Are social media "Influencers" leaders? Exploring student perceptions of social media influencers in the context of leadership and followership

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Abstract

Purpose – This purpose of the study was to investigate, analyze, and make meaning of student perceptions of social media influencers in the context of leadership and followership.

Design/methodology/approach – We investigated whether students perceive social media influencers as leaders, their perceptions of the difference between followers and fans, and the degree of responsibility influencers have over their followers' behaviors. Existing qualitative data were obtained from $n = 41$ participants for the study. We used elements of phenomenology within a single case study design (introductory leadership course) to thematically review and analyze students' discussion posts and agree on common themes.

Findings – Our findings show that most students do not believe influencers are leaders based on value differences between influencers and leaders broadly. Students perceived followers as more actively engaged than fans based on their ability to work alongside leaders, while fans are more passive by only consuming and admiring influencers' content. Lastly, most students noted that influencers are responsible for the behaviors of their followers and should have more awareness of their power and influence online.

Originality/value – As social media continues to influence the perceptions of the younger generations of leaders, our findings seek to provide insights into the evolving and dynamic nature of leadership and followership in the digital age.

Keywords Leadership, Followership, Influencers, Social media, Students, Values, Engagement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social media transcends almost every area of life, including our perceptions of complex topics like leadership, and plays an indispensable role in university students' learning behaviors (Abbas, Aman, Nurunnabi, & Bano, 2019). Social media platforms have revolutionized our communication patterns and led to the emergence of social media "influencers" (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2022). The evolution of digital technology promoted the emergence of this new breed of leaders (Kim & Kim, 2022), who have gained attention in leadership and followership circles (Gilani, Bolat, Nordberg, & Wilkin, 2020; Gilani, Bolat, & Wilkin, 2018; Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk, & Jones, 2020), as well as in political discourse broadly (Arnesson, 2023). Influencers have risen to prominence through their ability to influence the opinions and behaviors of their online followers, by elevating issues such as sustainability, gender-based violence, and other forms of activism on their platforms (Arneson, 2023; Maly, 2020; Wood, 2021).

Known as Social Media Influencers or "SMLs" (Gilani *et al.*, 2018), these individuals operate on various social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, commanding large audiences and shaping conversations around politics, fashion, and social issues. Considering this growing phenomenon, we sought to investigate and unpack how undergraduate students who study leadership perceive influencers in the context of leadership and followership, and what these perceptions could mean for the growing sphere of discourse in the social media realm. The main research questions we sought to investigate include:

(1) Do students perceive social media "influencers" as leaders? Why or why not?

(2) What similarities or differences exist between "followers" and "fans" on social media according to students?

(3) Do students perceive that social media "influencers" are responsible for the behavior of their followers? Why or why not?

Background
The rise of social media "Influencers"
Social media influencers (SMIs) are a modern type of independent endorsers who influence the opinions and attitudes of their audiences through platforms such as blogs, tweets, and other social media channels (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Influencers share expertise, create original content, and share their opinions to the audience who trusts them and is willing to be a referent (Morteo, 2017). They have built a substantial following on social media platforms, have a unique brand persona, and have the will to affect their audience's purchasing decisions through information, inspiration, and advice (Duffy, 2020). Social media influencers emerged with the rise of platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, where individuals could gain a significant following through engaging content (Duffy, 2020). Influencers can be sorted based on their quantifiable following such as mega-influencers (millions of followers), macro-influencers (hundreds of thousands to a million followers), and micro-influencers (tens of thousands of followers), and nano-influencers-a few thousand followers (Morteo, 2017; Wibawa, Pratiwi, & Larasati, 2021).

Fans and followers in the context of social media
Social media platforms have given rise to two categories of people, followers, and fans, who consume influencer (i.e., content creators or public figures) content. These two terms are often used interchangeably, but they encompass different levels of engagement and emotional attachment to the content and its creator. Followers are generally a broader category of individuals who subscribe to the profile, page, or account of an influencer/creator. They usually have a general interest in the profile or content of the influencer but may not feel a strong emotional connection (Park, 2022). Followers mainly subscribe to an influencer's page to keep updated on current happenings, news about a particular brand, image, or relevant socio-political topics (Miller, 2017). Followers engage with the media content by sharing posts, liking, and adding comments and are likely to unfollow any page or influencer if they feel the content no longer aligns with their interests.

However, fans can be described as individuals within an audience who show strong devotion to an influencer, celebrity, television show, or other forms of media representation (Lewis, 1992; Liao, 2021). Fans have a higher emotional attachment and loyalty to the influencer or public figure. They are more active in content consumption and are more actively engaged with it, often forming a perceived socio-emotional bond with the creator (Park, 2022). They share, like, and comment on the content more than followers do and are known for loyalty, referrals, and participation (Miller, 2017). This is because they often admire the personality and values of the influencers and feel a sense of belonging to the community of the

creator. Fans strive to maintain the image of an influencer's popularity by consistently sharing content about them and actively defending against any negative comments that could be unwelcoming to the influencer's image (Liao, 2021).

Followers and followership outside of social media
Followership is the practice of being an effective follower within a group or organizational context. It involves the skills, attitudes, and behavior that followers exhibit in their roles that complement leadership (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Followership encompasses a hierarchical power dynamic in which followers generally adhere to the guidance and desires of leaders, deferring to the authority wielded by those in leadership roles (Northouse, 2022). Followers are individuals who are part of a group, organization, or community and align themselves with a leader, or authority figure to achieve a common goal.

Additionally, in an organization, leadership is not done by the leader alone, and followership is not done by followers alone (Riggio, 2014). Followers are willing to support, obey, and submit to a person of influence, and play vital individual, relational, and collective roles in achieving an organization's goals and objectives (Koonce, 2016). The role of the follower is critical in the leadership process because one cannot exist without the other (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2019; Chaleff, 2008). Moreover, followership often recognizes the traits and characteristics an individual possesses in the place of leadership, mostly because of shared purpose, the vision, guidance, and direction provided by the leader. The role followers' play can be related to causal agents because they influence leaders' attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes (Ete, Epitropaki, Zhou, & Graham, 2022).

Followership typologies
Followership can be divided into two broad categories: role-based and relational-based (Northouse, 2022; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014). The role-based highlights followers' customary role or action while holding a formal or informal position within a hierarchical structure. The relational-based approach to followership, informed by the educational theory of social constructivism, emphasizes that followership is co-created through the dynamic interplay between leaders and followers in each situation (Northouse, 2022). It focuses on the interpersonal process of influence, with leadership occurring within the context of people exerting and responding to influence, rather than being constrained by predefined roles (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014). To enhance our understanding of followership, various scholars (Zaleznik, 1965; Kelley, 1992; Chaleff, 1995; Kellerman, 2008) have broken the broader area of followership into frameworks or "typologies". These typologies propose different types of follower roles observed in various settings (Northouse, 2022).

Two typologies from literature present significant connections to the present study: Robert Kelley's and Barbara Kellerman's typologies. Kelley's typology, which emphasizes the motivations of followers and their behaviors, and Kellerman's typology looking at followers' level of engagement, are relevant to the present study as the research team sought to explore the relationship between influencers and followers.

Kelley (1992) posited that five followership styles exist which he sorted into two different dimensions: engagement (i.e. active-passive) and critical thinking (i.e. independent critical thinking-dependent and uncritical thinking) (Kelley, 2008; Northouse, 2022; Novikov, 2016). These dimensions birthed five follower types including *passive followers* who are referred to as sheep, are low in active engagement, and look to the leader for direction and motivation (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006; Kelley, 2008; Novikov, 2016). *Conformist followers* are high in active engagement, always place themselves on the leader's side, and unquestioningly follow their direction (Kelly, 2008; Novikov, 2016). *Exemplary followers* are high in active engagement and independent critical thinking; they work well with others and are willing to provide alternative solutions in case of disagreement with the leader (Bjugstad *et al.*, 2006; Kelley, 1992; Northouse, 2022). *Alienated followers* are highly independent

critical thinkers (i.e. think for themselves), though they have lower active engagement and may have negative feelings toward the leader (Kelley, 2008; Novikov, 2016). Finally, *pragmatic followers* have moderate levels of engagement and critical thinking; they sit on the fence and wait for others to act before acting themselves (Kelley, 2008; Northouse, 2022). The Kelley typology is pertinent to our study based on the independent-critical thinking aspect.

Another typology relevant to this study is Kellerman's continuum which emphasizes the various levels of follower engagement on a spectrum. She conceptualizes followers on the low-level continuum as detached, doing nothing for the leader or to achieve the group goals, while those on the higher end are dedicated and contribute to the leader's efforts and goals of the group (Kellerman, 2008; Northouse, 2022). Kellerman identified five levels of follower engagement: (1) *isolates* are those who are not engaged at all and do nothing to contribute to the leader's effort or group goals; (2) *bystanders* are individuals who observe and know the groups' goals but do not participate; (3) *participants* are partially engaged and willing to take a stand to either support or oppose the leader when issues arise (Northouse, 2022), (4) a*ctivists* are agents of change who hold a deep conviction regarding the leader and their policies; and lastly, (5) *diehards* are fully engaged and committed to either opposing or supporting the leader. Diehards can go to extra lengths to achieve group goals (Kellerman, 2008; Northouse, 2022).

Both typologies provide a conceptual background and model for exploring student perceptions of influencers in the context of leadership and followership. We see connections between the degree of engagement (Kellerman) and independent critical thinking (Kelley) of followers and influencers, and our findings point to the nuances of the relationship between followers and influencers in social media, and how the digital content created by influencers can shape follower behaviors.

Existing research on leader-follower relationships in social media
While the body of research and scholarship is growing but limited, a few studies have looked at the relationship between social media influencers and their followers which have implications for the present study. Taillon *et al.* (2020) concluded that followers are drawn to influencers because of their "attractiveness" and "likeability", the latter of which predicted follower purchasing intentions from the influencer through word of mouth. The researchers also found that closeness or being able to identify yourself in another person (Taillon *et al.*, 2020; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), acted as a "buffer" if an influencer lacked a specific trait (e.g. likability, attractiveness, etc.).

Likewise, Gilani *et al.* (2018) found that social media influencers-leaders (SMLs) are heavily influenced by the "network behavior" of their social media followers (SMFs), meaning followers' engagement and activity shape the content SMLs create and how they develop their brand. All SMLs in the study expressed "desire to establish a greater followership" (p. 16). The relationship between SMLs and SMFs involves a dynamic exchange, where the power and intimacy of interactions affect both parties. Power and intimacy also played a role in the findings, as the authors noted that there is a give and take process that exists along a relationship continuum based on what is posted by the SML and how SMFs interact with it. However, there is a "dark" side to followership on social media, as SMLs often experience "anxiety", "fear", and "insecurity", leading to "internal conflict" about their authenticity due to SMFs reactions (Gilani *et al.*, 2018, p. 17).

Further, Gilani *et al.* (2020) also explored the power dynamics between SMLs and their followers using critical leadership studies in a hybrid qualitative approach. The study revealed that the relationship between SMLs and followers are co-produced and exist similar to a "magic mirror," with power continuously shifting between leaders and followers, which are primarily influenced by social media metrics such as, number of followers, likes, and comments. This power shift grants equal communication access and often favors followers, shaping how SMLs manage their identity and content. Moreover, this study brings to light

significant concerns regarding the exercise and misuse of power within social media, as well as the underlying politics of social media.

While these three studies don't represent an exhaustive literature review, their findings point to the growing discourse and scholarship around the relational context between social media influencers and their followers, and what nuances exist. Both studies have impacted the way we see future directions for our research.

Methodology

Data collection, population and course context

This research idea came after the spring 2023 semester. We used existing data (with student consent) from a required assignment in an introductory (i.e. 1,000-level) online, asynchronous leadership course at a large, four-year public land-grant university in the southeastern United States. The course provides a survey of leadership conceptual models and major theories. Several key learning outcomes for the course include "Describe fundamental theories and concepts of leadership and the different components of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development" and "Analyze the ways in which values and beliefs relate to human behavior and social relationships". Overall, the course seeks to disrupt students' preconceived notions or paradigms about leadership upon entering the class. Therefore, no singular definition of "leadership" is used in the course; rather, students explore, operationalize, and apply the concept in their own lives and context through assignments, discussions, recorded presentations, and reflective activities.

Undergraduate students enrolled in this course were either taking it as a general education requirement or as a requirement for the leadership studies minor where it is housed. The population of students enrolled in the course included a mixture of all levels from freshman to senior. After the spring 2023 and fall 2023 semesters ended, we emailed students enrolled in the course for permission to use their data anonymously. Qualitative data were obtained from 22 students in spring 2023 and 19 students in fall 2023 to make a total of $n = 41$ participants for the study, which was approved by the institution's review board (IRB #23–608). Existing data came from a discussion post assignment where students were required to review a course learning module on followership theories and concepts. For this specific assignment, students were asked to read an article from *The New York Times* titled "TikTok Influencers, Harassment, and Fans: Who's to Blame?" by Lorenz (2020) and answer the following open-ended discussion questions:

> Is an influencer a leader? How are influencers and leaders the same and/or different? What does it take to move from an influencer to a leader? How are "followers" and "fans" the same and/or different? Is the term "follower" the same when we discuss it in class compared to an influencer's follower? What is the underlying motivation for people to go out of their way to post a hateful comment under another person's video? As leaders looking to address hate speech, can we learn anything from these motivations to address this complex problem? What responsibility do influencers have to lead their followers to act in a particular way?

These questions were developed by Dr Matthew Sowcik, a professor of leadership development, who previously served as a contributor to the "Leadership" division of *The New York Times in Education*. Our analysis considered the students' entire responses; however, the study specifically addressed the previously mentioned research questions.

The article from which data were analyzed chronicles an incident involving an influencer named Chris with the alias @Donelij (a since-banned account) on the social media platform TikTok and the behaviors of his online followers. Chris (a 17-year-old teenager at the time) operated what have become known as "reaction accounts" where influencers post videos of themselves reacting to other TikTok videos and influencers (Lorenz, 2020). The main dilemma occurred when Chris posted reaction videos to TikTok influencers in the LGBTQ + community, which were perceived as homophobic and transphobic. Once people began speaking out against

Chris's reaction videos, his followers met the criticism with harassment which included anti-gay slurs, death threats, and "doxxing" (Lorenz, 2020), which is the act of publishing information about an individual—without their consent—to intentionally shame or embarrass them (Protect yourself from "Doxxing", n.d.). As a result, Chris was also met with harassment from other TikTokers and their followers, who directed racial slurs at him such as calling him the "N-word", "monkey" and sending direct messages saying they were going to kill him (Lorenz, 2020).

Overall, the article presents the ethical complexity of social media influencers' power and influence, and what that means for their followers. Some believe that Chris is responsible for how he uses his platform, while others assert that his followers are responsible for their actions (Lorenz, 2020). After grading our student assignments, we felt that this would be an interesting conversation to initiate with scholars and practitioners within leadership and followership disciplines.

Study design and data analysis
The design of the study incorporated elements of both phenomenology and case study methods. In terms of phenomenology, our study sought to emphasize a phenomenon being explored (i.e. the influencer-follower scenario described in the *New York Times* article) and initiate a philosophical discussion about the key ideas involved. However, since the existing data came from a specific course bound by context and time (i.e. spring and fall semesters during the 2023 academic year at a four-year institution) a single case study design was employed, with the "case" being the course itself and the modality, learning outcomes, materials, assignments, and students involved. As part of this project, the researchers used a thematic analysis framework to review students' discussion posts and agree on common themes.

The main goal of our analysis was to make meaning of the student responses while guided by our research questions. Analyzing the data involved a step-by-step process of (1) reading and re-reading student responses, (2) identifying key words or emergent phrases (see Table 1: Findings) that were made into codes (i.e. utilizing the in vivo technique), (3) agreeing upon codes that were repeated multiple times by students until they reached a saturation point, and (4) developing larger, overarching themes housed beneath each research question that represented the bigger picture of what students were saying. Guided by the constant comparative method, these four steps were repeated multiple times until both researchers reached a common agreement on major themes, sub themes/categories.

Results
This study explored students' perception of social media influencers in the context of leadership and followership, using student responses to highlight these dynamics in the current age of digital connectedness. The first research question asked: *Do students perceive social media "influencers" as leaders? Why or why not?* Regarding the first question, "Is an influencer a leader?", our analysis unveiled that 75.6% ($n = 31$) of the participants perceived that influencers are not leaders. They do not align with the conventional role leaders play or the leader-follower interactions, although they could become leaders based on certain criteria. Conversely, 19.5% ($n = 8$) posited that influencers qualify as leaders by their role or position on social media, while 4.9% ($n = 2$) of respondents did not answer the question.

Overall, participants' responses to the first question were mixed. Some viewed SMIs as leaders, admiring their large following and influence, while others rejected this view, associating leadership with authority and responsibility. Some students noted that influencers "could be leaders if" they used their platforms to promote positive causes or demonstrate prosocial leadership behaviors. For example, one student from the fall semester said, "To be more of a leader instead of an influencer, one could make videos to help/spread awareness rather than just trying to get the most views."

Table 1. Findings

Themes	Main categories	Subcategories	Emerging concepts
Value differences	*Influencers*	*Self-promotion*	Leaders = awareness of impacts; influencers concerned about product/image
			Leaders gain followers by sharing morals and values, while influencers gain followers by the content they post
	Leaders	*Moral/ethical causes*	An influencer is not a leader by default but can become a leader through certain causes/morals
			An influencer could be a leader if their platforms are positively utilized
		Prosocial behaviors of leaders	Influencers can be leaders but are often managed by other people, whereas leaders give directions
			Influencers can turn to a leader if they allow the voices of their followers to be heard
Engagement	*Active*	*Working with leaders*	Followers are more actively engaged with the leader than fans with the influencers
			Fans may not practice the values of an influencer, but followers operate with a shared purpose
	Passive	*Admiration*	Fans just admire the influencers, while followers are committed to achieving the group's goals
			Fans = following an entity; followers are seeking someone to lead them
		Consuming Content	Fans only consume media content, but followers are committed to the group's goals
			Fans only consume content without engaging in any form of leadership, but followers have someone who is leading them
Degree of responsibility	*Influencers are responsible*	*Awareness of power and influence*	Influencers can hold their fans/followers accountable for their actions.
			There is a "social responsibility" with being an influencer and words used
			Influencers must be aware of their power and take responsibility for followers' words/ actions
	Influencers are not responsible	*Individual responsibility of followers*	Leaders have control over their followers, and while influencers cannot necessarily control what the follower does, they can't be held responsible for the action and inaction of the followers
			Influencers are not responsible for the words/ actions of followers but can "influence" as role models through online platforms

Note(s): The table shows the thematic analysis from students' discussion posts, three broad themes emerged, with six main categories, two from each broad theme with eight subcategories. The emerging concepts which include excerpts from students' responses give a broader explanation of the subcategories
Source(s): Table by authors

Value differences
The results outlined in Table 1 reveal that the analysis provided one primary theme, value differences, two main categories, (1) influencers and (2) leaders, and three subcategories (1) self-promotion, (2) moral/ethical causes, and (3) prosocial behaviors of leaders.

Influencers. The first distinguishing factor between influencers and leaders was *self-promotion.* Students perceive an influencer to be mostly concerned about self-promotion, particularly promoting their image and "likability", products, and videos that may go viral, or to make money, while leaders are more concerned about their impact on followers. This connects to the findings from Gilani *et al.* (2018) regarding the motivations of social media influencers. For example, one student mentioned that "...many influencers simply posted videos for money and views", while others said, "[influencers] create content to push their wishes and desires onto the public" and "may be solely trying to get you to do certain things for their brands". Moreover, one student said,

> The way I think about it is this: a leader is an influencer, but an influencer is not a leader. Leaders must influence to be effective, but influencers do not uphold a legitimate leadership standard. Most influencers live their life and people who admire it become fans who invest in the same things as the influencing figure (Spring 2023).

Leaders. The *prosocial behaviors* of leaders arose as another important distinguishing factor that students used to parse out leaders from influencers. According to Wittek and Bekkers (2015) "Prosocial behavior is a broad class of behavior defined as involving costs for the self and resulting in benefits for others" (p. 579). Students also mentioned that influencers could become leaders if they practice prosocial behaviors such as "communication skills", "leading by example", having the ability to "influence" others, "give direction", and allowing "the voice of the followers to be heard". The other distinguishing element between leaders and influencers was the promotion of *moral/ethical causes*. Students attested that leaders influence the behavior of their followers by having a positive effect on them and by using their position for morally good reasons. For example, students mentioned that for an influencer to be a leader they would have to support "certain causes", use "their platform to have a positive impact over a community of followers" and "worry about the differences they can make in someone's life through their practices". One student provided an accurate illustration of this category within the value difference theme:

> I feel as though the definition of a leader varies from person to person. Influencers have many followers who have no problem copying their idols. The difference between influencers and leaders is that influencers are gaining a following unconsciously by posting their lives. Leaders gain a following by expressing their morals and having a bigger project to work on than just promoting products (Spring 2023).

In sum, while influencers are not necessarily seen as leaders, they do represent values promoted through the digital content they create. Students recognized that leaders gain followers by sharing their morals and values, while influencers gain followers by the content they post alone.

The second research question asked: *What similarities or differences exist between "followers" and "fans" on social media according to students?* From the analysis of the second research question (also shown in Table 1) one primary theme, engagement, two main categories (1) active and (2) passive, and three subcategories (1) working with leaders, (2) admiration, and (3) consuming content emerged.

Engagement

Overall, participants differentiated between followers and fans based on the *engagement* they have with the leader and/or influencer, which serves as a connection point representative of Kelley and Kellerman's typologies of followers' motivation, behavior, and level of engagement. It is important to consider that in collective discourse the terms "fans" and "followers" are used interchangeably, however, we sought to understand how students differentiated between the two.

Active engagement. Students categorized followers as more actively engaged by *working with the leader* as opposed to fans with influencers. One example of this is how followers

interact with leaders as opposed to fans. According to students, followers "engage closely with a leader", and have "direct contact" with leaders, while fans operate "from afar". They saw fans as not having a close relationship with influencers, while followers may closely relate with the leader. The student response below represents these findings:

> Followers and fans are also not the same. Fans are just enthusiastic people who share the same opinions or plainly just like the influencer (whether by look, by opinions, etc), an admirer with an extrinsic connection. Followers, however, follow teachings and feedback for the better; they have an intrinsic connection with a leader (Fall, 2023).

Overall, it appears that a true follower's relationship with social influencers-leaders can be likened to "exemplary" followers in Kelley's typology and "activists" or "diehards" in Kellerman's typology (Kellerman, 2008; Kelley, 1992), whereas fans can be categorized as "isolate" or "bystanders" in Kellerman's typology in their relationship to influencers-leaders.

Passive engagement. Conversely, students noted that fans are passively engaged as opposed to followers. For example, they believe *admiration* is critical for being a fan. Students see fans as people who just admire influencers, while followers are "committed to achieving the group goals" as established by the leader. Moreover, fans "mirror" influencers, while followers can be team players and influence or seek someone to lead them. The response below represents this category:

> When it comes to followers and fans, they are the same in how they look to one figure. However, fans are admirers without responsibility whereas followers commit to the cause and group they admire/ support (Spring 2023).

This finding connects to "passive followers" in Kelley's (1992) typology. According to Kelley (1992), passive followers look to a leader for direction and motivation, they are low in active engagement and are dependent, uncritical thinkers.

Lastly, participants differentiated fans from followers based on their *consumption of content.* They believe fans only "consume media", but followers are "team players" who are "committed to group goals". Moreover, fans consume content "without engaging in any form of leadership" or "practice what the leader says" but are instead "devoted to a person". Followers, on the other hand, are individuals who "incorporate the leaders' teaching into their life". The following example further emphasizes the passive versus active engagement between fans and followers: "Followers and fans differ; however, a fan may mimic or complement and consume media and a follower can be a team player to help the influencer accomplish goals."

How our students differentiated between followers and fans brings up an important question: have we (i.e. the field at large) been mislabeling social media followers as true *followers* according to existing literature, or would *fans* be a more appropriate title? Perhaps it's time to be more specific when we broadly refer to followers on social media as opposed to the traditional leader-follower paradigm.

The third research question asked: *Do students perceive that social media "influencers" are responsible for the behavior of their followers? Why or why not?* In this regard, 59.5% ($n = 24$) of respondents agreed that influencers bear responsibility for the conduct of their followers, while 22% ($n = 9$) expressed the view that influencers should not be held accountable for the actions of their audience. Additionally, 19.5% ($n = 8$) of respondents did not respond to the question.

Degree of responsibility
From the analysis of the third research question (also shown in Table 1), one theme, degree of responsibility, two main categories (1) influencers are responsible and (2) influencers are not responsible, and two subcategories (1) awareness of power/influence and (2) individual responsibility of followers emerged.

Influencers are responsible. While there was a divergence of opinion on whether influencers should be responsible for the behavior of their followers, most participants mentioned influencers should create content or display actions that will not result in their fans/ followers making hate speech. For example, one student mentioned that "influencers should try to create content that is kind and isn't a breeding ground for people to feel comfortable posting hate speech." Students mentioned that influencers have the responsibility to ensure that their followers/fans do not post hate speech and must hold their followers/fans accountable for their actions. This was demonstrated in the findings by the following sample quote:

> We must be more accepting and forgiving of dissenting opinions because maybe they are just trying to fit in. I think influencers have a responsibility to manage their followers to the best of their ability, I think if you curate your social media presence and followers, you need to understand your social responsibility does not stop just because you told them to stop. You must demonstrate positive behavior, you need to be accountable for what you have created and who you have harmed, directly or indirectly (Spring 2023).

Influencers are not responsible. Contrarily, a minority of participants believed that leaders have control over their followers, and while social media influencers cannot necessarily control what their virtual followers do, they can't be held responsible for the actions and inaction of the followers. Further, they do not believe that influencers are entirely responsible for the words/behaviors of followers but can "influence" as role models through online platforms. This is illustrated by the below quote from a student:

> Influencers aren't responsible for the way people react to their content, whether good or bad. Just like people reacted badly to Chris's Tik-Tok, and some reacted well, he was not ever able to control either of those two sides of things. Let's face it, people are going to act on the internet the way they want, and no one is controlling that, especially not teenagers on social media (Spring 2023).

Discussion

The findings from this study present implications regarding how students perceive leaders and followers, the relationship between the two, particularly in an online context, and what differentiates a true "follower" from a "fan". Though most of the respondents opine that influencers are not leaders, many believe that influencers should be held responsible for the actions and inaction of their fans/followers, which would point to a more traditional leadership role. Some see them as a "role model" that can be emulated and/or imitated through online platforms. As such, influencers should maintain high ethical standards to sustain the followers'/fans' trust. On the other hand, followers should be morally strong and work to do the right thing when working with a leader/influencer, particularly by abstaining from hateful speech or comments, and other challenges posed by the leader/influencer (Chaleff, 1995, 2008; Northouse, 2022). Influencers as role models also bear the moral responsibility to promote positive behavior and values, especially with the digital content they create. This will enhance the shared accountability of leaders and followers in creating an online environment that promotes ethical behavior, which harkens back to the "relational continuum" Gilani *et al.* (2018) noted in their research involving the shifting and "fluid" nature of social media influencers-leaders (SMLs) and their followers (SMFs). Understanding the moral dimension of influencers/leaders and followers can shape followers' behaviors and contributions toward group goals.

Additionally, this study offers insights that connect to existing followership typologies, such as Kellerman (2008) and Kelley (1992). What was shared by our students provided insights for understanding the evolving dynamics of followership in the digital age where influencers are presumably in leadership roles by having a large following. Thus, justifying the need to adapt and expand existing followership typologies to capture the unique traits

possessed by social media influencers within online communities is needed. This can be incorporated into lesson plans by educators to promote students' understanding of their roles as followers and leaders in the context of online influencers. It could also provide insight into the development of "digital age" or "social media" followership typologies that consider and include the roles of followers/leaders in the context of social media. Further, while these findings may not come as a surprise to readers, our study was an attempt to open the door to philosophical discussions and related scholarship to leadership and followership that go beyond traditional models and approaches. It provided insight into the vitality of promoting student knowledge to recognize leadership and followership in diverse contexts, especially in the case of social media.

Conclusion and recommendations

As our world becomes more digitally connected through social media, educators must recognize how young people, especially college students, perceive the individuals they follow on various social media platforms, and how that, in turn, shapes their understanding of both leadership and followership. Influencers have gained widespread recognition in recent years for their role in shaping consumer behavior (Cheng, Hung-Baesecke, & Chen, 2021). According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022, four out of ten social media users indicated they follow influencers or similarly defined "content creators", 72% of 18–29-year-old social media users follow influencers and three in ten adult social media users mentioned they bought something after seeing an influencer post about it via their social media platform (Faverio & Anderson, 2022). While much of the literature on social media influencers and their followers point to the world of consumer decision-making, advertising, and marketing, there appears to be a gap in knowledge about how this phenomenon is perceived by young people, particularly college-age students, in a leadership/followership context. Based on the findings from the study, we present the following recommendations to leadership and followership educators:

Digital citizenship

Given the rise of social media influencers and their ability to shape behavior, students should be educated on the role social media plays in leadership and followership discourse and how they use their leadership knowledge to become digital citizens. Consider creating a module in an existing class on leadership, followership, and social media as a starting point. The main objective would be to encourage students to think about how social media shapes how we see the world and how to respond to the pressing issues facing our growingly connected world. Given the ethical dilemma presented in the *New York Times* article, educators should provide space for students to learn how to be courageous followers (Chaleff, 1995) online and reflect on ways to speak out against content that could be perceived as harmful toward a particular group of people.

Unpacking terminology: social media "Influencers"

Educators should consider facilitating discussions about who social media influencers are and the role they play in society. The literature suggests they are important figures when it comes to influencing consumer behavior, but why exactly do students follow these individuals and what does that mean for their understanding of leadership? If, as one study suggests, influencers attract followers based on their attractiveness and likability, shouldn't there be questions raised about what that means for how they perceive leaders in general? One would think history is repeating itself with older theories such as The Great Man Theory or early studies about the physical traits such as height among leaders (Gibb, 1947) showing up in a new form. If influencers are labeled as "public figures" on social media as the literature suggests, students should be allowed to form their own opinions, operationalize a definition for SMLs and engage

in constructive dialogue with their classmates about the implications of their influence on and offline. Our findings suggest there is a difference between being an influencer and being a leader, and while this may seem obvious to those in an educator role, it may not always be the case for our students, who spend more time online than previous generations (Twenge, 2023).

Unpacking terminology: social media followers
Similarly, to unpacking influencers and their implications for leadership, educators should also plan to hold classroom discussions and operationalize what it means to be a follower in both online and offline contexts. The term "follower" is loosely used in the digital realm to indicate a literal following of an influencer based on the content they create or views/opinions they hold, but does that same meaning translate to offline contexts? Does simply following someone based on their digital content warrant the labeling of a follower as we see in the literature? We posit that the existing typologies, especially those outlined by Kelley (1992, 2008) and Kellerman (2008) would counter this assumption. This is further supported by our findings which suggest students perceive online followers as more like "fans" than actual followers in the leadership process, which has implications for the use of these terms more broadly. For instance, what specific actions would it take for a fan to be more of a follower on social media; to move from being more passive to active as our findings suggest? If we are to use "followers" when discussing social media and the role of influencers, time spent unpacking and explicitly having students operationalize the difference between simply liking or consuming an influencer's content (fans) rather than directly working with them and carrying out a specific goal (followers) will be critical.

Foundational course conversations through case studies
The use of case studies ranks high among the most frequently used instructional strategies by leadership instructors (Jenkins, 2016), however, the case study of the TikTok influencer Chris (@Donelij) steered foundational, course-appropriate conversations about leadership and followership in the contemporary world by highlighting the ethical dilemmas that arise in social media spaces. This case study challenged students to examine influencers' and followers' responsibilities when navigating controversial content. It also illustrates the shifting power dynamics, where the influencer's content and followers' reactions can drive online behaviors. Consider creating your own case study or utilizing a current event news article to illustrate a similar phenomenon about the degree of responsibility influencers have over what their followers say or do with the content they create. Such activities and conversations can help students develop their sense of moral reasoning and ability to practice leadership skills and apply concepts online.

Future research directions
This research will benefit the readership of JOLE as it offers fresh insights into the dynamics of leader-follower relationships in the context of social media. The case provided in this study offered a practical example of how leadership educators can enrich their curriculum and foster important discussions on how leadership education can adapt to serving a generation of students navigating a vastly different world than previous cohorts. Additionally, readers can gain a better understanding of the fluid-nature of power dynamics between SMLs and followers in the digital age.

Furthermore, future projects could look at persons seen as leaders outside of social media and how their leadership (online or offline) has caused them to become "influencers" on social media. Other research could explore (more concretely) what it means to be more of an active follower on social media as opposed to a passive fan. What (if any) specific actions or behaviors constitute an active follower online? In sum, this research project opened more questions than it provided answers, and we hope to explore some of these lines of inquiry in the future.

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