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Crisis

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Social Influencers: FOMO and Identity Crisis

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Abstract

In today's society, people desire to share their world with others from behind a screen. We follow social influencers and tend to conform our thoughts and beliefs to align with what we see on social media. Through our virtual window, we find comfort in knowing we are not missing out on life by keeping up with the trends of influencers. We sacrifice our unique character and individual self when we imitate others. The good news is that we don't have to conform to the identity and beliefs of others; we can maintain our own uniqueness by being diligent about what we see online and taking simple steps to maintain our individual identity.

On a cold, blustery day you and a friend are visiting the Auschwitz Museum, a site where over one million people lost their lives just decades before. People who were mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and friends; individuals who laughed, cried, and once enjoyed the fresh air and freedom around them, just as you are doing today.

Looking down you see railroad tracks; they are just as drab and gloomy as the day surrounding you. The wind picks up as tears form in your eyes. You reach into your pocket, searching with urgency. You find what you were looking for. You pull your cell phone out of your pocket and ask your friend to snap a picture of you. A snapshot of you, walking on the railroad tracks. Walking as though the tracks are simply a balance beam, rather than the same tracks that led hundreds of thousands of innocent people to their last breath of fresh air. You recall that a popular YouTuber that you follow for skin care regimens posted images of herself walking on railroad tracks outside of Auschwitz last year, and you have a strong desire to also share this moment in your life. Your photo is promptly posted to Instagram with

the caption "Spending the day at the Auschwitz Memorial, remembering the lives that were lost." You posted this on a whim, out of your desire to broadcast your empathy to the world, as you have seen someone popular do before. What you failed to realize is the actual lack of empathy you demonstrated in creating a post you hope will go viral from a place that silently holds a tremendous amount of pain and loss of life.

Auschwitz Memorial's take on photo opportunists

The Auschwitz Museum is not the only place social media influencers and their followers deem worthy of photo opportunities. Imagine participating in the dangerous trend of hanging out of a moving train in Sri Lanka while kissing your significant other or licking a stack of taco shells while working at Taco Bell (and losing your job for it) just because others are doing the same.

As a society, we have normalized communicating with one another in ways that do not involve direct face-to-face interactions. We are willing to accept the perceptions and judgments of others as a reliable source (Deutsch and Gerard 635). Rather than in-person relationships, we long to connect through filters, often by posting photos and videos on social media platforms. Not only do we desire to share the parts of our lives that make us stand out, but we allow social influencers to inspire our decisions and cultivate our sense of belonging to society.

The desire to share our lives with the world to avoid that feeling of missing out has led to a growing crisis of identity as people look to social influencers as models to imitate; this allows the normalization of following the influencer, rather than considering our own individuality, our own values, and our own character. The good news is there are steps we can take to find our way back to focusing on our individual identity. A few of these steps include finding reliable sources of information and being vigilant about time spent following others versus time spent focusing on our individuality.

Social Influencers and FOMO

One reason people strive to influence others is that influencing others is visible, it is something that can be measured based on the number of

followers or likes on a post (Beck). Another motivation is the strong desire to be liked, also known as being popular (Dominguez). The behaviors people will exhibit just to fit in are varied and surprising!

These behaviors and actions shared on social media, whether to influence or merely to be liked, are not limited to social influencers. Many social media users experience what is known as the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which is what connects the average person to the social influencer. FOMO is associated with higher levels of behavioral engagement with social media (Przyblyski 1847). The average person, who will be referred to as Average Sam, has FOMO about what is popular and trending on social media. Average Sam's FOMO allows them to be influenced by what popular people, aka social influencers, are doing. This influence allows them to focus on identifying and connecting with people through others' activities and interests, regardless of their own individuality and what makes them unique.

Participating in the dangerous trend of kissing while hanging out of a moving train

The term "social influencer" brings to mind other terms such as "creator," "trend setter," "instigator," "blogger," "popular," "social media," or "admired." Regardless of terms, public relations expert Angeles Moreno and her colleagues define influencers as active social media users who are "opinion leaders who can use their online platforms to diffuse information and affect the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences" (246). Social influencers can affect the lifestyle and buying behaviors of their followers; this phenomenon is described as social contagion, "the spread of belief, affect, or behavior where people influence one another" (Sijm et al. 131). *Forbes Magazine* characterized a social media influencer as someone who utilizes their platform to persuade and influence their audience of many followers on social media (Kirwan).

From the definitions given of a social influencer, a common theme emerges. A social influencer has a social platform and is trusted by others. Also, although the term *many* was used to classify a social influencer, this term is nonquantifiable. Monetary examples provide context to such nonquantifiable words that describe the audience of a social influencer. CNBC determined the number of social media followers an influencer needs to make $100,000 per year. On YouTube, an influencer needs at least 1,000

subscribers and 24 million annual views to earn $100K. On Instagram, one needs 5,000 followers and a minimum of 308 sponsored posts per year (Scipioni). TikTok, which grew 800% from January 2019 through June 2020, would earn an influencer $100,000 annually with 10,000 subscribers and over 270 million visits a year (Scipioni). This context provides some perspective on how the term *many* is defined within society.

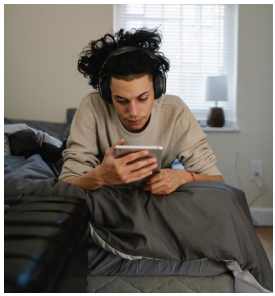
Social influencers tend to nudge the thoughts, opinions, and mindset of others in a certain direction through a simple online post. Economist Richard Thaler and law professor Cass Sunstein define a "nudge," whether purposeful or not, as "the choice architecture that alters people's behaviors in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" (6).

Someone scrolling through social media may be nudged into forming an opinion or mindset to avoid missing out on something (*The Social Dilemma*). When a person feels they are missing out on something, they feel unpopular (Alutaybi et al). Feelings of unpopularity cause the body to release an internal, inflammatory response as though preparing for an attack (Dominguez). What started out as a simple nudge might set off a defense mechanism to avoid feelings associated with missing out.

Many social media users experience what is known as the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).

When individuals are already concerned that they are missing out, their distress might be increased by seeing what they are missing out on via social media (Barry and Wong 2952-2953). This distress can cause people to do things to avoid missing out on the fun others are having (Zaske). To avoid being left out, someone might choose to watch a new TV show or movie, check out the newest restaurant in town, or buy products regardless of their level of interest. Then, individuals might give in to the temptation to post a photo on their own social media to show they are not missing out because they tried the new restaurant or product. Individuals with higher levels of self-compassion and a gentler self-appraisal are likely to experience less distress over other's activities (Barry and Wong 2963). The fascinating aspect of avoiding FOMO is its cyclical nature. The defense mechanisms may have dissipated for the moment, however, individuals who substitute face-to-face connections for social media connections increase their sense of loneliness, which adds to FOMO (Dossey 69).

When a user posts something on social media, the number of "likes" collected on the post increases dopamine, which is a chemical from the brain associated with rewards and pleasure (Sinek 53). Feelings of missing out tend to grow when the number of followers on social media is smaller than expected or when the *like* count does not climb as quickly as anticipated after a social media post goes up. The desire to check one's phone on a regular basis to avoid FOMO is an addiction (Edmonds). The 2019 movie *The Social Dilemma* highlighted how the younger generations have difficulty developing their own opinions, largely due to their inability to put smartphones away and live an unfiltered life (Stanley).



Avoiding FOMO

FOMO is not fueled only by feelings of unpopularity, it also includes feelings or perceptions that others are having more fun, living better lives, or experiencing more than we are (Scott). FOMO is "the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feelings that you're missing out—that your peers are doing, or are in possession of, more or something better than you" (Thompson). But FOMO goes beyond an "uneasy" feeling; it can take the form of actual fear, "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al. 1841). Facebook advertising consultant Carly Stringer describes social influencers as walking, talking FOMO machines!

Why We Want to Keep Up With the Kardashians

People who follow influencers naturally want to imitate them because they enjoy their content and products (Morgan). When they follow celebrities, seeing their social media posts helps the viewer to feel closer to the celebrity, almost as though the celebrity is communicating directly to the viewer (Caulfield, "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies").

Christiano Ronaldo, a professional football player for a premiere league club at Manchester United, was the most followed person on Instagram as of March 2021 with 254 million followers (Jankowski). As of November 2021, Ronaldo's followers had grown to 365 million followers. Ronaldo's large fan base is mainly the result of his status as a professional soccer player. In June of 2021 during a press conference, Ronaldo pushed two bottles of Coca-Cola away from him in favor of water, which encouraged viewers to drink water rather than sugary drinks. This single move coincided with Coca-Cola's stock

taking a $4 billion-dollar dive (Garcia). Although Ronaldo did not set out to be an influencer, this example demonstrates the significant power of influence he may have on others.

Remember Average Sam from earlier? Well, Average Sam follows numerous influencers online, sees how many followers they have and wants to live a similar lifestyle, so, what does Sam do? Average Sam follows the influencers' leads on what to buy, what to eat, what content to post on social media, and where to go; Sam posts about their own experiences to eliminate FOMO. By sharing experiences, Sam feels like a part of the social influencer's world.

Twitter was introduced in 2006, with Instagram following in 2010. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* made its debut in 2007, right in between the two. Author for *CR Fashion Book* Michelle Lee suggests the Kardashians were the prototype for today's social influencers. The Kardashians can still be viewed as a prime example of intentional influencing. A glance at their social media accounts shows their elaborate vacations and fashion sense. Although none of the Kardashian/Jenner sisters have as many followers as Ronaldo on Instagram, Kylie's 334 million and Kim's 308 million support the idea that the family has a heavy influence on others.

As social media has grown, so has the information shared by social influencers with their viewers.

Many people today look to social influencers as all-knowing sources when it comes to products they should try, trends to follow, or opinions to adopt as socially acceptable facts. As social media has grown, so has the information shared by social influencers with their viewers. In turn, these viewers immerse themselves in that information, studying, scrutinizing, judging, and formulating opinions based on the content selected by the viewer.

It is natural for people to compare their lives to others, often doing so through a virtual window (Birla). From this virtual window, one quietly observes well-known social influencers. These glimpses into the lives of others validate the idea that identity lies in being part of an elite social circle, which enhances FOMO. While influencers such as the Kardashians send the Average Sams into crisis mode of experiencing FOMO, it might come as a surprise to learn that even famous celebrities, who are often FOMO creators, are not exempt from FOMO. In the image following, four of the five Kardashian/Jenner sisters posted an image together at the

No exemption from FOMO

Cheesecake Factory in which Kendall, the sister not in the picture, commented "FOMO" upon seeing the image on Instagram.

While I was writing this article, students in one of my classes discussed trends they wanted to try based exclusively on videos they had seen on TikTok. When asked why they were interested in trying something new they saw on TikTok, the answer was *it just looked like fun*. I was shocked by this real-life example of seeing something featured by an influencer and wanting to try it for no reason other than that it *looks like fun*—and if they don't try it, they are missing out on the fun.

An example closer to home of the impact influencers have on us is my own daughter. Last year for Halloween, she wanted to dress up as Jeremy Camp's late wife, Melissa Camp. Jeremy Camp is a Christian singer/songwriter and someone my daughter sees as a leader and role model. After seeing the movie *I Still Believe* for the first time, my daughter said it changed her life and moved her to strengthen her faith. I happily agreed to assist her in the search for clothes that paralleled various clothing items Melissa had worn in the movie. The outfit was completed with a necklace that looked almost identical to the one Melissa had worn in the movie. I only wish you could see it in the image of her here.

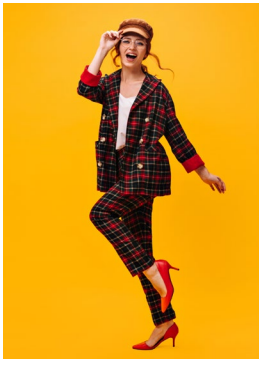
My daughter dressed as Melissa Camp

Fast forward one year and my daughter expressed interest in dressing up as someone unfamiliar to me, named Txunamy. When I questioned who this person was, her casual response was "she is a YouTuber," said in such a way that implied I should already know this person. Thanks to social media, I was quickly able to find Txunamy's Instagram page. Txunamy includes *"Kill em with kindness"* at the top of her Instagram page, a message relatable to the values I teach my daughter on the importance of being kind to others. However, her parent-monitored account did not look like an account I would allow my daughter to have. Wearing crop tops, short skirts and posing for that many photos are not things my daughter needs to be engaged in at a young age.

When I asked my daughter why she chose Txunamy, she first said, "I don't know," in contrast to her reasons for choosing to dress as Melissa Camp, who inspired my daughter to want to be a better person in the world. From reading books and watching the movie *I Still Believe*, my daughter was inspired to be like Melissa Camp based on what she had learned about her. My daughter was influenced by Txunamy's YouTube videos touring her bedroom, playing with fidget toys, and driving 300 miles to surprise her best friend on her birthday. She saw a life that looked like fun. Although my daughter could not provide a specific answer as to why she wanted to dress up as Txunamy, it is likely she was influenced by seeing a fun lifestyle and felt as though dressing up as Txunamy would ensure she would not experience FOMO.

Another potential reason my daughter wanted to dress as Txunamy was that she identified with Txunamy's fidget toy video or liked the idea that she, too, has a brother. These possible motivations, and others, were identified by Bradley Hoos, chief growth officer at The Outland Group, an influencer marketing agency, as key reasons people follow social influencers:

1. To conform to cultural norms;
2. The belief that one has power and control over their choices;
3. To gain a personal connection with someone we identify as relatable to us.



Fashion style influenced by Clueless

The first key reason people follow social influencers is to *conform to cultural norms*. The social influencer culture has become intricately woven into everyday life through daily online platforms. People rely on social media for the latest cultural trends (Mustafa). When one fears they are missing out, they are willing to follow the cultural norms portrayed on social media to avoid that feeling of not being a part of the crowd. An example of this is the 1995 movie *Clueless*. Over 20 years after the movie was released, fashion trends introduced in that movie could still be seen as cultural fashion norms, including mini backpacks, cropped tees, stretch chokers, and flannel shirts (Kim). Although the movie was introduced before the social media boom, clearly people have long looked to others as a source of influence on what trends to follow.

Conforming to societal norms to avoid FOMO allows identity and character to be influenced by others, rather than allowing it to be an extension of who and what a person is. "Once our choices become part of our identity, it's easy to find information that confirms our views" (Caulfield, "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies").

We long to fit in and have a place in society to avoid FOMO

People also follow social influencers due to the *belief that one has power and control over their choices*. Those who want to fit in will conform to what appears normal and popular, which contradicts having power and control over their own choices. One study found 23.3% of social media users believed others were trying to affect their opinions via social media (Malinen and Koivula). In comparison, 82% reported they trust social networking sites to influence their purchasing decisions ("20 Surprising Influencer Marketing Statistics")

Finally, people follow social influencers because of their desire to *gain a personal connection to someone they identity as relatable*. As humans, we crave connections and relationships with others. We long to fit in and have a place in society to avoid FOMO. From this yearning, many find ways to justify decisions based on what the influencers are displaying.

When individuals permit influencers to be their definitive source of products to try, trends to follow, and opinions to adopt, they are allowing others (essentially strangers) to exert excessive influence over their identity. In giving influencers this power, people are constructing identities in their influencer's image via a virtual window to prevent FOMO and ignore—or at least suppress—the individuality of their identity.

Crisis, Character, and Influence

The growing trend of social influencers is no secret to society. Society is growing more tolerant of supporting trends and opinions presented by influencers. Attempts to stay connected on social media has users averaging 2.5 hours per day on social media platforms ("Global Social Media Stats")—browsing influencers' profiles for updates on the latest trends and creating posts to share glimpses of their lives, often fabricated, to ensure the world knows that they are not missing out on life.

When my son was born, he was given a green blanket with a smiling brown monkey positioned in the middle of the fabric. Over the first year or so of his life, this blanket was something he gravitated toward, and it became his beloved "Blankie." Blankie went on many adventures with him, including car rides, outings, overnights with grandparents, and even made its way to the beach in Florida and the Mall of America. Imagine the images that could be shared if Blankie had a social media account! Blankie has been re-sewn and patched up many times. The monkey that was once vibrantly positioned in the middle of the blanket was transformed, thanks to his babysitter and a sewing machine, into a football, basketball, and now finally, a turtle.

My son and Blankie

You might be wondering, what does a blanket have to do with identity and character and, better yet, FOMO? Identity defines who and what a person is that makes them unique and different from others. Character is determined by the moral qualities a person wants to portray. In a way, identity and character are like that blanket. When God creates an individual, their character is like a fresh blanket, ready to be transformed and shaped by the world around them. The values learned at a young age from the surrounding environment allow identity and character to further develop and transform.

A large part of being an adolescent is learning about identity, which shapes one's character. When social media dominates an adolescent experience, the consequences of this domination can be severe (Stanley). As time moves on, identity, and in turn character, are influenced and sculpted by the surrounding environment and experiences. Environment consists of the people adolescents spend time with, even those they silently observe from a social media window. When they make decisions based on FOMO, this contributes to the crisis of allowing their identity and character to conform to what society deems popular and trendy. Experimental psychologist Andrew Przybylski and associates found adolescents who scored high in FOMO were more likely to spend time on social media in times when they should be focused on something more important, such as learning during a university lecture or driving (1847); that second finding is scary for those of us on the road with them!

A person's identity defines who and what they are that makes them unique and different from others. When people become so immersed in the lives of others via social media, they are creating an illusion of a relationship with that celebrity that does not exist. People looking in on the influencer's life feel as though they have a relationship with the influencer, but the relationship is only one-sided (Golbeck). By creating the idea of a relationship that is fake, the person conforms their identity to fit an illusion.

A person's identity defines who and what they are that makes them unique.

In 2019, psychologist Mike Brooks reported the typical American spent 1,460 hours per year on their smartphone. By the end for 2021, the average amount of time a user spends online grew to 6 hours and 58 minutes. Per day! Datareportal indicated that, of all the time people spend on their devices each day, 2 hours and 27 minutes are dedicated to social media ("Global Social Media Stats"). That is a lot of time spent daily on living out (and forming) one's identity and character through a filter! While some of the time on social media may be spent sharing one's own posts or connecting with family and friends, most of that time is more likely spent scrolling through news feeds. News feeds are regularly filled with content posted by influencers and ads, often sponsored by businesses and organizations that are not even being followed by the user. This contributes to the crisis of identity and character; the more time they spend on social media, the more people are likely to be impacted by social influencers, even by those influencers they are not actively interested in.

Character shaping and influence can happen right through the screen. Fyre Festival of 2017 is an example of how people were influenced to conform their identity and character to fit in with the trends of the time. 63 of the most well-known influencers in the world at the time promoted the event on their social media accounts (Kubbernus). The hype of this event spread like wildfire once influencers became involved. People were willing to pay up to $100,000 for a ticket to this private island event that was said to include all you can eat and drink, private jets, extravagant villas, and parties with celebrities.

The Netflix documentary, *FYRE: The Greatest Party that Never Happened*, exposed the absence of an infrastructure for successful implementation of this event, along with a lack of staff, shelter, and food needed to

accommodate the number of tickets sold. People had trusted social influencers' integrity enough to buy tickets without checking the credibility of this event, though it was clearly too good to be true. Attendees put logical thinking aside and apparently focused on how the event would impact their identify and sense of belonging.

Making choices based on what we perceive as popular leads us to conform to societal norms, whether helpful or harmful, rather than embracing our individuality or choosing what is right and good. This is not the best way forward.

Fyre Festival's disappointing fare

A Way Forward

When someone follows an influencer, their choices and decisions are affected by the influencer and those choices become part of their identity (Caulfield, "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies"). But "God doesn't Photoshop the before picture or use a filter to make it look glamorous and Instagram-worthy. He is in the business of transforming our heart and our character through the waiting" (Narjala). With social influencers and FOMO likely here for the long haul, there are small adjustments people can make to shift their focus away from looking to influencers to avoid FOMO and to individual identity and character:

1. Consider the source of information;
2. Monitor screen time;
3. Think of one's identity on the other side of the social media filter.

The first adjustment to shift focus from social influencers to one's own identity and character is to *consider the source of information*. People can start by realizing the stories shared on social media by influencers are not always the real story (Thompson). The photo or video we are watching might have taken 10 attempts before the final product was ready to post. People often look to social influencers as the all-knowing source when it comes to products to try, places to visit, or trends to follow. Before buying the product, booking the flight, or jumping on the bandwagon to follow a

new trend, a person can do their own research. This research can include investigating products, reading reviews, or spending time on a company's website to learn more about their values and beliefs.

People can read and learn about influencers they feel a connection to and explore the influencer's values and beliefs to determine if they align with their own values and beliefs. If a person finds an influencer's values do align with their own, there is little harm in following the influencer's lead, within reason. The important point is to stay true to your own identity and moral compass, rather than becoming a generic version of the influencer.

Second, *monitor screen time*. Newer smartphones and electronics can track the number of minutes spent on the device along with the amount of time spent on each app on the device. In the book *The Happiness Advantage,* Shawn Achor points out that if people set rules when trying to change a habit, they are less likely to succumb in the moment when tempted to stray from the decided-upon changes (168). An alarm could be set for a certain number of minutes. Once the alarm goes off, it is important to put the device down and move on to something else to reinforce the change.

Another way to monitor screen time is to take social media breaks. The length of the break can vary: perhaps a day, a week, or even a month or longer. During that time, users should not allow themselves to check their social media accounts in any capacity. Instead, they can spend the time they would have spent on social media engaging in conversations with family and friends, reading a book, or taking time to enjoy nature by adding more exercise into their day. As author and law professor Timothy Caulfield states, "any effort to make our days less fragmented, frantic, and stress-reducing is worth considering" (*Your Day*, 232). By taking time away from social media to have conversations with others, or taking time to oneself, one's identity and character can be influenced by loved ones and oneself rather than by social media influencers.

One's identity and character can be influenced by loved ones and oneself rather than by social media influencers.

The third adjustment I recommend is to *think of one's identity on the other side of the social media filter*. The more a person bases their self-worth on their fundamental inner identity, the less pressure they place on external circumstances and other people (Oberg). Replacing negative thoughts about missing out on something with positive thoughts helps to reframe one's

thinking to focus on the present (Thompson). When did you last spend time by yourself, reflecting on your day, a recent choice you made, or an upcoming decision? What about the last time you wrote in a journal about whatever thoughts were on your mind? Or took time to truly pray or write down three things you are grateful for each morning? Taking time to yourself will allow you to reflect on your own identity and character.

These three adjustments are small steps. As the saying commonly attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. goes, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." While it may not be clear what life will be like on the top of the staircase where they have separated themselves from the influencer and FOMO, taking the first step is the way to begin the climb.

Final Thoughts

Our identity and character make us who we are. Subconsciously and consciously, our identity and character are at the core of every thought, action, and word we speak. Comparing our imperfections to the outside packaging of others is dangerous (TerKeurst 141). If we allow influencers on social media to consume our decisions and opinions to avoid FOMO, our minds will be focused on someone else's outside packaging, their identity and character and not ours. If we decide to focus first on formulating our own thoughts and opinions, we are putting our identity and character before FOMO, which allows us to have our individuality, values, and character at the heart of our identity.

I don't know about you, but I don't want others to remember me as someone who conformed to the influences of others. I want others to remember me as someone who was true to myself, someone who did not try to Keep Up with the Kardashians, but rather someone who made them want to be a better version of themselves.

Molly Hein is an Assistant Professor of Business at University of Dubuque. She has an EdD in Educational Leadership from University of Phoenix, an MS in Sport Management from Western Illinois University, and a BA in Physical Education from Loras College. Although her career path led several ways at first, her passion has always been in education. Molly is grateful her path led to her current role at University of Dubuque.

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