low view count, he still felt that the process included a negotiation between himself and the audience. This was especially evident when Aiden answered questions about being authentic in the social media space while choosing what parts of his identity to share.

Instead of just thinking about like what can I get out of this, situation you are taking, you're taking the approach of a servant. You're saying, OK...how can I serve this moment? How can I serve this conversation? How can I serve this person through this piece of content or media, whatever it is? Because for me, when you take a



service approach to content creation. Theoretically, it's less that you're thinking about yourself. It's more that you're thinking about somebody else but in. But ironically, paradoxically, in that process, you're actually being more honest, being more authentic.

To Aiden, he saw choosing what parts of his identity to keep sharing based on view count as a true part of his identity. In this sense, Aiden wasn't changing his identity based on view count, but he was negotiating what part of his identity to share as an SMI and how to position his identity based on view count.

This process of presenting your identity through content and choosing how to adjust according to view count was a site of conflict and identity negotiation for Bryan. He often created content based off topics that related to something in his identity as well, taking inspiration from storytelling content from other travel influencers. But after view counts increased when he posted more what he described as "cross-cultural" content that were a little more informational as opposed to storytelling, he felt pressured that to continue making similar content because he was trying to create more stable visibility for his SMI activities. Bryan explained that this created a sort of conflict as he tried to navigate creating content that he felt came from him and content that his audience would like.

...now I'm still trying to figure it out, you know, like my most popular videos are talking about the Asian cultures, but, the main thing that still is meaningful, you know, talking about like my own personal story and what I go through and trying to convey those emotions. But then, yeah, those videos don't get as many views, but I still enjoy making them. So, you know, I'm still trying to figure out this whole content creation thing.

Bryan seemed to feel that video content that resonated with himself and felt was valuable to others but didn't always align with what he felt his main audience wanted to consume. In fact, this also seemed to be a place where he was grappling with which identity would be the most useful for him moving forward as an SMI.

Both Aiden and Bryan created content that included presenting a part of their identity to an audience and seemed to feel that the value of the content they posted was somewhat tied to view count. But other than signaling a topic's or content type's initial ability to draw in an audience, which the SMI used to decide if they would continue sharing that part of their identity in that certain way, view count seemed to carry limited weight in identity negotiation.

### **Identity Negotiation and Weighing Audience Comments**

On social media, audience engagement can include the ability for an audience to leave a public comment on a piece of content or send messages to the SMI. During these interviews both SMIs focused on posted public comments and how they positioned their identity when interacting with audience engagement in different ways. Both Aiden and Bryan negotiated their identities through deciding how much they weighed positive/neutral and negative commentary from the audience.

Aiden mentioned that the increased number of comments concerning the topics in his videos indicated that what he was sharing was valuable to his audience and encouraged him to continue developing videos that included themes surrounding societal and religious issues. This progression was evident in the way he developed his SMI identity after initially sharing an aspect of his Sri Lankan identity that drew a larger audience to his account: "people started to ask me more personal questions, more existential questions, because they found out that I was a pastor". By engaging with audience comments through creating content from the questions that they

asked, Aiden felt welcomed by his audience to position himself in a ministerial role to answer questions his audience had about life. Aiden did not negotiate between his identity and audience ideology solely to make decisions about what themes or topics he would talk about in his videos; it also helped him negotiate boundaries around what he would take on as a part of negotiating his identity in response to negative comments from the audience which are commonly called “hate comments”:

When somebody's being mean and abrasive, or harsh about something that I've shared. Instead of saying, oh my gosh. That is an indictment on my character that is an indictment on my identity. That's a judgment on who I am. I'm saying, they are reacting to a piece of a small section of my identity and my story that I have chosen to share and their reaction to that is not necessarily a reaction to me as a person, but maybe it is essentially their reaction to the revelation that they got through listening to that piece of content...

Aiden negotiated the extent to which hate comments from his audience would be in conflict with his identity by deciding that rather than reacting to him as a whole person, the audience was most likely reacting their own reaction to his content. Additionally, Aiden described what he shared on social media as a small part of his identity that he chose to share with the purpose of the audience receiving a message, negotiating the place hate comments took in relation to his own identity; he was aware how much of his identity he shared and how much of his identity the audience was not presented. Aiden negotiated the role different comments of the audience would take as he continued sharing his thoughts and aspects of his identity in his content.

Deciding how much weight and what role audience comments had in his identity negotiation was also a large part of Bryan's identity negotiation. At the time of his first interview

Bryan shared that he was currently struggling with doubts of his pursuit to becoming a full time SMI while continuing to travel. And this negotiation seemed to be fueled by a conflict of ideologies between his family, who expressed concern and a desire for him to return home, and his own desire to continue traveling and building a career as an SMI. Although he had not resolved how he felt about moving forward, Bryan decided to share this with his audience. In his second interview, I asked how the input from his audience from that specific video had affected how he viewed the pressure he felt in that moment:

I think it helps... sometimes like with this lifestyle... everything comes in waves...I'm like OK, I'm doing this. I'm growing. It's great...I'm still chasing my first high of like my first you know 700,000 view video like. Now my videos are like 4005 views...It's a bit discouraging with the algorithm, but then the comments from the people really helps...Like maybe my videos aren't reaching out to as many people as I want, but based on these comments that I'm receiving, these videos are , you know, hitting people that actually watch on a very deep level. So, I'll be like, okay, my videos actually have an impact and I have value as a person and this is something that I can do and I can work on and there's value in what I'm doing.

Although Bryan is still aware of his view count, the questions he was receiving from his family, and the positive comments from his audience also play a role as he negotiates the value of himself as an SMI and if it is still an identity that he wants to develop.

Bryan also had to negotiate the boundaries that hate comments as people made assumptions and reacted to his identity as portrayed on social media. During his time posting content about his travels in Latin America and instead of distancing himself from the

assumptions that some audience made of him, he found places where his own identity could connect with what people on the other side of the comments might be saying:

So, when I was posting videos about Mexico, most of my comments were definitely positive. But I did get a few that were like ohh you—gentrification or you know—Maybe some people think I'm living in Mexico...I don't know if they knew that I'm a tourist. But then I'll respond to them...Because like for me, I understand the perspective of them being angry about gentrification, I recognize the struggle. I'm from Southeast Asia, and I see it happening back home as well. And I try to engage these people who give me hate comments. And I think something that's quite powerful is there's this function which is like you can respond to comments in your video.

In the hate comments, Bryan found a place where he could identify with the people behind the hate comments. In this way he created opportunities for himself to continue sharing about his life online as a tourist in Latin America as opposed to keeping away from sharing content on the topic of travel.

Audience engagement seems to be an area where both SMIs think carefully about the aspects of their identity can be shared with their audience and what type of value their audience perceives their content to be. SMIs also negotiate the ways the audience's comments will affect their identity negotiation.

### **Negotiating Identity Via Purpose and Developing Content**

SMIs' purpose behind posting on social media varies greatly and often dictates narrative choices. Both Aiden and Bryan spoke of what they originally hoped to do as well as how their

purpose may have changed. They were both clear on how they wanted to approach their content while working towards that intended purpose.

Firstly, while Aiden's audience size and view count can lead one to assume he did receive financial capital from his SMI work, Aiden did not mention this as being a part of his purpose as an SMI in his one interview. Instead, he spoke explicitly of his goal of wanting to share messages he felt would be of value to people. This does not necessarily mean that financial capital was not a part of Aiden's goal at all, but the goal he was most interested in describing when speaking about being an SMI was his goal in sharing a message that would be beneficial to others.

Aiden's increased view count encouraged him to create videos that included chai making, but his original reason for sharing a topic through a chai making video was to share cultural capital through chai, which was tied to Aiden's identity as a Sri Lankan, that he felt his audience would benefit from:

In contrast to maybe coffee, or at least the coffee culture in the—in the United States, which is more indexed towards, you know fuel... We need to keep working, so let's just get a caffeine shot. Tea has a different kind of imagination attached to it and tea invites more conversation. Tea invites more mindfulness and space and presence and so—it was very—it was very conducive to use tea as a way to kind of deeper question and explore ourselves a little bit more.

Aiden also considered how he wanted to communicate his ideas through his identity as a pastor:

I really want to prioritize peace, peacemaking and so I've opted for a more covert way of communicating ideas...partly informed, actually significantly informed by

my worldview, Christianity and Jesus, in that sharing ideas through parables was very instructive to me.

When combining communication modalities from both his Sri Lankan and pastor identity, Aiden developed a narrative style in his videos that he felt would benefit and help his audience at some point in time. This was evident in his reasoning behind creating videos that relied heavily on story telling:

When you're culturing ideas through stories, it's more of an indirect way of communicating ideas...at first, it feels like a story that is innocent, innocuous. It's just, you know, just a nice story...but then, hopefully that after a certain part of time has elapsed and when they go through certain life situations and circumstances, they would remember some of the things that they heard from the story, and then it would just hit them at the right time.

Aiden's identity as a pastor who did ministering work in his community as well as his identity as a Sri Lankan and "third culture" person, influenced how he shared through his content on social media. When that content was perceived as valuable through "views" and audience engagement, this then encouraged him to develop a narrative style in his content through negotiating ideology and identity.

For Bryan, his content development process included negotiating between audiences and which part of his SMI identity is more applicable to them. Because Bryan previously worked in a career that included emotional storytelling and was inspired by other travel storytelling influencers, he developed content that positioned him as a traveler and storyteller.

I think for now I'm still trying to reach out to those people, like people who have a similar background like, you know, we would live our entire lives going...doing the

safe—like going to school, getting a job, working corporate for many years and then you get burnt out and you ask ...So basically, people who are also experiencing that and then maybe inspiring them, inspiring them to do something about it through my, through telling my own stories...and somehow I reached out to another segment of the audience, which was my first video that went viral...so then I now have sort of like a niche where it's like oh I'm the Asian traveler in Latin America talking about like cross cultural things like Chinese culture in Mexico, like Asian culture in Latin America.

Bryan negotiated which aspects of his journey as a traveler that he wanted to share by negotiating between his perception of the audience's wants and the need to monetize his content so that he could continue being a full time SMI.

Another area of contrast in his content development process where Bryan experienced identity negotiation was his offline SMI experiences that would become a part of his content. When discussing his experiences in Latin America finding similarities, differences and ties to history to his own culture, Bryan expressed the way it changed his perception of his identity in relation to the rest of the world.

I think. Over—across my travels, I really found that. Like a big lesson that I've learned is we're not as different as we think we are. And I mean definitely we are different, and the beauty is celebrating our differences and different cultures and everything. But at the end of the day, we are all human and. And as humans, we celebrate, we have similar stories and we celebrate similar things and, and I feel like when we see the similarities within the differences, I feel like there's a beauty in that and we can all you know, show each other more love and understanding from that.



Bryan's offline SMI experience opened an area for him to feel less distant from people in the countries he was traveling in. However, throughout his content development process, the division between his identity in an offline setting and the way he presents the identity he chooses to share online was an active site of negotiation for Bryan whose journey as a full time SMI was tied his daily present life as a full-time traveler. Because Bryan's content was heavily based on personal stories, he not only had to navigate what aspects of his own life to share but what aspects of his life with others that he should share.

I feel like the best way you can connect is really just to be human and show people that these are my wins, but these are also my losses, and these are my vulnerabilities and that's how people can relate. But then how do I show my vulnerabilities if it involves one other person who might not appreciate me sharing that information, or something along those lines? You know what I mean? So that's something that I'm still trying to navigate, yeah.

Bryan went on to explain that to navigate this conflict he speaks with the people involved in his videos and receives their input before posting content. A conflict area that Bryan seemed to be navigating when choosing what parts of his life experience to share online that also aligned with his SMI identity, stemmed from his desire to earn income as a full time SMI which created a grey area of what were strictly parts of his offline identity and what were parts of his online identity.

### **Discussion**

The findings revealed that L2 speakers who take on an SMI role are actively engaged in negotiating their identity through the shaping of ideology and capital. This was consistent with the underlying principle of points of conflict outlined in Norton's expanded model of investment which defined the points of conflict between identities, ideologies and capital that L2 speakers

have and encounter as they navigate and position themselves in systemic constructs to reach a goal or desire (Darvin & Norton, 2016).

First, both Aiden and Bryan were very aware that they were negotiating an SMI identity digitally and that it was being negotiated differently than how they would in their physical world. Throughout the interviews it was clear that both Aiden and Bryan felt there were boundaries on the identities that they share in both real life and online environments. Aiden did not initially share his identity as a pastor on TikTok until interest from his audience allowed him to introduce that element into his content. Bryan was purposeful on which parts of his travels he wanted to share online according to what his audience was responding to. To add to this, they negotiated their identity with their own ideology, the ideology of their real-life communities, as well as the ideology of their audience. This became clear in both Aiden and Bryan's discussions about how they positioned themselves when dealing with hate comments. Aiden chose to distance his identity from hate comments connecting that what he shares online is not his whole identity while Bryan chose to use hate comments to help him reflect, find connections with his audience, and create more content. When Bryan communicated with his family who expressed concern about his SMI endeavor's and worried about his view count, he turned towards the positive comments from his audience to find value in what he does as an SMI. Similar to the participants in Lam (2000), L2 speakers taking on the role of SMI find spaces to negotiate between identity and ideology to reposition themselves to a place that is more empowering so that they can continue their work as an SMI.

Aiden and Bryan also negotiated their SMI identity with perceived capital. For Aiden, his main purpose was to continue sharing messages related to what he cared about, and so his view count and comments or questions from his audience played a large role in his SMI identity

negotiation. For Bryan, the conflict between what he valued as capital and what his view count was indicating as a more valuable capital was strong, and he was in the process of deciding how he would manage his content moving forward because of it. This led him to reflect deeply on his identity as an SMI as he tried to navigate content that he wanted to share and content that his audience was more interested in. These purposeful decisions between identity and capital were consistent to bodybuilder's SMI identity negotiation in Wellman's (2000) study and also gives insight to the way L2 SMIs are faced with and navigate systemic constraints so that they can continue growing their audience and have access to the opportunities and affordances that come along with a high view count. As what Darvin and Norton (2016) posited about digital spaces, this reflects the flexible effect capital can have on L2 speakers' identity.

Though this study revealed clear points of identity negotiation for L2 SMIs, there were a couple of limitations that may keep it from revealing the full scope of identity negotiation of an L2 SMI. The extent to which their L2 played a role in Aiden and Bryan's negotiation did not emerge as central in the interviews. In the interviews Both Aiden and Bryan were more focused on non-linguistic cultural aspects of their identity. This was, in part, because of the research design where their use of L2 was not a specific question asked in the initial interview and so the role that L2 played in the SMIs activities was not directly addressed in the first interview and so other themes emerged in the data collection. A further study would benefit from asking more directly about L2 usage. This could also be because both speakers were proficient L2 speakers. Aiden had been speaking English for a large part of his life and worked in English. This could also be because both speakers were proficient L2 speakers. Aiden had been speaking English for a large part of his life and worked in English. Bryan learned English at a young age and used it in his school, social, home and work life. Referring to Lam's (2000) study, it could be assumed that

because taking on the role of a social media influencer and the audience is voluntarily choosing to participate in the community the SMI is building, their identity as L2s became less central but this is not something that could be confirmed with just the data gathered in this study. Expanding the sample in future studies to include more L2 proficiency levels would reveal more insight into SMIs L2 identity negotiation.

Another limitation in the results of this study is that both Aiden and Bryan mentioned creating content with a strong storytelling aspect based on topics that are mostly related to lifestyle. SMIs create content through a variety of modes that are not always related to storytelling and who create content in a variety of settings (Wilkens, 2023). L2 SMIs who create content in other genres may not have the same number of opportunities to negotiate identity or may experience different points of conflict.

What can be confirmed is that identity negotiation for L2 speakers as SMIs is strongly related to their content creation process as they manage input from their audience whether it be through comments or view count. Negotiating identity in the face of capital was also found to be less structured than in other environments and can be negotiated between the SMI and audience. In the case of Aiden who was originally mainly sharing cultural capital through chai, his audience opened the door for him to share other aspects of his identity. Bryan on the other hand often felt his hoped-for or imagined SMI identity was being restrained by what his audience valued.

Darvin and Norton's (2016) expanded model of investment provided a good framework for observing L2 speakers as learners in other studies, but in this study, it proved to be a strong model to describe an L2 speaker's experience not as a learner but as a legitimate speaker in a digital space. There have been many attempts to categorize what exactly makes someone

considered an SMI, but something that was clear in this study was that taking on the role of SMI is a clear choice made by the SMI themselves and the content that they make is used to project a part of their identity to be received by an audience. L2 SMIs step into the role because they have something they feel expert enough to share.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated identity negotiation that occurs for L2 SMIs as they take on varying roles on social media. The results of this study highlighted aspects of being a social media influencer that facilitate or initiate identity negotiation such as valuing view count as capital, weighing audience engagement and identity negotiation, identity negotiation via purpose and developing content. This demonstrates that taking on the role as a social media influencer creates many avenues for L2 speakers to negotiate their identities and claim varying roles within their L2 communities that positions that bring them closer to something they want such as sharing a message or financial capital. Finally, the results of this study demonstrate that the study of L2 SMI identity negotiation can give insight to how L2 speakers navigate digital spaces, like social media, to enter spaces with identities outside of being an L2 speaker or learner.

### Chapter 3: Conclusion

An individual's identity is difficult to define because it is multiple and is negotiated and presented over varying contexts and times. Like the varying contrasts that define a perceived object, L2 speakers' identity can be observed and defined through points of conflict. This study was able to identify some areas where L2 SMIs encounter identity negotiation at points of conflict that were consistent in Darwin and Norton's (2016) expanded model of investment. Aiden and Bryan were pushed to negotiate and define their identity as they encountered, compared and managed similarities and contrasts in ideology and desired capital between themselves and their audience.

In summary, Aiden and Bryan's encounter with view count and audience engagement related to their content—sometimes as a whole or individual pieces of content—created areas of contrast that initiated reflection for both about the identity they choose to project on social media as they took on an SMI identity. Their desire to connect with an imaginary and hoped for audience influenced what part of their identity they wanted to share. When faced with conflicting and negative comments, both participants negotiated the weight this would carry in their identity negotiation which demonstrates the ways varying degrees of contrast can define identity. Through these encounters Aiden and Bryan negotiated between their offline identities and SMI identities in a fluid manner in order to receive greater visibility and, as mentioned by Bryan, generate a source of income to continue his activities as an SMI. This also aligned with how identity is negotiated in Darwin and Norton's (2016) suggestion that L2 learners “move fluidly across online and offline spaces” as they navigate different social systems.

As social media platforms continue to develop, L2 SMIs will have to negotiate their identities to adapt to new affordances created as they pursue visibility and/or financial capital. In

a push to create a larger web of monetization, social media platforms are also, to some extent, overtly challenging limitations to language barriers between varying levels of speakers (Johnson, 2025). For example, recently, different social media platforms have been launching AI-auto dubbing that can reproduce an SMI's voice in multiple languages. This new feature has been received with mixed feelings for audiences as well as L2 SMIs as they make decisions of how much or whether they will use this feature as it can sometimes cause the audience to question the authenticity of the identity the social media influencer is presenting. SMIs in general feel hesitant to allow AI to have access to their specific voice, a tool most SMIs rely on as a part of presenting their identity online. The negative and positive effect this has on L2 SMIs' access to affordances on social media is not something that has received a lot of research attention because it is a new feature on social media; however, understanding how AI features that address language barriers change the way L2 SMIs navigate their identities could be a future avenue of study.

The questions asked in the interviews did not explicitly push the participants to specifically talk about the use of their L2 on social media. Additionally, both SMIs were proficient L2 speakers and used English in many different parts of their life, and so their identity as an L2 speaker was not central in the discussions of the interview. Exploring SMI identity negotiation with a variety of L2 speaker levels could give more insight on this.

When Darvin and Norton (2016) introduced their expanded model of investment, they pointed to the importance of understanding how L2 learners access capital and create more opportunities for themselves outside of the classroom. In recent years, the opportunities that L2 speakers find outside of formal classrooms has grown significantly and most especially on digital platforms like social media. This study demonstrated the ways that L2 SMIs are actively

engaged in identity negotiation in a position other than “L2 learner or speaker” but as legitimate speakers in a community that they themselves helped construct.



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