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произлезени од борбата за видливост и потрагата по популарност**

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Instagram Engagement Pods:

**The motivation to join a subculture born as a result of the struggle for
visibility and pursuit of popularity**

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore what motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods. Pods are secret groups that aim to outsmart Instagram's algorithm so users can gain more visibility on the platform by increasing interactions on their posts. Existing research oversimplifies the motivation of users to join pods by frequently labelling them as influencers, who want to increase their engagement rate to grow their popularity and income. This research was based on a review of relevant literature and a questionnaire sent to 10 Instagram users who participate in pods to gain insights on their motivations, experiences, and attitudes towards pods. The findings from this research show that besides looking to increase their engagement rate, followers, and influence, some users also join pods from curiosity and for vanity reasons, as well as in search of social support and collaboration, and not necessarily income and popularity. This thesis also proposes ways to conduct more representative research through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a bigger sample.

Keywords: Instagram engagement pods, influencers, algorithm, engagement rate, brand

INTRODUCTION

Background

During the second decade of the 21st century, Instagram grew into a social media network that redefined what it meant for people to have an online presence. Back in June 2018, Instagram became “a global community of one billion” users, officially making the app one of the most populated social media platforms on the internet at the time (Instagram, 2018). In less than a decade, Instagram outgrew its status as a photo-sharing application, which was made official in June 2021, when the Head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri, posted a video announcement where he stated that Instagram was no longer just a square photo-sharing application, but a platform currently focusing on “four key areas” which are Creators, Video, Shopping and Messaging (Mosseri, 2021).

Instagram’s growing popularity significantly boosted the status of its most-followed users, which became known as influencers. Influencers are regular Internet users who accumulate a large following on social media by posting visual and textual content which is usually a “narration of their personal lives and lifestyles” and who “monetise their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts” (Abidin, 2015). They are people who are regarded as “trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” due to their large network of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). As such, influencers are regarded as “opinion leaders” and are very attractive to brands because regular users, who are potential customers for brands online, see influencers as “personal, authentic, credible, and down-to-earth sources of information”, regardless of whether the influencer is a micro-influencer (up to 10,000 followers), a meso-influencer (up to one million followers), or a macro-influencer (over one million followers) (Harrigan et al., 2021). From these definitions, it can be deduced that regular users are the rest of the population on social media whose following is significantly smaller and who do not use their social media presence to earn money.

As Instagram continued getting more features and attracting many users, it became obvious that its owners were looking to greatly capitalize on its popularity. In fact, when Instagram announced its new algorithm in the spring of 2016, promotion became the number one buzzword on the application as it emphasized the importance of staying visible in this overcrowded space. Algorithms are “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on

specified calculations” and they manage users’ interactions on social networking sites. They govern the flows of information and play an increasingly important role in selecting what information is considered most relevant to users from a “corpus of data composed of traces of our activities, preferences, and expressions” (Gillespie, 2014).

When Instagram announced that they were focusing on optimizing the order back in 2016, it meant that they had reprogrammed the algorithm (Cooper, 2021). The most obvious change that resulted from this was the replacement of Instagram’s traditional reverse chronological order of showing posts with a new order where users see first the posts that the platform believes they are most likely to interact with (Instagram, 2016). For users, this meant that visibility of their content was no longer guaranteed as their posts would only be shown to a portion of their followers who, according to the algorithm, would be most likely to be interested in their posts based on their activity on the platform. Users, especially influencers who built their careers on Instagram and whose main income came from the paid content they created for brands, were the first ones who started feeling the negative effect of the changed algorithm as it transformed Instagram into an “unwelcoming platform” for them (Corr, 2021). After the algorithm change in 2016, influencers who made money from their posts on Instagram had to focus on creating content that would generate high engagement in order to reach bigger audiences (Abnett, 2016).

Engagement in the social media landscape, notably Instagram, is synonymous with interactions. Actions such as post likes, reactions, shares, views, and comments are all classified as interactions (Newman, 2019). Given the difficulty to measure the impact of social media marketing campaigns as well as “calculating such campaigns’ return on investment”, marketers who work for brands and who engage in influencer marketing typically “measure the rate at which users engage with their posts” (Jaakonmäki, Müller and vom Brocke, 2017:1152). Engagement rate is a formula that calculates how much a user’s audience is interacting with their content and it is an important metric for brands when choosing to work with influencers on the platform.

Engagement rate has become the new online currency and the reasons are multifold. It’s not just that high engagement rates serve as a signal that the influencer has a responsive and high-quality audience, which is important from the marketer’s perspective. (Schröder, 2019b)

A lower engagement rate means that fewer people saw a user's post. For influencers who get paid by brands or companies to promote products or services, a lower engagement rate equals lower pay rates per post. As a result, users who want to get paid well and remain relevant as influencers on the platform must focus both on growing their following and maintaining their followers engaged at all times. In fact, influencer marketing is a practice based on the belief that "influencers can impact their followers' beliefs and practices so long as they can captivate and maintain their attention" (Hearn, 2010; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015, as cited in Cotter 2018:3). However, given the nature of the Instagram algorithm, achieving this can be hard even for influencers with a massive following.

As a result, influencers focused on learning how "the algorithms that govern visibility on social media" work by analysing what types of platform activity increase their content's visibility and produce more engagement with their posts (Cotter 2018:3). Following this turn of events, a lot of theories emerged about how the Instagram algorithm worked. One of the most popularly held beliefs is that posts that get a significant number of likes and comments within the first hour of posting have a bigger chance of appearing to more followers and even making it to Instagram's Explore tab – also known as the Search Tab – where the app features posts from all users. Therefore, increasing interactions such as comment counts in the first moments of posting boost a post's chances of earning more engagement (Saraco, 2021). In other words, the Instagram algorithm favours recently posted posts, and it boosts content that receives a lot of engagement within the first few hours of posting (Warren, 2021).

Research Focus

This thesis focuses on analysing Engagement Pods. In an attempt to trick the algorithm into showing their posts to a bigger audience, users who wanted to simultaneously boost their engagement rate and build their follower base came together and created engagement pods, which is a type of collective algorithm hacking. A guide on engagement pods written by social media experts Luca Castellani and Marco Mazzilli (2018), defines them as "private groups of Instagrammers" in which users "tell each other when they post and promise to like and comment on everyone else's posts in order to promote visibility" (Castellani and Mazzilli, 2018:7). Similarly, in an article for the Entrepreneur, contributing writer and Social Media Strategist Lesya Liu explains that:

Pods are groups of Instagrammers who get together to like and comment on each other's posts. It's pretty important for a new post to get likes and comments as fast as it can to demonstrate its worthiness of more exposure. If you have a group of people engaging with your post as soon as it goes up, you are giving a head start to each post. (Liu, 2019)

The term "pod" is derived from "the social organization of dolphins". Dolphins are known to come together in groups known as pods as a way to protect a weaker member. In fact, dolphins "have several reasons to join, besides that it is a learned behavior. Small dolphin species gather into multi-member pods as a way to compensate for their size when facing predators." (Castellani and Mazzilli, 2018:8). This way, dolphins manage to improve their survival rate in vast bodies of water which is very similar to how members in Instagram engagement pods help each other to survive and grow in the competitive world of brands and influencers on Instagram.

There are several terms and concepts which are specific to the "pod ecosystem": quantity of required interaction, type of required interaction, entry requirement, and special interest groups. Pod participants are required to make a certain number of interactions with the other members before dropping their own link. Also, pods can require different types of interactions. Some pods are focused on likes, comments, both likes and comments, or follows and saves. Some pods have entry requirements such as a "minimum follower count". These groups can also be specialized by interest such as fashion, food, travel, or they might be generic (Weerasinghe et al., 2020:1876).

Engagement pods were formed as a "less detectable way to manipulate engagement" on Instagram and their primary strength is the fact that they use actual users instead of fake profiles, bots, or third-party apps which are more easily detected by the Instagram algorithm as suspicious activity due to their automated nature. "Pods, which allow users to trade engagement in the form of comments, likes, and follows, are often run on encrypted messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram, but also appear in Facebook groups and in direct message groups on Instagram" (Goodwin et.al., 2020:10).

However, when we talk about engagement pods as observers, it is easy to conclude that all participants are "influencers" who decide to participate in engagement pods to increase their engagement, which, in return, can help them collaborate with brands. Brands in any industry are interested in calculatable social media metrics, including followers count and engagement rate.

Besides being able to target more specific audiences, one of the main reasons why marketing professionals for brands shifted “their budget from traditional to digital channels like social media is cost effectiveness” (Schröder, 2019a). To be seen as cost-effective, one campaign based on influencer marketing has to yield good results that are usually measured in the form of views, likes, comments, shares, saves, etc. Therefore, the higher the numbers, the more successful the campaign, and, in order to be selected by a brand, influencers must prove that their content receives interactions.

This thesis aims to look at engagement pods from a different perspective. Existing literature and research as well as online articles and blog posts on pods mainly focus on their effectiveness in inflating a participant’s engagement rate and follower numbers. However, there is a tendency to group pod participants under the same umbrella term “influencer” when in reality, a lot of the participants do not exhibit the commonly accepted qualities of an influencer. During her time as an engagement pod participant, this researcher observed that many of the pod members did not curate their feed in the typical influencer fashion, nor did they collaborate with brands or seek to build a social media career where a good deal of their income would come from the content they create on the platform. This researcher’s personal observations that were deduced from her time as a pod participant are discussed in more depth in the Internal Mechanisms of Engagement Pods part of this thesis.

The importance of exploring engagement pods from this perspective is fuelled by the need to document the changing nature of how people are starting to act on social media, with a focus on Instagram as one of the most popular platforms at the time of writing. This thesis classifies engagement pods as a subculture that was formed by Instagram users to fight against two types of pressure: one was the mounting pressure of building a cultural capital on a densely populated platform with the intent to elevate a user’s social status and power online; the other was the pressure of winning against the machinery – in this case, the algorithm – put into place to ensure that the mother company of Instagram, Facebook, is economically benefiting from its users’ struggle for visibility. Although engagement pods can be seen as a subculture born from the need for collaboration to rise above these pressures, it is also normalizing behaviours that would otherwise be considered of fraudulent nature. The word fraudulent is used to describe pods due to the fact that the parent company, Facebook, acted back in 2018 to suspend these groups in

their attempt “to stamp out such algorithm-gaming activity” (Hutchinson, 2018). This development lets us know that pods are acting outside the established rules and guidelines allowed on the very platform they are operating on.

Many of the participants in pods are not traditional influencers. However, the fact that Instagram users from different backgrounds are coming together to outsmart the algorithm and using unconventional tactics to increase their visibility and popularity, opens the space for a discussion about whether we are moving towards a future where such online behaviours will be embedded in the essence of our social media presence. That discussion should also aim to answer the question about what motivates people to engage in such behaviours if their income is not necessarily connected to their social media presence.

Research Aim and Research Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to gain an understanding of what motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods and offer a view of how effective this secretive subculture is in terms of helping its participants achieve the goals they had when they first joined. It will also provide a glimpse into the possible future of pods. The following research objectives have been identified as of paramount importance to achieve that aim:

1. Highlight the commonly accepted reasoning of what motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods based on existing information.
2. Identify the reasons Instagram users join engagement pods.
3. Explore how pods really function and analyse the experiences of pods participants.
4. Evaluate the efficacy of pods in the context of helping Instagram users reach their goals.
5. Formulate recommendations on how to improve the experiences in pods and how to conduct more representative research on engagement pods.

The listed objectives are necessarily linked, and they will answer specific sub-research questions that will become building blocks that will contribute to achieving the main aim of this thesis. The first objective will be covered in Part One: Literature Review and will aim to answer the question: “How has existing literature analysed Instagram users’ motivation to participate?” The second objective will provide background to the main reasons Instagram users join pods by looking at

the answers from the 10 respondents that participated in this research. The third objective will answer the question “How do pods function and are they effective in helping Instagram users reach their goals?” This is a very important point for this research because it will establish a basis of claims about whether or not pods are a practice that will continue well in the future and shape cultural values or if they are a jumping stone to the next tactic to fight the algorithm. The fourth objective will look at the overall outcome of this behaviour as seen through the eyes of the respondents and answer the research question: “Are participants committed to making pods work and follow the set rules?”. Lastly, the fifth objective will provide meaningful insight for future research by making recommendations based on the Literature Review and the collection and discussion of empirical data that contains the views of pods participants. It will give an effective answer to the question “Is there a future for pods and will they be normalized and accepted as an integral part of the Instagram culture?”

Internal Mechanisms of Engagement Pods

During her time as a pod participant, this researcher observed different types of behaviours in pods that were not aligned with the initial description of how pods work and what types of people participate in them. As someone who discovered engagement pods in 2017 and who participated in many pods, this researcher experienced these groups first-hand and was left with mixed impressions on the reasons why some users join them. For that reason, participant observation has been implemented as an additional data collecting tool. This part is based on the observations of this researcher who, as a former participant, cannot fully detach her personal views from the described observations.

For starters, this researcher found engagement pods while googling for resources on how to increase her engagement rate on Instagram. She too was a content creator who watched engagement on her Instagram drop to the point where people barely saw her posts. Her initial research was not aimed towards finding such groups because she did not even know they existed. Although by nature, pods are secret groups, some of them are discoverable through a Google search and have low barriers to entry (Weerasinghe et al. 2020:1874). This researcher found most of the Engagement pods she participated in through Facebook groups. Some were called “Instagram Followers Exchange” or “Instagram Growth – Engagement Pods” while others were not overtly promoting themselves as pods, but rather as support groups such as “Blog + Biz Babes”, “Boost your Blog”, “Digital Nomad Entrepreneurs”, “Grow Your Blog”, “The Blogging Squad”, “The Curated Chic”, “Boss Girl Bloggers”, and many more. These Facebook groups grew so exponentially that back in 2018 Facebook suspended 10 large groups “for helping hundreds of thousands of people trick Instagram’s algorithm into showing their posts to more people” (Kantrowitz, 2018).

Most of these groups brand themselves as support groups because it sounds a lot more ethical, and it empowers group members into thinking that they are part of this subculture that is essentially trying to fight against the algorithm. For example, the discourse that participants in women-exclusive engagement groups use include terms such as “women supporting women” and “women empowering women”. If a user identifies as a woman, it is very stimulating and inviting for them because they ultimately start viewing engagement pods as an opportunity to both gain visibility on social media and enter a community of people who actually care about

them achieving their goals. However, this researcher observed behaviours by fellow pod participants that were not in line with those expectations.

For starters, not every pod participant follows the rules. Each pod has different rules depending on what is the goal of the participants, or at least, the goal of the admin who created the group. Some rules that this researcher came across while participating in pods included: following all pod members, engaging with every single post of the other participants before dropping your link, commenting with at least four words - which does not include emojis because the algorithm boosts posts that have meaningful comments - saving posts, sharing a participant's giveaway on stories, etc.

A lot of times, pod members would simply drop their link without engaging with anyone. In these pods, there were users with a bigger follower base who did not want to follow users with a smaller number of followers. Some users even unfollowed the rest of the participants after a given period. Other users would only engage with posts briefly before they dropped their link, and they would not follow the rule of commenting with at least four words. This beat the purpose of boosting a post's engagement by commenting within the first few hours of posting. However, despite the lack of reciprocity between users that this researcher observed in some pods, these groups are still "effective tools for increasing users' Instagram popularity" which leads to a "significantly increased level of likely organic comment interaction on users' subsequent posts" (Weerasinghe et al. 2020:1874).

When researching engagement pods as an observer rather than as a participant, it is very easy to conclude that all participants in these pods have a clear goal and purpose for participating. It is easy to think of all of them as influencers trying to push their content out there to get validated for their creative or business skills and increase their income and possibility for new jobs or brand partnerships. However, as an insider, this researcher met users from a lot of different backgrounds and industries, and it was often hard for her to understand why those users would care about increasing their engagement rate.

In the pods this researcher participated in, some users were mothers whose main type of content were photos of their children. Some of these mothers were aiming to collaborate with brands for children and earn money from featuring products together with their children. In essence, this is what influencers do. However, there were also mothers who only shared photos of their children

without any obvious indicator that they were trying to attract brands or work as influencers. Another type of user that this researcher encountered in pods were pet lovers but did not sell pet food or pet supplies. Some of the users were avid selfie-takers, but they did not work in the beauty industry. Other users in these pods included people with stable jobs such as governmental employees, lawyers, nurses, fitness instructors, etc. These users did not promote a certain idea, and simply shared random photographs of their daily lives. There were users who were religious and who wrote entire captions devoted to their God, without having a call to action such as “join my religion”. Yet, they participated in these pods to get more followers, likes, and comments. All pod participants described above were regular users or people who, unlike influencers, did not monetize their social media presence.

The dominating population in these pods were still influencers or wannabe influencers, entrepreneurs, artists, and content creators. These influencers were inherently different from the regular users in these pods. The main difference was the type of content they would post. Influencers or wannabe influencers created content that aimed to promote something whether that was an idea that would position them as an opinion leader in their niche or a product or service by a brand or a company. These influencers had a very thought-out content plan that highlighted a certain goal, even if that goal was to simply be popular as a social media celebrity rather than a content creator labouring in a certain field.

As we have seen from the examples above, both regular users and influencers can be a part of pods. The different types of motivation to join a pod, especially viewed through the eyes of pod participants with different demographic and psychographic backgrounds, is an important topic to be researched, especially since such behaviours that were previously only correlated with social media influencers and celebrities, are now performed by the rest of the population online. In order to understand pod participants and explore their experiences in pods, direct input by different types of pod participants is required. This direct input will shed light on important questions about pods such as: are pods really support communities and a subculture that has established beliefs, norms, and values? Do participants feel close to the other pod members or is it all business? How do they feel about participating in a behaviour that is essentially banned by Facebook, and, in essence, labelled as a fraud? What are the views on the ethical implications of that behaviour?

PART ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This Literature Review examines published research as well as online articles and blogs on engagement pods and analyses the general understanding of how pods function, the overall representation of pods in the media, and the emerging social and cultural trends of this collective behaviour. Given that Instagram engagement pods started appearing after Instagram changed its algorithm in 2016 (Instagram, 2016), there is sufficient research exploring their efficiency in increasing participants' engagement. One noteworthy research is by Janith Weerasinghe et al. (2020) where the researchers trained machine learning models to detect Instagram posts that had gained interactions as a result of activity in Telegram-hosted Instagram pods. Their research showed that pods are “effective at increasing the organic interaction users receive” (Weerasinghe et al., 2020:1883).

A great deal of valuable data comes from blogs of companies that offer social media services such as Hootsuite, Tailwind, Later, Tribe Group, Willow, and AdvertiseMint to name a few. The writers of these articles and blog posts are people who work in the field of social media. Some of their job titles include social media managers, social media marketers, copywriters, content marketing managers, digital marketers, and even Instagram coaches who own businesses that help bloggers, influencers, and entrepreneurs monetize their following on the platform. These blog posts and articles sometimes end with a call to action. For example, back in 2018, Hootsuite Lead Copywriter Emma Brown wrote a blog article about her experience in trying out engagement pods and concluded her article with the following call to action: “Don’t feel like engagement pods are for you or your brand after reading this? We’ve got lots of content to help you organically build your following on Instagram—from simple ways to get more Instagram followers to quick tips to up your Instagram game” (Brown, 2018).

The importance of highlighting the existence of calls to action in some of these main sources of information on pods is to point out the possible bias in the conclusions of these blog posts and articles as many of these companies write these texts with the intent to promote their products and services. Existing bias and their seller agenda might be one of the reasons why existing articles and blog posts on pods mainly focus on the nature and efficiency of pods. Going back to the Hootsuite blog post, Brown (2018) admitted that engagement pods were effective in increasing engagement on the platform, however she also identified many “pitfalls” that can

damage a participant's personal brand as well as reasons why participants should not use them. She wrote that engagement pods are time-consuming and produce results that not only look suspicious to audiences but are also "meaningless". More importantly, Brown noted that participants might need to comment and like on content that is irrelevant to their brand and highlighted the fact that influencers using engagement pods to "artificially" inflate their engagement is "probably fraud, similar to buying followers or likes" (Brown, 2018).

Similarly, a big number of online articles and blog posts written on the topic of pods by people working in social media such as Kristen Dahlin (2020), Alex Tooby (2017), Anne Felicitas (2020), Kaley Hart (2019), and Doug Neale (2019), focus on the nature, types, benefits, and drawbacks of pods. Online articles on pods by popular news sites such as the Entrepreneur (Liu, 2019; Boitnott, 2020), also discuss pods and their efficacy and compare pods and organic engagement growth strategies. However, there is not enough research on the motivation of participants from different demographic and psychographic backgrounds to join engagement pods. There is also an absence of discussion about who are the users that enter pods. When they are not simply labelled as Instagram users, pod participants are frequently described as "influencers" in these texts. For example, in an article for Wired on the existing rhetoric that surrounds the different tactics to manipulate the social media algorithms, Emma Grey Ellis (2019) makes a reference to engagement pods when arguing that platforms consider different activities as gaming the algorithm, including "influencers agreeing to join "engagement pods" to like and comment on each others' posts".

In her article "Instagram Pods: Can Engagement Pods Beat the Algorithm?", Tailwind Content Marketing Manager Kristen Dahlin (2020) goes into detail about the nature of these groups and shares experiments her company had conducted by participating in pods. However, she never comments on the types of people participating in these pods and only notes that "Instagram pods began to appear among influencers as early as 2016, as a result of the algorithm change". These types of descriptions misinform readers that pods only consist of influencers. By labelling pods participants as influencers, it detaches them from the rest of the Instagram population by putting them in a group that is often perceived as different from the regular user because of the perceived power they have to influence the behaviours of the rest of the users on the platform.

Victoria O'Meara (2019:2) takes a slightly different approach in labelling pod participants in her article "Weapons of the Chic: Instagram Influencer Engagement Pods as Practices of Resistance to Instagram Platform Labor" where she refers to the 16 engagement pod participants she interviewed as "self-identified influencers". Her main argument is that "engagement pods represent a response to the material conditions of platformized cultural production on Instagram, where proprietary curation algorithms wrest knowledge and control of the labour process from producers." O'Meara (2019:2) dubs the collective effort of engagement pod participants to beat the Instagram algorithm "cooperative algorithm hacking" and argues that although it is different from existing organizing strategies, it is still a response towards the "threat of invisibility". The threat of invisibility is a concept discussed by Taina Bucher in her book "If...Then" which focuses on Facebook's algorithmic arrangements which dictate the visibility of a user on the platform.

Bucher (2018:85) argues that "the Facebook algorithm does not treat subjects equally; it prioritizes some above others." Bucher conducted an experiment with her own personal Facebook account where over the course of several months she compared the contents of "top news" to that of the "most recent" news to see how many posts or stories are making it to the news feed on the platform. The results of her experiment showed that the closer a story was published to "real time" the bigger the probability of that story making it into the top news which most users see. Moreover, her top news were stories (or posts) that had bigger engagement or more interactions by users than the rest. Ultimately, she concluded that "stories without significant interaction seemed to be filtered out", and she equated being visible on Facebook with being "selected by the algorithm" (Bucher, 2018:86).

Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012 for one billion dollars (Frier, 2020), which means that the same algorithmic logic that is applied to Facebook is also applied to Instagram. Bucher's (2018) conclusions shed light on the origins of the basic rules on which engagement pods function. For starters, one of the main rules in pods is to interact with a participant's post as soon as it is shared in the group. As observed by Bucher (2018:84-88), the more recent the story (or post) is, the more probability it has to appear as a top story and therefore, gain more visibility. What makes this story even more likely to appear on the top of the feed is the number of interactions (such as likes and comments). Following this logic, for engagement pods to be efficient, a participant's

post must get as many interactions as possible when it is freshly posted in order for the algorithm to boost it and help it be seen by more users of the platform. The observations and arguments made by Bucher (2018) show that a bigger visibility on a platform, in her case Facebook, can be achieved by combining timely engagement with a bigger number of interactions.

When Instagram's algorithm changed in 2016 (Hunt, 2016), independent cultural producers on the platform who monetized their content were the first ones who felt the effects of this change because it instantly impacted their engagement rate, and, as a result, their income. Algorithmic systems play a big role in "structuring the contemporary employment economy" and it results in feelings of annoyance, frustration and "substantial angst" as independent cultural producers watch how algorithms wreak havoc on their revenue (Duffy, 2020:103-104). Algorithms constantly change to keep up with social trends, and cultural producers, more often referred to as influencers, are left with the tedious task of figuring out the new algorithmic rules. However, the main focus of this thesis is not to dive deeper into the rules that govern the Instagram algorithm. It focuses more on how it has influenced user behaviour online, more specifically how it motivated users from different demographic and psychographic backgrounds to group in pods as a way of challenging and manipulating the algorithm's power.

Currently, a user's Instagram profile and the size of their following is a representation of the cultural capital that they have built online, but the benefits of which can also translate offline. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital is the "collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class" (Social Theory Re-wired, n.d.). In his essay "The Forms of Capital", Pierre Bourdieu (1986:243) argues that:

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (Bourdieu, 1986:243)

In the case of social media influence, the number of followers a user has is objectified cultural capital because a user's Instagram profile is the user's property. Bourdieu (1986:243) argues that cultural capital is convertible and that in certain conditions it can become economic capital. Lev Manovich touches upon this point in his book "Instagram and Contemporary Image", in which he explores Instagram's image culture by placing it within a rich cultural and historical context. In the fourth part of this book, Manovich (2017:115-118) writes about the "Instagram class" and points out that an Instagram user's cultural capital is created through that Instagrammer's skills.

Karl Marx's concept of *means of production* is useful here because Instagrammers can be said to own the means of *cultural production*. This means, however, not only simply owning mobile phones and apps but more importantly having *skills* in using these apps, and more importantly having *skills* in using these apps, understanding Instagram's rules and strategies for creating popular feeds, and being able to apply well these strategies in practice. Importantly, Instagrammers do not have to always sell their skills to "capitalists" – instead, they mostly use their skills themselves to have meaningful and emotionally satisfying experiences, to meet like-minded people, to maintain human relations, or to acquire social prestige. (Manovich, 2017:117)

Manovich (2017) goes on to say that cultural capital is created by using these skills and that the size of that cultural capital can be measured by looking at the numbers of followers or respect a user commands in their community. Manovich (2017:117) points out that the cultural capital that a social media user accumulates online "can be translated into economic capital if an Instagrammer starts working with advertisers and marketers to promote products in her/his feed, or if her followers purchase goods or services via the linked blog or website". As such, it can be deduced that users would join pods to increase their visibility on Instagram and grow their following and their cultural capital. In return, they would become relevant to brands from which they earn their income. Therefore, when we talk about Instagrammers' skills, we no longer just reference their ability to create engaging content, but also their marketing skills in pushing out that content in front of their target audience by swimming against the flow of the Instagram algorithm.

Looking to grow one's cultural capital and making money on social media are behaviours often correlated with influencers, regardless of whether these are acclaimed or self-proclaimed

influencers. Influencers are typically seen as people who monetize their social media following (Abidin, 2015). That is why, popular online resources such as online dictionaries offer oversimplified definitions of the term. For example, Cambridge Dictionary defines an influencer as “a person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them” (Cambridge Dictionary, online). In order to earn money, influencers plan and curate the content they put out and this content is meant to attract attention, the size of which is measured in the forms of likes, comments, and shares. Then they use different marketing techniques and skills to promote their content. These are some of the reasons why influencers are seen as a different group than the regular users. Typically, a regular user would be the opposite of an influencer. They would be a person with a smaller following who often knows all their followers because they are very likely to be their family, friends, and acquaintances, and who posts for the sake of sharing a certain meaningful memory.

The reason why it is important to make the distinction between influencers and regular users is because as someone who has participated in engagement pods, this researcher has come to realize that the pod members are not often people that we traditionally call influencers. Many of these people do not even curate their content. They are, in fact, regular users who share certain milestones in their lives and who have other sources of income often unrelated to their social media activity. That means that this Instagram subculture that we call engagement pods is comprised of users who might share the same goal, but they do not share the same motivation. The goal is to increase their engagement rate and gain visibility on the platform, but the questions are why and to do what?

This points towards the fact that every user has different reasons for building an online presence and gets different gratifications from their online presence. We can analyse different motivations through the uses and gratifications theory which rather than looking at how the media influences people, it looks at how people use the media and aims to explain what “social or psychological needs motivate people to engage in a variety of media use behaviors” (Katz, Blumber, & Gurevitch, 1974, as cited in Lineberry, 2012). While some use Instagram to work with brands and create Instagram-centric campaigns, others use the platform as a portfolio, and “for many creative aspirants, portfolios serve as a form of design industry credentialing” which helps them find clients and earn money from jobs that are often unrelated to Instagram (Scolere, 2019:2).

Some users engage in pods for political reasons. According to researchers Anastasia Goodwin, Katie Joseff, and Samuel C. Woolley, although most engagement pods are mainly formed independently by users operating in the same niche, some of the largest pods in the United States are run by companies such as Wolf Global, which operates over 50 engagement pods on Telegram with allegedly over half a million members. This company also sells real USA-based followers and “auto-liking as premium services” (Goodwin et.al., 2020:10). Goodwin et.al (2020:11) argue that when used in the field of politics, pods can amplify the message of bad actors and lead to the spreading of harmful messages mainly because its participants are actual users who might make it appear as if “a certain type of messaging is popular with a specific type of user on the platform”. In fact, the mentioned research by Weerasinghe et al., (2020:1883) showed that pods are effective at inflating the popularity of a user’s content and it led them to conclude that pods pose a threat to the “integrity, security, and resilience” of online social networks when faced with “politically-motivated propaganda and other implications of artificially-garnered influence”.

Under the pressure of undisclosed algorithmic rules, Instagram users who are often referred to as cultural producers, are making “strategic efforts” to become “algorithmically recognizable” (Gillespie, 2017).

Indeed, the influencer exerts very little official control over the platform’s infrastructure or governing logics, reflecting a chasm of power between platform holders and those who animate these spaces with their social and economic value. When changes are implemented, often without notice or explanation, these cultural producers are profoundly impacted by the new conditions of visibility that characterize their work. (O’Meara, 2019:2)

This is one of the main reasons why the question of authenticity often arises in some existing literature that mentions pods. In 2019, Emily Dean Hund wrote a dissertation on the influencer industry where she dove deeper into the meaning of authenticity in the digital era. She examined how various stakeholders in the influencer industry including influencers, advertisers, social media companies, and marketing agencies “construct and negotiate the meaning, value, and practical use of digital influence as they reimagine it as a commodity for the social media age—a commodity whose value shifts in accordance with ever-changing industrial rubrics for cultivating

and evaluating authenticity” (Dean Hund, 2019). Further in the text, Dean Hund argues that some influencers entered engagement pods to enhance their engagement rate in a way that appears authentic to outsiders, after having discovered the strategies that brands and marketers used to evaluate the authenticity of the audience of the influencers they choose to work with.

Popular discourses often described these collective behaviors as “gaming the system”—characterizing them as dishonest or even amoral—as the platforms on which they were carried out simultaneously encouraged and punished influencers’ engagement as a means of exerting control (Dean Hund, 2019:103).

The “gaming the system” rhetoric is often used by scholars to describe behaviours in pods and technology companies frequently use this rhetoric to justify why they do not fully disclose how their platform’s systems work (Cotter, 2018:8). Another term that is often linked with pods is “systematic reciprocity abuse” which describes the mutual agreement between pod participants to interact with each other’s posts (DeKoven et al. as cited in Weerasinghe et al., 2020:1874). Many researchers and scholars view pods as a type of manipulation that is hard to detect mainly because the reciprocity abuse is preformed manually by pod users and their activity on the platform appears organic (Weerasinghe et al., 2020:1875).

During the research conducted for this thesis, it became obvious that Instagram engagement pods should be categorized as a subculture that was created as a reaction to the dynamically changing Instagram culture. Pod participants still want to be part of Instagram because it offers access to a big audience, but they do not want to fully follow its algorithmic rules which were designed to profit out of their struggle for visibility. In a way, participation in engagement pods can be seen as a fraud, but only because it goes against established expectations of what a user has to do to gain more followers and become more famous.

In fact, when Dick Hebdige wrote about style “as intentional communication” in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, he raised two questions: 1) how does a subculture make sense to its members?, and 2) How is it made to signify disorder? Hebdige thought that subcultural styles can be perceived as “deviant” because they lack normality and “go against the grain of a mainstream culture” (Hebdige, 2002:100-102). Very similarly, pod participants go against the perceived notion of how an influencer is created. When we speak about Instagram influencers, we often imagine individuals who achieved a certain success on the platform via hard work and

consistently posting quality content. Secret participation in pods was not a tool included in the original path towards becoming a successful Instagram influencer. It has to be noted that although these users participate in these pods, it does not mean that the content they offer is not of good quality. At a first glance, pods can be mistaken as a counterculture to the overall Instagram culture. Even though their interests are at variance with those of Instagram, pod participants do maintain the founding principles of the general Instagram culture they are a part of. These users worked out the mechanisms that drive the algorithm, and formed these pods to win over it, but by still following its rules.

There is also an ongoing discussion whether pods help or hurt a user's personal brand. The question is no longer whether these pods work. Research based on machine learning models found that pods are effective tools for increasing users' Instagram popularity and that it leads to "a significantly increased level of likely organic comment interaction on users' subsequent posts" (Weerasinghe et al., 2020). However, is it ethical? Is it hurting their personal brand? What is so important to pod participants that it motivates them to participate in these pods despite the risk of their followers finding out about their role in these groups and potentially facing backlash? Are they even concerned about the possible ethical implications or is this subculture slowly normalizing this behaviour? To this researcher's knowledge, there has been little-to-no public research that looks at engagement pods from a closer perspective or through the eyes of the pod participants themselves.

PART TWO: METHODOLOGY

The main research question of this thesis is: “What motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods?” Other research questions that this thesis aims to answer include:

1. How has existing literature analysed Instagram users’ motivation to participate in pods?
2. What are some of the main reasons Instagram users enter pods?
3. How do pods function and are they effective in helping Instagram users reach their goals?
4. Are participants committed to making pods work and follow the set rules?
5. Is there a future for pods and will they be normalized and accepted as an integral part of the Instagram culture?

Due to the absence of similar existing research, this thesis will attempt to gain a better understanding of this cultural shift by analysing responses from Instagram users who participated or still participate in pods. If more and more regular users join pods, then we are witnessing a shift in values and a normalization of using seemingly fraudulent tactics to inflate the social importance of an individual online who does not necessarily embody the qualities of a typical influencer. Therefore, it is important to gain insights into what motivates Instagram users to participate in pods. To answer the aforementioned questions, the research conducted for this thesis has five connected objectives:

1. Highlight the commonly accepted reasoning of what motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods based on existing information.
2. Identify the reasons Instagram users join engagement pods.
3. Explore how pods really function and analyse the experiences of pods participants.
4. Evaluate the efficacy of pods in the context of helping Instagram users reach their goals.
5. Formulate recommendations on how to improve the experiences in pods and how to conduct more representative research on engagement pods.

The Literature Review showed that there is a lack of existing research that closely explores pod participants’ motivations to join pods. However, it did help highlight a problem in the way pod

participants are described in existing research where they are often labelled as influencers. When pod participants are referred to as influencers, they are instantly classified under this umbrella term which oversimplifies and misrepresents a heterogeneous group of people with different goals and motivations in their social media use. The Literature review partially answered Objective 2 given that many of the engagement pod participants are, in fact, traditional influencers whose income depends on Instagram engagement metrics (Likes, Comments, Shares, Saves, etc) which is why they create or join pods.

Existing research such as “The Pod People: Understanding Manipulation of Social Media Popularity via Reciprocity Abuse” by Janith Weerasinghe et al. (2020) as well as blog posts and website articles from companies offering social media services such as Hootsuite show that pods are efficient in increasing the participants’ engagement and their following. However, there is very little research evaluating the reasons why some of the regular users join these groups if they are not typical influencers or their immediate goal is not to become influencers. This gap in research provided ample evidence on the need for direct input from diverse engagement pods participants to understand what moves the mechanisms of this subculture.

To get that input as well as a basic understanding of what motivates Instagram users to join pods, this thesis uses explanatory research to answer the main research question, which is “What motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods?”. Explanatory research was chosen as the approach to answer the research questions of this thesis as it is usually conducted for a research problem (or a research topic) that was not well researched before. In this case, previous research on engagement pods was insufficient and therefore unable to generalize an answer as to why Instagram users engage in pods. Explanatory research helps in defining priorities by generating operational definitions that focus on the most important aspects of the study. It is usually meant to provide details where a small amount of information exists on certain topic, and it might not provide final and conclusive answers to the research questions but allows the researcher to explore the research with a varying level of depths (Explanatory Research Definition, 2021).

The main purpose of explanatory research is to increase the understanding of a researcher on a certain subject. It does not provide conclusive results because of the lack of its statistical strength, but it makes the researcher determine how and why things happen. It can also be very advantageous in directing subsequent research approaches. A great understanding of the subject

allows the researcher to hone subsequent research questions and can greatly increase the usefulness of a study's conclusions.

2.1 Data Collection

The research method adopted for this thesis is a mixture of explanatory research and an online questionnaire delivered to ten female Instagram engagement pod participants from four countries: North Macedonia, Czech Republic, Netherlands, and Canada. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the secrecy that surrounds it, random sampling is almost impossible in this case and recruiting participants is a challenge, especially since not many people who are in pods talk about their activity in these groups with their extended circles. There is no openly available sampling site that the researcher can visit to randomly select respondents. That is why the convenience sampling approach was adopted.

The ten participants were recruited from the engagement pods that this researcher joined throughout the years, starting from 2017 till 2021. Trust played an important aspect during the recruitment process of the respondents as many of those who were initially approached declined to be interviewed despite being promised full anonymity. There were a few candidates who simply stopped all contact with this researcher after reading the initial proposal for the interview. The ten respondents trusted this researcher and openly talked about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts of engagement pods. Given the existing trust, the convenience sampling approach used for data collection in this thesis provided ideas and insights that in the future might lead to more detailed and representative research.

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was delivered to all respondents via a direct message on Instagram which contained a link to a Google Form. The questionnaire they received combined open and closed questions and was divided into seven sections, each of which aimed to answer a specific research objective.

2.2 Framework for Data Analysis

The questionnaire is divided into seven sections, with Section one focusing on Demographics which will help highlight the diversity of the selected respondents, and Section seven containing an open-ended question prompting the respondent to widen the discussion by adding anything

that they felt was not covered in the questionnaire. The remaining sections from 2 to 6 are structured according to themes which reflect the overall aim and objectives of this research. The seven sections of the questionnaire are represented in Table 1.

Section/Theme	Questions
1. Demographics	7
2. Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level	9
3. Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes	7
4. Engagement Pods and Time Management	3
5. Interest and Commitment	2 (+1 sub-question)
6. The Ethics	7
7. Additional Comments by Respondents	1

Table 1 Questionnaire: breakdown of themes and questions

Given the nature of this research and the need for interpretative understanding of this type of online behaviour, a qualitative approach is the key to gain insights into participants' thought process, reasoning, behavioural patterns, and justifications of their activity in pods. For that reason, even the multiple-choice questions have an open-ended option labelled with 'other'. Each section, or theme, plays a particular role in answering the main research question of this thesis: 'What is the main reason Instagram users join engagement pods?'

For example, the Demographics section will help highlight the different background of pods participants which is crucial when trying to find a link between an individual's background and their motivation to become an active pod member. Section two, or Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level, will provide additional information to that already highlighted in the Introduction and Literature Review and give an answer to research Objective 2: 'Identify the reasons Instagram users join engagement pods.' as well as partially answer Objective 3: 'Explore how pods really function and analyse the experiences of pods participants.' Section three or "Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes" will analyse the experiences of pods participants, thus completing Objective 3, as well as fully address Objective 4 which aims to 'Evaluate the efficacy of pods in the context of helping Instagram users reach their goals.' Section four (Engagement Pods and Time Management) and Section five (Interest and Commitment) will

dive deeper into the experiences of pods participants and will focus on generating answers about how practical and useful pods are for the participants as well as assess how big of a role this subculture plays in the daily online and offline lives of the participants. These two sections will give answers on how to improve participants' experiences in pods, which is part of research Objective 5 'Formulate recommendations on how to improve the experiences in pods and how to conduct more representative research on engagement pods'. Section six will deal with the ethical perspective of joining pods and will provide a view on whether there is a future for engagement pods and if they will be normalized and accepted as a natural behaviour of people who decide to use social media.

As depicted above, the questionnaire sections and the research objectives are interlaced which shows that this qualitative analysis is not a linear process and requires the implementation of "the iterative process of description, analysis and interpretation", an approach by Wolcott (Wolcott, 1994, cited in Biggam, 2011:162). An integral part of this research is to analyse, interpret, compare, and contrast the respondents' answers both against each other and against the findings in the Literature Review. The main goal of using this approach to analysing is to identify key ideas and recurrent themes such as repetitive behavioural patterns. That means that although the questionnaire was divided into themes, they are not separate topics. They are inter-related.

2.3 Limitations and Potential Problems

As discussed above, due to the sensitivity of the research topic, the convenience sampling method and the questionnaire data collection method yield results that cannot be generalized. Some of the participants were unwilling to be recorded and constantly postponed an online interview call, which is why they were instead sent a questionnaire that they could fill in at their convenience.

A recorded in-depth semi-structured interview would have provided a secondary data for analysing which is the behaviour of the respondents while answering the questions. With a questionnaire, we cannot see the initial reaction of the respondents to sensitive questions, notably the ones questioning the ethics of participating in secret groups that aim to artificially increase the importance of an Instagram user, which is judged by the number of interactions they get on their posts. Therefore, for some respondents it is hard to judge whether the answers they gave

were completely honest or diplomatic to make themselves look good. However, given the fact that this researcher has a personal connection to the respondents, although that of a simple acquaintance or the relationship of two people who follow each other on Instagram, an online filled in questionnaire eliminates the presence of bias in the interviewer/researcher. This gives this researcher the ability to be more objective when analysing responses and increases the reliability of the study. Also, this researcher included individuals from multiple countries and from different demographic backgrounds with the intent to collect multiple views on the same issue and to ensure that the results are not dependent on a one-dimensional opinion that might be skewed due to similar demographic backgrounds, thus decreasing the threat of misinformation.

Due to the extensive and detailed nature of the questionnaire which covers all the areas that would otherwise be covered in an in-depth semi-structured interview, the analysis of the gathered data provides a valuable input into what motivates Instagram users to join pods. The results provide a very detailed insight into the pod participants' experiences in engagement pods coupled with their perceptions of this secretive Instagram subculture.

PART THREE: ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research conducted for this thesis is concentrated around a group of 10 female respondents who participated in engagement pods in the past or are still part of them. The respondents are from four different countries: North Macedonia, Czech Republic, Netherlands, and Canada. All the respondents are Instagram users who have participated in different engagement pods for a given period between 2016 and 2021. The analysed responses were collected between March and May 2021.

In order to make sure that the data collected from the questionnaires reflects the main objectives of this research, the questionnaire was structured around five main themes which are: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level, Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes, Engagement Pods and Time Management, Interest and Commitment, and The Ethics. These five themes are preceded by a section on Demographics aiming to highlight how different the demographic backgrounds of pod participants can be regarding their age, location, occupation, education, marital status, children, etc. The seventh section, succeeding the five main themes, is titled Additional Comments by Respondents and aims to offer an opportunity for the respondents to highlight an opinion, behaviour, or a trend in engagement pods that this researcher might have missed when drafting the questionnaire due to different experiences. To provide easy overview of the results, the analysis and discussion of the results is divided into seven sections which follow the structure of the questionnaire.

3.1 Section One: Demographics

To summarize the answers received in Section one: Demographics, six of the 10 respondents were between the ages of 21-30 while four of them were aged 31-40. Five out of ten respondents were citizens of North Macedonia, with four of them living in Skopje and only one in Veles. Two respondents were from the Netherlands, with one respondent living in The Hague whereas the other respondent did not provide that information. The last two respondents were from Brno, Czech Republic, and Canada. All respondents had completed some level of higher education. All of them had an undergraduate diploma, and eight of them had some sort of a postgraduate degree. In terms of occupation, two of the respondents were professional photographers, whereas the rest included a graphic designer, lawyer, artist/company owner, engineer, customer service agent,

acupuncturist, social media manager, and policy advisor. Below is a list of each respondent and their official occupation at the time of interviewing:

- Respondent 1: Photographer
- Respondent 2: Graphic Designer
- Respondent 3: Photographer
- Respondent 4: Policy Advisor
- Respondent 5: Lawyer
- Respondent 6: Artist/ company owner
- Respondent 7: Customer service agent
- Respondent 8: Engineer
- Respondent 9: Acupuncturist
- Respondent 10: Social Media Manager

Five of the respondents reported to be married, with two of them being mothers with a single child. Three respondents were single, and two reported to be in a relationship. More detailed information about each of the respondents can be found in Appendix B: Engagement Pods Participant Responses.

3.2 Section Two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

The first question the respondents had to answer in Section two titled Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level was “what is your main purpose in using Instagram?” The goal of this being the opening question was to understand how the respondents viewed Instagram: as a source of income, and therefore, work, or as an application for entertainment. Half of the respondents answered that they used Instagram for “fun” and that it was their “creative outlet” whereas the other half said that they use it to promote their work, “attract an audience to make a passive income”, as well as for “business and uncommercial promotion of art”.

Most of the existing research on pods has been published on blogs and websites of companies or apps offering social media services such as scheduling posts, monitoring accounts or hashtags, managing multiple social media platforms, planning brand strategy, etc. Some of these companies or apps include Later, Hootsuite, Tailwind, Medium, etc. These articles and blog posts mainly contain information on how pods function and how people can find and join pods (Dahlin, 2020; Barkho, 2017; Brown, 2018; Grove-White, 2019). To test the validity of that information, the second question asked respondents “How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?” Six respondents said that they joined engagement pods them via people that they already knew such as friends, followers, other creators on Instagram, or simply people they were “already organically engaging with” on the application. Only respondents 6 and 10 gave a very detailed explanation on how they researched and joined pods online without having an established connection with some of the existing members in the pods. Although not impossible, the respondents did stress that they needed to spend a significant time researching to understand how pods worked and how to join them.

For example, respondent 6, a business owner looking to grow their business’ Instagram profile, explained:

Respondent 6: I searched on Google and then Reddit what is the way to increase number of followers. Lately, it is very difficult to increase number of followers with paid ads if you are a business. And we noticed some influencers have unusually high engagement and follower increase on their profiles. I figured there must be a catch. There was less information on Google but I learned about the pods on Reddit, and after I learned they were called engagement pods, I could find more information on Google.

Respondent 10 who is a Social Media Manager, and therefore savvier in the business and nature of social media networks than the rest of the respondents, used other platforms to join and participate in pods.

Respondent 10: I found most of the pods I participated in via Facebook Groups. If you look around the platform, you will find a lot of groups where "creators support creators" or groups created by an Instagram influencer who offers people the chance to exchange knowledge and help each other. There are a lot of follow threads as well. In some groups, for example, Fridays are reserved for exchanging follow for follow, so you can drop a link to your Instagram username and people who like your profile will follow it. You must also follow theirs back. Sometimes, some of these posts in these groups are calls for joining private commenting groups or pods that are organized on messaging apps like Telegram or, most commonly, in Instagram DM. As a member in a pod, you are supposed to like and comment each post that the other members send, and they should do the same for your posts.

According to these responses, despite their secrecy, it is not impossible to find a pod by doing research online. However, it is significantly easier to join if you have someone on the inside already who trusts that you will be an active member who will not disclose their participation in the pod. Half of the respondents said that they found the pods via friends and people they knew on Instagram.

The third question "What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?" directly dealt with the motivation for joining pods. As expected, the main goal of respondents who said that they used Instagram for work was to increase their engagement rate, following, and connections with other content creators. Respondent 6 who noticed a slow growth in following and very low engagement on their business' Instagram profile said that she was motivated by the fast-growing profiles of their new competitors who started popping out on the market. She said that they were "forced to search a way to keep on track and not get left behind. We had to find a way to increase our popularity on Instagram and grow our business profile."

Respondents who said that they used Instagram for fun joined pods out of curiosity to see what would happen to their engagement rate. For example, respondent 7 honestly responded that she

had no particular goal when she joined pods, but she “liked the idea of having a certain amount of likes and followers, which was more than usual. The idea of being recognized and, let's say, admired is what I enjoyed.” Respondent 1 noted that she was not really looking to join pods and she was added to these groups to do something else such as a collaborative post between multiple content creators, but they later kept the group and transformed it into a pod to “support each other”. Similarly, respondent 8 said that she was looking to support a “like-minded community, because the internet trolls do want to destroy everything nowadays” hinting to potentially being a victim of online bullying on Instagram. From her response it could be assumed that pods partially function as support groups as well, however, respondent 5 was disappointed that that was not the case for her. She said that “My first idea of the groups was that we are going to support each other like it should be. But then I concluded that it was like kind of a spam.”

Instagram engagement pods are a phenomenon that has existed for a little bit over half a decade, and more and more people have started to find out about these groups. The fourth question “Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?” aimed to see how pod participants viewed pods from a wider perspective. In general, six respondents thought that pods were becoming somewhat known, however, some of them did note that it was more likely that it is known by people who are looking for ways to grow their audience such as content creators and influencers, and not by people who “use their Instagram for personal use” (respondent 2) or “regular folks” (respondent 10). Respondent 7 said that “I believe more and more people know, it's being recognized in the comments, and it's even sometimes promoted on a particular post in a form of a loop.”

In her statement, respondent 7 is referring to the loop giveaway, which is a marketing strategy used by both influencers and traditional celebrities on social media where there is a certain prize on the line and to enter to win, the users have to follow all the people or brands that are involved in the giveaway. In an article for the Entrepreneur, contributing writer and Sparkhouse CEO Torrey Tayenaka (2020), argues that “the goal of the loop giveaway is to drive quality, genuine followers to the participating brands. The method has been established as credible, and the inclusion of celebrities has only made the case for the loop giveaway stronger.” It is not uncommon for pod participants to agree on running a loop giveaway to increase their follower

count. Although she did not pay, this researcher was a part of an engagement pod where some of the participants agreed to pitch in USD 50 and pay for a Nordstrom gift card which they later offered as a prize in a loop giveaway. It is important to note that the giveaway was not affiliated with Nordstrom and it was completely paid by the pod participants who agreed to join the giveaway.

To the fifth question “How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)” the respondents said that they found the pods through friends (respondents 1, 3, 4), someone they knew on Instagram (respondents 2, 4, 7), Google and Reddit (respondent 6), Facebook groups (respondents 4, 9, 10). The answer of respondent 8 to the fifth question was ambiguous: “The ones outside of North Macedonia are extremely rewarding. I like a healthy sisterhood”.

The sixth question “How long have you been participating in pods?” dealt with the respondents’ activity level in pods to gauge how big of role pods play in their daily lives and how much time they devote to this activity. Some of the respondents are still part of engagement pods whereas others stopped using them for reasons that will be disclosed in Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes. A rough average of the length of time that nine out of 10 respondents have spent participating in pods is 20 months, or a little less than 2 years. Only respondent 6 reported to have quit pods after one week of activity. Respondent 10 noted the longest period of participation which was “around 2-3 years”.

The seventh question of this section asked respondents “How many pods are you participating in?”. Their answers did not point towards a particular trend. Overall, 30% of the respondents participated in one, 30% in three, and 30% in four or more pods. Only one respondent answered that they participated in two pods.

The eight question of this section asked respondents “How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?” The most common answers included: around 30 minutes (respondents 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7), one hour (respondents 4 and 10), and two hours (respondent 6). Respondent 8 said that the amount of time she spends on pods depends on whether she likes the pods and whether she is on Instagram that day or not. Respondent 9, on the other hand, said that it depends on the day, but sometimes it can be as short as 15 minutes.

To the ninth question “Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?”, six respondents said that they communicated with other pod members in Instagram direct messages whereas four said that they usually coordinated in messaging apps such as Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc.

3.3 Section Three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

In the first question of Section three, the respondents were asked to share some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that they were not expecting when they first joined. Half of the respondents said that one of the most positive aspect was that they had met new people and made new friends within the pods.

Another positive aspect that was highlighted by respondents 1, 4, 7, and 10 was the expected outcome – bigger engagement on their Instagram profiles. Respondent 10 said that she “made a lot of new friends and found some wonderful ladies to follow.” In fact, the third question from this section asked the respondents “Have you become friends with the people you’ve met in pods?” and 6 of them responded “Yes, with a few of them”. Moreover, half of the respondents said that they had personally met with other pod participants when they answered the fourth question of this section: “Have you ever personally met with other participants?”.

Respondent 8 was the only one who has used the “other” option to answer the third question in this section (“Have you become friends with the people you’ve met in pods?”) and was unable to make a distinction between public support groups such as the Hype House and secret support groups such as Instagram Engagement Pods. When asked if she had become friends with people she had met in a pod, she gave the following response:

Respondent 8: Again, pods in Macedonia are different than those from abroad. Join one and see the difference, maturity and growth people have. The hype house for example exists for a reason. And they're all friends. Also have you seen how celebrities that are verified have pods on their own and frequently support the fight against oppression?

As highlighted in this thesis’ Introduction and Literature Review, pods are secret groups where the members do not disclose their participation because what they are doing is arranging for doctored likes and comments to appear on their posts which in return increases their engagement rate. The Hype House, on the other hand, is a “content creator collective” that also has a physical location which is a mansion in Los Angeles (Lorenz, 2020). In an article in Cosmopolitan, Mehera Bonner explained that “the whole point of Hype House is to collaborate on videos for TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, and to promote each other’s platforms and personal brands” (Bonner, 2021). Taylor Lorenz (2020) argues that these “so-called collab houses, also known as

content houses, are an established tradition in the influencer world” and they greatly benefit influencers. While in essence, both pods and collab houses aim to increase the engagement and number of followers of their members thus increasing their popularity, they are two different concepts.

Going back to the first question of this section (“Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren’t expecting when you first joined.”), respondent 8 gave the following answer which further highlights the fact that she might have expected her experience in pods to be identical as the one she would have if she participated in a public collab house:

Respondent 8: Spreading an important message, creating justice, making a change in the society through unity, equal rights, creative group collaborations, support for your mental health when the trolls get to you and you feel so low and like there’s no real support or no one to turn to. It’s a community. Not just a pod. But then again, it depends if you’re into a toxic one or not.

Also, respondent 6 was the only one who had negatively responded to the first question by saying that “There are no good aspects. It is very time-consuming unproductive activity. It doesn’t bring much benefit to the profile increase.” However, (as discussed in Section two), it is worthy to note that respondent 6 quit pods a week after she joined them, which, when compared to the rest of the respondents, is too short of a period for her to have seen any significant results.

When asked about the bad aspects, the respondents listed different types of experiences. Respondent 8, for example, fortified her claim that pods where the members were Instagram users from her home country, North Macedonia, are “toxic”. None of the other respondents’ negative experiences were tied to a specific nationality’s behaviour.

Respondent 8: The only bad pods that I've been in are the ones in Macedonia. People seem too greedy, bossy, and like to push their own agenda. Or want to seem 'better' so they're like, oh no, I won't support a pod or be a part of one, I'm better than that. And that's fine, but then again, why are you lurking and don't leave the group?

Respondent 4 noted that “the engagement isn't always as genuine, comments get generic” and respondent 7 said that other participants reacted “badly” if someone missed another person’s

post and did not like or comment on it. In contrast, respondent 5 criticized the other pod members' lack of respect for the pod's rules:

Respondent 5: I thought that support is going to be constant and realistic. We have a deal that we are going to comment (not an emoticon but real comment) on our photos and save them but that is rare. People don't respect their own rules.

Respondents 1 and 10 said that they were not always interested in the content that was shared by the other members in the pod. Respondent 1 said that sometimes it was a challenge for her to formulate comments for posts that were not in her interest. Respondent 10 further elaborated on this feeling of disinterest and even dislike towards the posts of other pod participants:

Respondent 10: I don't feel like commenting on all of the members' posts. Some post only selfies, then there are the moms who constantly post photos of their kids and there is a limited number of times I can comment "aww so cute". In pods, they also make you write comments with at least 4 words which according to information online, is how Instagram distinguishes real people from bots. So you can't simply comment with emojis. People get angry if you do that and they see it as not engaging with their content. Also, I sometimes feel like a fraud. I try to tell myself that I am doing my best to get ahead in a very crowded platform, but I don't fully find happiness in fake likes and comments.

Respondent 2 focused more on the lack of proper organization in the pod she participated in. She explained that the pod participants were from different parts of the world and in different time zones which made it impossible for all of them to participate quickly for the pod to have any effect on everyone's engagement rate. Moreover, the participants were not in the same industries which "made it hard to actually grow your audience through their audiences." She was also uncomfortable by the fact that other Instagram users could see that the same people repeatedly commented on her posts. This response shows that many times, pods are hastily put together without much thought about how the diversity of members can affect the pod long term. As observed from the bad aspects of participating in pods that the respondents pointed out, diversity is not always a welcomed aspect in pods. Cracks can easily start showing when the pod participants do not have common interests which might be one of the main reasons why many of them stop following the rules and the pod eventually falls apart.

Section three also dealt with how the respondents viewed other participants in the pods. Question 5 asked: “According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?” to which the most common answers were “popularity”, “to grow their audience”, “engagement” and “vanity”. Respondent 10’s answer contained bits of the answers of all respondents. She explained:

Respondent 10: I want to say same as me: to grow their personal brand on Instagram and grow professionally, but honestly, I am not sure. Some people really post random photos, and they expect you to engage with them. We had a lady from the US who posted only random photos with Biblical quotes and being an atheist, it was hard for me to comment anything. She soon saw that I wasn't saying anything just liking her photos and she also stopped interacting with my posts. Some people might want to become famous, but others... I am not sure what they gain from participating in pods. I think sometimes some do it for the vanity to show other people around them that people are interested in what they have to say or post.

In question 6, the respondents were asked whether they would stop participating in pods if they achieved the goal they had in mind when they first joined. Five out of 10 respondents said that they either left or were thinking of leaving pods because they felt that their goal was not achieved. Four respondents said that they would not leave pods because they liked “the social aspect” of these secret groups. Only Respondent 1 answered “Maybe, but I still haven't left any of the pods.”

Question 7 was directed towards the respondents who had already left the pods. Some of the reasons they offered, besides the fact that their goals were not achieved, were that pods were “time-consuming” (Respondents 6 and 10) and they “didn’t bring any benefit” (Respondent 6) from a business perspective. Respondent 7 noted that she did not like the feeling of being pressured to comment and facing criticism when she did not do it instantly. Respondent 2 said that she had stopped using Instagram, and therefore pods, for a certain period of time. However, she noted that she does not think that she would ever join pods again because she did not see much growth in her Instagram profile. She thinks that “having more real connections will lead to more real engagement because it comes from a place of feeling connected.”

3.4 Section Four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

Instagram has created lucrative career opportunities for many of its most-followed users. Eman Alshawaf and Lettie Wen (2015) dub users with a large number of followers social media “mavens” or individuals “who spread trends and ideas through their use of social media” and who “become authoritative figures and use their social media accounts for commercial purposes” (Janssen, n.d., as cited in Alshawaf and Wen, 2015). The more popular they become, the more chances they have to be recognized by a brand or a potential client as influencers. Collaborations or paid partnerships with brands and companies on Instagram bring in both reputational and financial benefits for the user. This is one of the main reasons why those seeking to grow their professional career on Instagram are trying to increase the number of their followers as well as their engagement rate. As described in the Demographics section of this research, the respondents identified themselves with particular job titles in different industries such as photographer, graphic designer, acupuncturist, lawyer, etc. None of the respondents listed “influencer” as their occupation, which means that the respondents are already working in different fields, and they need to make additional time for content creation and posting on Instagram as well as for engaging in pods.

The first question in this section sought to make a connection between the respondents’ jobs and their Instagram activity by asking them: “Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?” Six respondents answered yes. Respondents 1 and 3, both photographers, answered that they get more jobs and clients via Instagram, which is to be expected given the fact that in its essence, Instagram is a photo-sharing application. Respondent 5, who is a lawyer, got more fashion brand collaborations due to the number of Comments and Saves on her posts, however, these were unrelated to her career as a lawyer which she currently holds. Respondent 8, the business owner, noted that the more popular they are on Instagram the more people get to learn about the products they sell. Respondent 10, who is a social media manager, said that numbers often defined her competence as a content creator in the eyes of the brands who would work with her if she had a “good track record” of creating engaging content people interact with.

Three respondents answered no. Respondent 4, a policy advisor, respondent 7, a customer service agent, and respondent 9, an acupuncturist, all said that increasing their engagement rate

and influence on Instagram did not help their jobs. Respondent 2, who is a graphic designer, said that at the moment, Instagram was not helping her job, but she added that she believes the platform would create more visibility for her if she was more active.

The second question in this section asked respondents how they manage their time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants in pods. Their answers did not help identify one pattern that could be generalized across respondents. Some said that they did it whenever they had free time or randomly during the day, others dedicated time in the evening to catch up with all the posts that were shared in the group. Respondent 7, a customer service agent, said that she “tried to be proactive and react and respond in the first moments, so I don't lose time later on. It's easier for me to waste 10 seconds right away than spend and dedicate an hour afterwards.” While respondent 3, a photographer, said that “it doesn't take that much time”, respondent 5 (lawyer) and respondent 10 (social media manager) said that sometimes they skip commenting or comment a few days later due to their busy schedules.

The respondents' answers to the third question in this section “What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?” revealed three main limitations or obstacles: time management, work, and school. The only different response came from respondent 4, the policy advisor, who noted that sometimes they faced a technical barrier caused by the application: “At a certain point Instagram introduced a limit of posts that you could interact with in a short period of time, so at times I couldn't finish catching up and thus couldn't post my own link for engagement.” While respondent 2, the graphic designer, noted that sometimes interacting with all the posts in a pod takes a lot of time if the “group is full”, respondent 5, the lawyer, did not note any obstacles, but rather pointed out an emotional response that prevents her from fully participating. She said: “When someone doesn't engage with my posts, I do the same, I skip.”

3.5 Section Five: Interest and Commitment

Bloggers and online articles talking about pods often describe them as “support groups” (Shores, 2017; Cunningham, 2016), which signals that the members in these groups are working together to support each other’s growth. However, to the first question of this section: “Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other’s content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?”, six out of ten respondents replied that “Participants mainly care about promoting their own content”. This tells us that six of them believe that people create and join these groups with a personal agenda and are not that interested in what other pod participants post or share. Therefore, the support they offer in this groups is more like a chore or a task that the participants need to do to remain in the pods. Of the remaining four respondents, respondent 3 and respondent 9 answered that “participants mainly care about promoting and helping each other,” respondent 2 answered “participants are interested in the content of just a few other participants”, and respondent 8 used the Other option to write “With the exception of North Macedonia”, once again showing her dissatisfaction with the pods from her home country.

The following question labelled “1. a)” in the questionnaire, was a follow up question to the first one. It was a multiple-choice question that asked the respondents: “(If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant’s posts even though you are not interested in their content?”. From the obtained answers, it can be concluded that despite the lack of interest, the respondents still engaged with the content of the other members. Respondents 2, 3, 6, 7 answered “Yes, I engage with all participants’ posts”. Respondents 4 and 10 answered “Yes, I engage with all participants’ content, but not with each and every single post” which showed that they did not discriminate the participants, but sometimes skipped commenting on some of their posts. Respondents 1, 5, 8, and 9, however, were selective when it came to which participants’ content they would interact with and answered “I only engage with posts from participants whose content I am interested in”. None of the respondents used the “Other” option to express a different opinion.

This introduced the second and most important question in Section five which asked the participants “Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant’s post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.” Respondents 3, 6, 7, and 8 never felt uncomfortable commenting on other participant’s posts. One of them,

respondent 7, said that when the subject of the content was something they were unfamiliar with, but they would still try “to find a common ground to even make sense and not be a generic comment.” The remaining six respondents noted that there were sometimes posts that they did not want to engage with. For example, respondent 4 and respondent 5 answered that they did not want to interact with posts containing nudity, but they ended up doing so.

Respondent 4: [...] I don't like explicit nude content, so anything too "erotic" would make me uncomfortable. Also, content that I just generally wouldn't like (aesthetic wise) and thus would find it hard to find something nice to say would lead to me feeling uncomfortable and "fake" with what I was commenting.

Respondent 1 who does not have children did not feel comfortable commenting on posts about children or “baby stuff”. She also said that she did not like commenting on posts promoting “body treatments like fake lips or brow trends”. Respondent 2 described herself as a private person who keeps her personal life off social media, so she felt “awkward” when some of the participants would share very personal things in their Instagram posts. Respondent 10 could not continue commenting on posts of participants that went completely against her religious views and her interest.

Respondent 10: I mentioned previously, but I am an atheist and one lady who was very Christian kept posting Biblical quotes under her posts. I didn't really have anything to comment. At the beginning I tried to avoid the topic by commenting "the dog is cute" or "love the colors of the sky", but there is a limited number of things you can say. Also, there was a lady who kept posting close up selfies and at the beginning I would write "love the makeup" or "your eyes are pretty", but as time went by, I couldn't really do it anymore. And if someone were to sit and analyze her profile, there is no way they would believe that I am such a fan that I comment on her every single selfie. It was ridiculous. At least I posted outfit and product photos and each of my posts was unique and different.

What can be concluded from the answers in Section five is that even though the majority of respondents engaged with most of the posts that were shared by other participants in the pods, six of them were not comfortable with having their name seen in the comment sections of posts that they would normally not interact with. The fact that some respondents skip posts

that they do not want to engage with, or they completely ignore content that does not align with their interests and values, shows why dissatisfaction with the members' behaviour grows in these groups. This gives even more insight into why in Section three: Question 6, which asked the respondents "If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?" half of them answered that they either left or were planning to stop using pods as a way to grow their engagement.

3.6 Section Six: The Ethics

The aim of Section six, at the end of the Questionnaire, was to gain more insight into how the respondents felt about engagement pods in general and whether they saw it as an ethical behaviour. This part of the questionnaire was designed to have a self-assessing quality for the respondents to reveal whether they saw this type of social behaviour on social media as fraudulent or a necessary part of building their online persona. Assessing whether such obscure activities by diverse Instagram users – some of which might have couple of hundreds of followers whereas others entertain thousands of followers – is becoming normalized as part of our increasingly digitalized lives is one of the most important research questions of this thesis.

In practice, any social behaviour that is considered ethical would not be kept secret whereas any behaviour that deviates from the social norms of any culture, if practiced, is more likely to be performed in secrecy. That said, the first question of this section asked the participants: “Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.” For starters, the predominant opinion was that pods are an open secret given that “if you dig little bit, you will find more information on them” (respondent 6). Respondent 10 noted that “if you can Google them, then they are not a secret.” Respondent 1 said that although she has never hid her participation in pods, she has been asked to “keep it private by the creators”. Moreover, according to Respondents 5 and 7, followers are noticing that something is happening in the comments and although some of them might not be fully aware of what goes in the background, they are afraid that comments from pod participants might be turning away some genuine followers from commenting on their posts. Four out of the 10 respondents thought that pods should not be kept secret. Respondent 9, for example, thought that pods should not be a secret because she finds them to be a good way to connect with people. Respondent 4 answered candidly: “I don't think it should remain a secret. Everybody knows about them, and you can really see when people are in pods, the comments are pretty generic. So why pretend it's not happening?”

The second question asked respondents “What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?”, and six of them thought that no one would care and that nothing would change even if the word got out. Respondent 6 was one of the remaining four respondents who, as a business owner, thought that it would not

be good for her business if her followers and potential clients found out about her activity in pods. Respondent 1 elaborated that she was disappointed in some people when she first found out they were participating in pods, and that she believes most people would have the same reaction about her. Respondent 5 thought that “maybe” she would lose her followers’ trust. Respondent 10 was unsure of the potential consequences and said “[...] I think some of them would be disappointed. I don't think that many people think of Instagram as I do. I think of it as a business and in business, sometimes you have to do things you don't like in order to succeed. Some might think I am fake, although I put so much effort in my content. Some might not even care if they enjoy my content.”

In general, the answers to the third question in this section: “What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?”, showed that none of the participants took any special precautions to keep their activity in pods secret. Respondent 1 said that she was careful not to give her phone or password to anyone, so they do not open her messages. Respondents 5 and 10 answered that they simply avoided talking about pods with their offline communities and only the pod members know they are in pods. Respondent 7 noted that people in her pod were cautious not to get “shadowbanned” by Instagram. Instead of writing “new post” in their pod, which has organized in their Instagram direct messages, they would use another secret word so the Instagram algorithm would not pick up on what was happening within the group and would think it was a regular chat.

This type of cautiousness came about as news outlets started reporting that users on Instagram were getting “shadowbanned”. “Shadowbanning” is defined as the platform deprioritizing accounts and limiting their reach by restricting their posts’ visibility. “The primary “indicator” of a shadowban is your hashtagged content not appearing on Explore pages to anyone but your followers” (Dahlin, 2020). This is not an official term used by Instagram as the apps’ representatives claimed back in 2018 that “shadowbanning” was not a real thing (Constine, 2018). In a blogpost about Later, a marketing platform for Instagram, Content Marketer Monique Thomas (2021) explained that it is not really clear how Instagram decides which accounts get shadowbanned. However, she listed five actions or activities on the platform which were rumoured to significantly increase an account’s likelihood of getting restricted visibility,

including “fake engagements, such as paying for likes or comments, using bots to increase followers, and participating in engagement pods” (Thomas, 2021).

In 2021, Adam Mosseri, the Head of Instagram, wrote a blog post with the intent to shed some light on how the Instagram algorithm works and explained that shadowbanning was a “broad term that people use to describe many different experiences they have on Instagram” (Mosseri, 2021). Mosseri did not acknowledge the existence of such practice and explained that what Instagram can do to help its users in these situations is to “be more transparent” about why it takes down some posts, make fewer mistakes when they decide what to restrict, and give its users a better explanation on how the platform’s systems work (Mosseri, 2021).

The fourth question in Section six asked the participants: “What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)”. However, only three respondents noted positive attitudes towards pods. Respondent 9 said that her pod makes her “happy to connect with others” and respondent 8 said she would never leave some of her pods, including her “cosplay prop group” and her “cosplay pod”. Respondent 7 said that she would “recommend them to creative accounts, people who are genuinely interested in sharing a specific knowledge or a skill and small businesses that have a harder time being recognized.”

On the other hand, respondents 2, 4, 5, 6, and 10 thought that people should avoid being in too many pods and they highlighted the importance of creating creative content that appeals to their followers as well as organically engaging with other people on the platform. According to them, that is how a user can build “real influence” on the platform, with respondent 6 adding that “Instagram should make a better algorithm for businesses that pay ads, pods are useless.”

Respondent 2 answered frankly: “I say no. I don’t think they work unless you have a very specific group (same demo, style, country). I would tell them to focus on a strategy, creating creative content and test things out. Instagram is a long run, pods are trying to push something that won’t really move the needle for growth (in my experience). You are better off putting effort in ads than pods.”

The fifth question asked respondents: “Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.” Five out of 10 participants answered “no”. Respondents 3 and 9 noted that they are only participating in one pod, which does not really influence their engagement that much. Respondent 1 said that she does not feel like she is deceiving her followers because she simply shares her posts in the group and does not pressure the other members to interact with them. She leaves the other members to decide if they want to interact. Respondent 2, the Graphic designer, said no because her participation in pods does not change the content she would post even if she was not in pods. Respondent 8 said no and elaborated that “if 10 bloggers comment on my posts, but more than 200 fans comment too, I don't think it's a deceiving popularity.” She also was not happy that people are starting to pay attention to the comment section: “Do people peep at comments now? Is that how low we've gotten? We're gonna obsess over not just like counts but comment counts? What a world to live in.” Respondent 7, the Customer Service Agent, thought that although there is a difference between the number of interactions on posts that are boosted by pods and those that are not, “no one will bother to sit and compare your posts. Unless you are really in ‘people's eye’.”

When answering the same question, Respondents 4, 5, and 10 said that they did think that they are deceiving their followers. Respondent 4 said that most people would have not commented on her photos “if it hadn't been a rule of the pods”. Respondent 5 said that the fact that she feels like she is deceiving people was why she is trying not to engage so much in pods. She added that she wants her engagement to be real and for her not to feel like she is pretending. Respondent 10 went a step further and admitted to feeling like “a fraud” and expressed her wish to leave pods. She said that she does not judge people who participate in pods, but she wants to be able to proudly say that it was her creativity and content that made people visit her profile, not “behind the scenes work”. Respondent 6 did not answer the question, mainly because she had only participated in pods for a week and had not spent enough time in them to develop an opinion on the matter.

The sixth question asked the respondents to describe the difference in the feeling when they get genuine comments from followers versus comments from engagement pods participants. Seven participants said that they felt a lot better when they received genuine comments from people

who were not in pods. Respondent 4, for example, elaborated that getting genuine a comment “feels much better since I know that the person chose to comment, because they genuinely like my content and not because they had to in order to post their own link.” Respondent 7 wrote about the negative experiences she has had with pod participants who would comment irrelevant things under her posts which made her wonder why she bothered to be honest and genuine on their posts if she was not getting the same treatment.

Respondent 2 and 3, on the other hand, said that they appreciate both types of comments equally, and that over time, they started experiencing them the same way. Respondent 2 added that she feels this way unless she can distinctly tell from the comments that the pod participant is not very invested. Respondent 9 did not seem to mind given that she only participates in one pod where no one is obliged to comment and other members comment only if they want to, which she always appreciates.

Lastly, the respondents were asked if they would recommend using engagement pods to other people in the future. These were their answers:

- Respondent 1 (Photographer) – Yes
- Respondent 2 (Graphic Designer) – No
- Respondent 3 (Photographer) – Yes
- Respondent 4 (Policy Advisor) – No
- Respondent 5 (Lawyer) – No
- Respondent 6 (Artist/ company owner) – No
- Respondent 7 (Customer service agent) - Yes, but to a certain types of accounts
- Respondent 8 (Engineer) – Yes
- Respondent 9 (Acupuncturist) – Yes
- Respondent 10 (Social Media Manager) - No

Despite their various experiences in pods, both pleasant and unpleasant, five respondents said that they would recommend pods to other people in the future. The other half answered that they would not.

3.7 Section Seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

Section seven allowed the respondents to express an opinion or an aspect of engagement pods that might have not been addressed in the questionnaire. Only four respondents wrote additional comments and observations:

Respondent 1: “We live in a small country and sometimes the participants don't share same interests, but some pods can be motivational like a workout group.”

Respondent 5: “I would like to recommend trying pods because you would see what people are doing to gain more followers and popularity. But on the other hand, you would see what people should not do for popularity and new followers. Being honest with your community is the real way of gaining new followers. When you do the other things connected with the algorithm you could succeed, and you are going to be happy with it. I know people who are part of 10 or more groups, and they have like thousands of likes and everything but in the end of the day I believe that they know that that is not their creativity but pods. You can have collaborations and earn money but that would not last if you are not honest with your community.”

Respondent 7: “They can make you feel bad if it becomes personal ;)

Respondent 10: “I don't want to villainize people who participate in these groups. As I mentioned, some of them are really good people and of course, I was a part of them as well. But if it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. The only reason why I haven't quit yet is because it feels awkward just to leave a group. What am I supposed to say "okay... nice knowing you. Bye now!" I think that awkward moment is why I am postponing it.

The responses above show that the respondents have mixed feelings towards pods. One of the questions that was raised throughout the thesis was whether engagement pods really function as support groups or if participants are more inclined towards using pods for personal benefits only. When organized in the right way, as respondent 1 explained, pods can help motivate the participants. However, if they become too personal or if the participants spend too much time in a group, pods can make them feel uncomfortable, as respondents 7 and 10 described. Therefore, whether or not pods are support groups is a question that can be answered subjectively. It depends on the participants' experiences in pods when put against their initial expectations.

CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this research was to advance an understanding of what motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods, and, in the process, to gain insight into users' experiences and thoughts of pods. For that purpose, this thesis analysed responses of 10 pod participants that were collected via an extensive online questionnaire. The five research objectives addressed different aspects of the pod culture and the analysis of the research findings showed that some users are not necessarily motivated by a certain goal or desired outcome when they join pods.

The first research objective sought to highlight the commonly accepted reasoning of what motivates Instagram users to join pods. As analysed in the Literature Review, existing research and literature imply that users enter pods with the intent to increase their engagement rate in order to improve their visibility on the platform and earn an income. The focus is on assessing the bigger impact pods have on the social media landscape as well as the authenticity and reliability of social media platforms when faced with such manual manipulation of their algorithms. As a result, existing research looks at pods from a bird's perspective and does not deal with the various motivations that push users to coalesce in pods. It also does not investigate how pod participants view these groups and their fellow members. The "threat of invisibility" is quoted as one of the main reasons users join pods, and they are often generalized as influencers, whose activity on Instagram is inherently connected to financial benefits (O'Meara, 2019).

Existing coverage online, mainly found in the form of blog posts and articles written by people working in social media such as social media managers, social media marketers, copywriters, content marketing managers, digital marketers, Instagram coaches, etc., neglects to investigate what types of users join pods and loosely generalizes them as influencers. As a result, it does not identify pods as a subculture comprised of both influencers and regular users and it does not address how pod behaviour might be changing our social media use.

The main research question: "What motivates Instagram users to join engagement pods?" was directly answered through the second research objective which identified the reasons why Instagram users join pods by comparing the findings of this research as well as the Literature Review. The research conducted as part of this thesis showed that not all pod participants label themselves as influencers. While those who use Instagram for work did confirm the findings in

the Literature Review, which pointed to the fact that users join pods to increase their engagement rate, followers, influence, and income, some users cited other reasons such as curiosity, vanity, support, and collaboration. As the answers by Respondent 1 showed, when they were added to these groups, they did not necessarily enter them with the intent to manipulate the algorithm. It was more to collaborate on a post for a campaign and promote their work, and, as they realized the benefits, they naturally saw the group transform into a pod. Respondent 8 noted that she was looking for a like-minded community and as the analysis of her answers showed, she was unable to make a distinction between pods and public support groups such as the Hype House. This means that some users might be looking for like-minded individuals to achieve different gratifications than the ones loosely identified in existing research and online coverage.

Through the third research objective, this research explored how pods really function and analysed the experiences of pods participants. Findings showed that each pod has its own rules. However, overall, participants are expected to engage with all the other posts first before dropping their own link. An analysis of the respondents' answers made it obvious that this rule is not always followed as there are many pod participants (sometimes the respondents as well) who do not engage with all the posts in the group or, at least, they do not do it immediately. This research identified a few reasons why participants skip interacting with some posts including lack of common interest, distaste towards another user's content, or the lack of reciprocity from other users in the pod.

Some pods are more liberal, and the participants simply drop their links and do not really obsess over who interacts with them and who does not. However, as observed from the answers of respondent 7, there are pods in which users feel pressured by other group members to engage with a post as soon as it is shared, which leads to growing dissatisfaction with the way the pod is managed. Another reason for dissatisfaction with pods was diversity as Respondent 4 elaborated: "I don't think our pod was set up the right way — we were all from other parts of the world, so no one really participated quickly enough for it to have effect. We weren't in the same branches which made it hard to actually grow your audience through their audiences. People would see that the same people comment under your posts."

This research established that not all pod participants are aspiring influencers or even traditional influencers who earn a wage from their Instagram activity. Some have to make time for social

media in order to engage. As discussed in Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management, some of the obstacles to full participation in the pods include: time management, work, and school. As some of the respondents noted, when they first joined pods, they were expecting to find a support group, and while some of them made friends and new connections in pods that made them feel happy and supported, there were those who were disappointed with the lack of sincerity and commitment to genuine interaction that they had experienced in pods.

The fourth research objective evaluated the efficacy of pods in the context of helping Instagram users reach their goals. Given that one-half of the respondents either left or were planning to leave pods, while the other half said that they would not leave them, shows that a pod has to be organized and managed in a way that it aligns with the goals of all its participants in order for it to run successfully. Whether or not pods are efficient in helping Instagram users reach their goals falls on subjective views given how the initial goal that users had when they joined pods might have changed in the process. In fact, pods have been proven effective in terms of increasing engagement and followers, but some of them have failed to meet the expectations of their participants.

Those respondents who were planning on leaving pods or already left them did it because they could not achieve their goal, whether that was to increase their engagement rate and following or to find a support group that catered to their social needs. Some respondents decided to remain in pods, regardless of whether they were meeting their initial expectations or not. These respondents continue to stay in pods because they like the social aspect of belonging to a group or they are too uncomfortable to face criticism for leaving. There were also those who had experienced a growth in engagement and following, so they remain in pods for that reason.

The fifth research objective and one of the goals of this thesis was to formulate recommendations on how to improve the experiences in pods and how to conduct more representative research on engagement pods. The fact that this research identified the social aspect of pods as one of the main reasons users decide to remain in pods, shows that pods are not necessarily viewed by the participants as an algorithm manipulating machinery. While some do view them as a chore and end up quitting because they are unhappy with their experiences, others find a support system within them and are happy to stay and continue interacting. According to the respondents' answers, one way to improve users' experiences in pods and make them functional is for the

participants to have similar interests, to operate within the same niche or industry, and to have established rules that work for all the participants, not just a few. That said, it is important to note that many pods are randomly put together and aim to increase the quantity of interactions rather than focus on quality interactions, which is why user satisfaction in such pods drops.

Cotter (2018:8) argues that users' efforts to outsmart the algorithm should be called "playing the visibility game" rather than "gaming the system" because it "directs attention to the interplay between actors that acknowledges each actor's individual role" where actors would be the influencers, algorithms, and platform owners. In that sense, none of these actors is inherently bad, and therefore, pod participants are simply players who identified a possibility of winning the visibility game and devised a strategy known as engagement pods. As observed from the respondent's answers in Section six: The Ethics, half of the respondents did not view their activity in pods as deceptive of their popularity for three reasons:

1. They participate in very few pods and, according to them, this activity does not greatly inflate their engagement.
2. They do not pressure other pod participants to interact with their posts, so those who do engage do it willingly, which is synonymous with organic engagement.
3. Their participation in pods does not change the content they would post.

Six respondents had said that nothing would change for them even if their followers found out they were participating in pods, which leads us to believe that they do not see anything inherently wrong with pods or the fact that they are, in essence, a deceptive tactic.

Those who did view engagement pods activity as fraudulent, expressed a desire to have real engagement and noted that cultural producers should focus more on producing quality content and interacting with their target audiences rather than looking for more pods to join. As previously discussed, some pod participants do not create quality content, they do not curate their feeds, and they do not seem to earn an income from Instagram, which was why this thesis aimed to pinpoint the reason behind their participation. Respondents' answers as well as this researcher's observations of the internal mechanisms of pods revealed that there are users such as mothers and religious individuals who join a miscellaneous pod without a clear purpose in mind, or at least a purpose that is easily recognizable by a third party.

This leads us to conclude that the importance of acquiring cultural capital on Instagram has influenced its users' life to a point where the main motivation for joining pods comes not only from the struggle for visibility or the need to maintain an income but also from the fear of missing out. The fact that some respondents listed curiosity as one of the reasons for joining tells us that there are users who treat pods as a trend, and they do not want to miss out on something that could potentially lead somewhere. To a certain degree, pods can be also seen as a trend given that their existence is tied to the volatile nature of algorithms that continuously change and evolve.

Given that half of the respondents would recommend pods to other people in the future shows us that at least for now, pods are here to stay. As pointed out in Part Two: Methodology, the methods used for data sampling and collection implemented in this thesis yield results that cannot be generalized when it comes to answering the question: what motivates Instagram users to participate in engagement pods? However, it does provide an extensive insight into multiple aspects of this activity which could be further explored to understand how our social media use is changing under the influence of algorithms.

The first recommendation for further research is to include a bigger sample and collect data via in-depth semi-structured interviews can offer better insights on users' motivation. Respondents can be chosen based on some of the findings in this thesis and can include more users who are mothers, avid selfie posters, religious individuals, etc. The second recommendation would be to explore the extent to which participation in pods has been normalized as an integral part of building an online persona. Given how seemingly regular users are joining pods, there is a space for exploration how much users really need pods in order to accumulate the desired amount of social capital as well as address the level of awareness of pod participants about the dangers that pods pose to the reliability of social media networks in the longer run. The third recommendation is to design research that would focus on analysing the different gratifications users get from participating in pods. This research showed that some users such as respondent 8 might be looking for like-minded individuals and join pods to get emotional support rather than achieve popularity. By following the aforementioned recommendations, future research can gain even better insights into ongoing cultural shifts on social media and assess how big of an impact pods have on shaping our social media habits.

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Appendix A: Engagement Pods Participant Questionnaire

Section one: Demographics

Age:

- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 21-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 41-50
- ☐ Above 51

Gender: _____

Country/City: _____

Education: _____

- ☐ Primary Education
- ☐ Secondary Education
- ☐ Undergraduate Education
- ☐ Postgraduate Education
- ☐ Vocational Education

Occupation: _____

Marital Status:

- ☐ Single
- ☐ In a relationship
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Rather not say

Children:

- ☐ None
- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three or more

Note: If you are no longer participating in Engagement Pods, please answer by thinking back to the time you participated. There are questions that will address your reasons for deciding to leave Engagement Pods.

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?
2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?
3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?
4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?
5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)
6. How long have you been participating in pods?
7. How many pods are you participating in?
 - None
 - One
 - Two
 - Three
 - Four or more
 - Other:
8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?
 - Around 30 minutes
 - One hour
 - Two hours
 - More than two hours
 - Other:
9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?
 - In Instagram direct messages
 - In Facebook group chats
 - In Facebook groups
 - In messaging apps (Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc)
 - Other:

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.
2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).
3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?
 - Yes, with a few of them
 - Yes, with a lot of them
 - No, it's strictly business
 - Other:
4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?

- Yes
 - No
 - Other:
5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?
 6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?
 7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?
2. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?
3. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?
 - All participants are genuinely interested in each other's content
 - Participants are interested in the content of just a few other participants
 - Participants mainly care about promoting and helping each other
 - Participants mainly care about promoting their own content
 - In general, participants are not interested in each other's content
 - Other:
1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?
 - Yes, I engage with all participants' posts
 - Yes, I engage with all participants' content, but not with each and every single post
 - I only engage with posts from participants whose content I am interested in
 - Other:
2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.

Section six: The Ethics

1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.
2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?

3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?
4. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)
5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.
6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?
7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other:

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?

Appendix B: Engagement Pods Participant Responses

Respondent 1

Section one: Demographics

Age: 31-40

Gender: female

Country/City: North Macedonia/ Skopje

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Photographer

Marital Status: Married

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

Fun and to promote my work.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

I join the pods to do a giveaway, then continue to support the other girls.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

I was added to a few pods. The first one was with other influencers to do a collaborative post. The second was also for promotion, but then we continued to use the pod to support each other. And the last one I for a workout group.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I think more people know about pods.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

Friends

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

About 2 years now

7. How many pods are you participating in?

○ Three

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

○ Around 30 minutes

9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?

- In messaging apps (Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc)

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.

Some of the participants became costumers, we hang out or did some giveaways together for better engagement.

2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).

Sometimes other participants ask me to engage in posts that are not in my interest and I don't know what to write back.

3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?

- Yes, with a few of them

4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?

- Yes

5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?

Personal gain, trends, fun

6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?

Maybe, but I still haven't left any of the pods.

7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

/

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?

Yes. I get free products or more important clients that pay my bills.

2. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?

I use my free time to do this.

3. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?

Time management, freelance work.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. **Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**
 - Participants mainly care about promoting their own content
1. **a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?**
 - I only engage with posts from participants whose content I am interested in
2. **Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.**

Some participants' posts were promoting baby stuff or body treatments like fake lips or brow trends, so I didn't feel comfortable commenting on it.

Section six: The Ethics

1. **Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.**

I personally don't hide my participation in the pods, but I've been asked to keep it private by the creators.
2. **What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?**

I personally was disappointed in some people when I found out about pods, and I think most people have the same reaction.
3. **What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?**

I don't know...not giving my phone or password to others, I guess? So they don't open my messages.
4. **What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)**

I'm not the type of person to engage in debates. I will try to express my feelings with arguments but as short as possible. I would say do what works best for you.
5. **Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.**

No not really. I usually post my photo or video in the group or just tell them I have a new post so they can decide if they want to react.

- 6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?**

I prefer genuine comments, they feel more real.

- 7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?**
 - ☐ Yes

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

- 1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?**

We live in a small country and sometimes the participants don't share same interests, but some pods can be motivational like a workout group.

Respondent 2

Section one: Demographics

Age: 21-30

Gender: female

Country/City: Netherlands

Education: Undergraduate Education

Occupation: Graphic Designer

Marital Status: Single

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

To create additional content for my blog to attract an audience to make a passive income

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

I can't remember fully but I didn't actively pursue one. I think I was added by someone I already organically engaging with. I figured I should try it out and see if it would get me the results that I wanted. The rules were that you'd liked and commented (more than 4 words) under each post that would be shared in the pod (an Instagram chat group). And when you are all caught up, you can share your own.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

I wanted to see if it would help me grow my audience by upping my engagement rate through the extra likes and comments.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I think people who want to grow their audience know about it but people who use their Instagram for personal use, don't.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

Via someone on Instagram

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

I participated for maybe one and a half year.

7. How many pods are you participating in?

- One

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

- Other: Probably between 15-30 min.

9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?

- In Instagram direct messages

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.

You build a kinship (?) with the people in the pod.

2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).

I don't think our pod was set up the right way — we were all from other parts of the world, so no one really participated quickly enough for it to have effect. We weren't in the same branches which made it hard to actually grow your audience through their audiences. People would see that the same people comment under your posts.

3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?

- Yes, with a few of them

4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?

- No

5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?

To grow their audience and talk about Instagram.

6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?

I did stop mostly because I stopped using Instagram for a while. I don't think I will do it again because I didn't see much growth. I think having more real connections will lead to more real engagement because it comes from a place of feeling connected.

7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

See answer above — I stopped because I felt like I needed a break to recoup.

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?

At the moment, no. I do think if I would be more active it does help create visibility.

2. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?

I would upload my own post first on my feed and then go into the chat to engage and drop in my own post. I always did this around lunch time.

3. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?

It sometimes takes a lot of time when the group is full.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?

- Participants are interested in the content of just a few other participants

1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?

- Yes, I engage with all participants' posts

2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.

Sometimes when the posts were really personal. I like to keep my real personal life off social media so I sometimes find it a bit awkward when people share really personal stuff.

Section six: The Ethics

1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.

No. I think they should be shared as an option but with honest pros and cons.

2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?

I don't think it would have a big impact.

3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?

We didn't take any (as far as I was aware).

4. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)

I say no. I don't think they work unless you have a very specific group (same demo, style, country). I would tell them to focus on a strategy, creating creative content and test things out. Instagram is a long run, pods are trying to push something that won't really move the needle for growth (in my experience). You are better off putting effort in ads than pods.

5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.

No, it doesn't change my content. I think it would be different when it comes to brands.

6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?

I think I appreciate them just as much (unless I know the pod participant isn't really in it).

7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?

- No

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

2. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?

I think we covered everything!

Respondent 3

Section one: Demographics

Age: 31-40

Gender: Female

Country/City: North Macedonia/ Skopje

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Photographer

Marital Status: Married

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. **What is your main purpose in using Instagram?**
Promoting my work
2. **How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?**
A friend sent me an invitation to join.
3. **What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?**
I was curious to see what would happen with my engagement.
4. **Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?**
I don't know honestly.
5. **How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)**
I heard about them through friends.
6. **How long have you been participating in pods?**
About a year.
7. **How many pods are you participating in?**
 - One
8. **How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?**
 - Around 30 minutes
9. **Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?**
 - In messaging apps (Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc)

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. **Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.**
I found lots of interesting new accounts.
2. **Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).**
None for me.
3. **Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?**
 - Yes, with a few of them
4. **Have you ever personally met with other participants?**
 - No
5. **According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?**
To increase their engagement rate.
6. **If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?**
Don't know if it's an end goal- I just like participating in this pod because of the content.
7. **(if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?**
/

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

4. **Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?**
It helps me get more jobs.
5. **How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?**
It doesn't take that much time.
6. **What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?**
There are none for me.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. **Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**
 - Participants mainly care about promoting and helping each other

1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?
 - Yes, I engage with all participants' posts
2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.
None so far.

Section six: The Ethics

8. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.
No opinion honestly.
9. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?
It's only one pod that I use, and most participants from it have become friends/followers so I don't think it would change much.
10. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?
I don't take any precautions.
11. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)
I don't have that much experience to have an opinion on this matter. It may be good for people to use such pods which have similar content to theirs.
12. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.
No. As I said, I only use one pod, I don't use it often and the engagement is real at this point.
13. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?
Again, these have become the same thing over time.
14. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?
 - Yes

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

- 3. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?**
No answer.

Respondent 4

Section one: Demographics

Age: 21-30

Gender: Female

Country/City: The Netherlands/ The Hague

Education: Undergraduate Education

Occupation: Policy Advisor

Marital Status: Single

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

I use Instagram to share my content and interact with others. I also use Instagram to find inspiration (beauty/fashion/interior) and to stay informed about what's happening in the world.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

When I was still using Engagement Pods (1-2 years ago) they were functioning in the following way: there would be a group chat consisting of a decent amount of people, preferably with the same niche. Every time someone had posted a new post, they would drop their link in the group chat. You could only drop your own link if you had caught up with all the links before you (previous 24 hours/previous 10 posts/previous 25 posts etc., dependent on the rules). I joined them after being invited to join them by different fellow content creators.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

I started using them because it was a good way to boost my engagement and to connect with other creators. I saw a huge increase in following and engagement when I first started using them. My main goal was to grow my engagement rate and following.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I think most creators know of the existence of pods.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

I'm currently not in any pods, but previously I would find them via Instagram/ Facebook/ friends.

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

I was participating in pods for 2 years

- 7. How many pods are you participating in?**
 - Other: none currently but I was in more than four when I was still using them. I'll answer the following questions for when I was using them.
- 8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?**
 - One hour
- 9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?**
 - In messaging apps (Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc)

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

- 1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.**

Increase in engagement, more followers (big accounts as well), more niche-followers/
- 2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).**

The engagement isn't always as genuine, comments get generic
- 3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?**
 - Yes, with a few of them
- 4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?**
 - No
- 5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?**

I think the same reasons as mine.
- 6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?**

I already stopped, but I don't feel like I achieved my goal.
- 7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?**

I stopped using them because I wanted to focus on developing a more authentic and genuine engagement and connection with my followers. Plus, it just is too time consuming.

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

- 1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?**

Nope

2. **How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?**

I used to take out 1 hour in the evening to catch up and post.

3. **What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?**

At a certain point Instagram introduced a limit of posts that you could interact with in a short period of time, so at times I couldn't finish catching up and thus couldn't post my own link for engagement.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. **Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**

- Participants mainly care about promoting their own content

1. **a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?**

- Yes, I engage with all participants' content, but not with each and every single post

2. **Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.**

Yes, I'm sure I was. I don't like explicit nude content, so anything too "erotic" would make me uncomfortable. Also, content that I just generally wouldn't like (aesthetic wise) and thus would find it hard to find something nice to say would lead to me feeling uncomfortable and "fake" with what I was commenting.

Section six: The Ethics

1. **Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.**

I don't think it should remain a secret. Everybody knows about them, and you can really see when people are in pods, the comments are pretty generic. So why pretend it's not happening?

2. **What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?**

I don't think my followers would have minded.

3. **What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?**

None

4. **What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had**

to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)

I think people should avoid being in too many pods, and instead should focus on developing genuine relationships with their followers by creating content that appeals to their followers. That's the way to developing a sustainable following.

- 5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.**

Yes of course, most people wouldn't have commented on my pictures if it hadn't been a rule of the pods.

- 6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?**

Feels much better since I know that the person chose to comment, because they genuinely like my content and not because they had to in order to post their own link.

- 7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?**

○ No

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

- 1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?**

No answer

Respondent 5

Section one: Demographics

Age: 21-30

Gender: Female

Country/City: North Macedonia/ Veles

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Lawyer

Marital Status: In a relationship

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

for fun, using my photos to tell a story or inspire with my positive energy.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

A girl who follows me, asked me to join in one of the groups she is part of and then when other people saw me there, I was invited again and again. And about how it functions - we write a message in the group that we have a post and then we wait someone to react.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

My first idea of the groups was that we are going to support each other like it should be. But then I concluded that it was like kind of a spam.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I didn't know about these things. I think that people assume something is happening, but I'm not sure that everybody knows about them.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

Like I said, a girl told me about it. I was not aware that these things exist.

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

I think maybe 2 years.

7. How many pods are you participating in?

- Three

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

- Around 30 minutes

- 9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?**
- In Instagram direct messages

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

- 1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.**
I have new members of my community and I have new friends.
- 2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).**
I thought that support is going to be constant and realistic. We have a deal that we are going to comment (not an emoticon but real comment) on our photos and save them but that is rare. People don't respect their own rules.
- 3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?**
○ Yes, with a few of them
- 4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?**
○ Yes
- 5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?**
Same as me: more followers, comments and saves.
- 6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?**
I think that I'm going to leave them. Not because they don't work but because people don't respect the rules.
- 7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?**
/

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

- 7. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?**
Yes, I've made collaborations with fashion brands because of the number of comments and saves.
- 8. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?**
I try to engage everyday but sometimes I skip because I just don't have the time.
- 9. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?**

When someone doesn't engage with my posts, I do the same, I skip.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

- 1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**
 - Participants mainly care about promoting their own content
- 1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?**
 - I only engage with posts from participants whose content I am interested in
- 2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.**

Yes. I don't like to engage with nudity and posts about children but I'm engaging because those people engage with me too.

Section six: The Ethics

- 1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.**

I think that followers are seeing what is happening and they know of it somehow, but I think that they have to be secret. It's not going to be okay if they really know about the forced engaging.
- 2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?**

Maybe I'll lose their trust.
- 3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?**

I don't talk about that with my community.
- 4. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)**

I try to avoid them when I can. I think that real engaging is important because that is the real influence.
- 5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.**

Yes! I try not to engage so much in the groups because of that. I like my engagement to be real not forced and not to feel like I'm pretending.

6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?

I feel really happy when I have real comments because that is the real engagement and that is why I'm on Instagram. I want my followers to feel something when they see a post of mine.

7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?

- No

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

4. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?

I would like to recommend trying pods because you would see what people are doing to gain more followers and popularity. But on the other hand, you would see what people should not do for popularity and new followers. Being honest with your community is the real way of gaining new followers. When you do the other things connected with the algorithm you could succeed, and you are going to be happy with it. I know people who are part of 10 or more groups, and they have like thousands of likes and everything but in the end of the day I believe that they know that that is not their creativity but pods. You can have collaborations and earn money but that would not last if you are not honest with your community.

Respondent 6

Section one: Demographics

Age: 31-40

Gender: Female

Country/City: North Macedonia/ Skopje

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Artist/ company owner

Marital Status: Married

Children: One

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

Business and uncommercial promotion of art.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

I searched on Google and then Reddit what is the way to increase number of followers. Lately, it is very difficult to increase number of followers with paid ads if you are a business. And we noticed some influencers have unusually high engagement and follower increase on their profiles. I figured there must be a catch. There was less information on Google but I learned about the pods on Reddit, and after I learned they were called engagement pods, I could find more information on Google.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

We run the business a second year, and we saw new competition company profiles were growing very fast and gaining grater popularity. We were forced to search a way to keep on track and not get left behind. We had to find a way to increase our popularity on Instagram and grow our business profile.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I think it is unknown practice, because I had to do a profound search to learn they exist. They are used by many so-called influencers: they have a lot of engagement a lot of followers, they are real, but if you look closely, you will see they are not organic. I think not many people know about this practice. Buying followers and likes is a better known practice among majority.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

I am not sure, Google and Reddit. You really cannot find many pods like this. I just picked the first, because I was curious to check how they work. Just checked

how they work a few times and don't participate anymore as it is very time consuming.

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

For a week and I stopped.

7. How many pods are you participating in?

- Three

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

- Two hours

9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?

- In messaging apps (Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram, etc)

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.

There are no good aspects. It is very time consuming unproductive activity. It doesn't bring much benefit to the profile increase.

2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).

It is a very time-consuming unproductive activity. It doesn't bring much benefit to the profile increase.

3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?

- No, it's strictly business

4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?

- No

5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?

I suppose they want to grow their profiles so they can earn money through them, get popularity and earn money.

6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?

I stopped because my goal couldn't be achieved.

7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

I stopped because my goal couldn't be achieved. It was very time consuming and didn't bring any benefit. It is easier for a business to pay ads and make a giveaway than interact in pods.

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

- 10. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?**

Yes, more people learn about the products we sell.

- 11. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?**

We pay ads, and do giveaways, interact only with real fans.

- 12. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?**

Nobody has time for that. Instead, we pay a person to interact in pods, we pay influencers to promote our products, pay ads and make giveaways.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

- 1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**

○ Participants mainly care about promoting their own content

- 1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?**

○ Yes, I engage with all participants' posts

- 2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.**

No.

Section six: The Ethics

- 1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.**

I suppose they are open secret. If you dig little bit, you will find more information on them. If you dedicate some time to search you will find them, but you will find nothing at first attempt.

- 2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?**

It is not good for a business, I think.

- 3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?**

None

4. **What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)**

Instagram should make a better algorithm for businesses that pay ads, pods are useless.

5. **Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.**

No answer

6. **How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?**

Genuine comments are better, it is the goal of a business to attract real interest.

7. **Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?**

☐ No

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

1. **Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?**

I already explained everything I know and think

Respondent 7

Section one: Demographics

Age: 31-40

Gender: Female

Country/City: Czech Republic/Brno

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Customer service agent

Marital Status: Married

Children: One

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

Mostly for fun, pleasing my aesthetic, having a creative outlet.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

I joined by being recognized as an active member by a member who was already a part of the group. I didn't even know that anything like that existed before.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

Not a particular goal in the beginning, but I liked the idea of having a certain amount of likes and followers, which was more than usual. The idea of being recognized and, let's say, admired is what I enjoyed.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I believe more and more people know, it's being recognized in the comments, and it's even sometimes promoted on a particular post in a form of a loop.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

Instagram

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

I was part for a year, year and a half in my first one, and much shorter time in the second one.

7. How many pods are you participating in?

- Two

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

- Around 30 minutes

9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?

- In Instagram direct messages

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.

Engagement, being recognized, being discovered, being liked in general.

2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).

Pressure of liking/commenting as soon as possible, other participants reacting badly if you miss out a post, lack of time and dedication.

3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?

- Yes, with a lot of them

4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?

- Yes

5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?

Engagement, being popular and proving they are better than others.

6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?

If I achieve my goal, I would stop only if I have the feeling that the same engagement and energy will genuinely continue without the need of asking for it.

7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

The reasons are mainly stated in the "bad aspect" answers. But also - trying to be present for other members, but not receiving the same feedback.

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?

It doesn't.

2. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?

I tried to be proactive and react and respond in the first moments, so I don't lose time later on. It's easier for me to waste 10 seconds right away than spend and dedicate an hour afterwards.

3. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?

Lack of time since being back to work. Not being so active, so I don't have any "background" to even be invited or participate.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?

- Participants mainly care about promoting their own content

1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?

- Yes, I engage with all participants' posts

2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.

Not in particular, there are a lot of subjects I'm unfamiliar with, but I try to find a common ground to even make sense and not be a generic comment.

Section six: The Ethics

1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.

They are definitely an open secret, just like I said - they are being more and more recognized and obvious (a lot of the times in a negative way), that can make some of the sincere friends and followers turn away from commenting.

2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?

It would not change anything.

3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?

Having a separate group or a secret word for 'New post' that will not alert Instagram that something like that is happening within the group, rather than just a regular chat.

4. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)

I would highly recommend them to creative accounts, people who are genuinely interested in sharing a specific knowledge or a skill and small businesses that have a harder time being recognized.

- 5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.**

When you put it like that, there is a difference between the number of interactions, but no one will bother to sit and compare your posts. Unless you are really in 'people's eye'.

- 6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?**

Happier because comments from Pods sometimes have nothing to do with the post itself, and you wonder - why do I even bother to be honest on your post?!

- 7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?**

○ Other: Yes, but to a certain types of accounts.

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

- 1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?**

They can make you feel bad if it becomes personal ;)

Respondent 8

Section one: Demographics

Age: 21-30

Gender: Female

Country/City: North Macedonia

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Engineer

Marital Status: In a relationship

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. **What is your main purpose in using Instagram?**
Creativity.
2. **How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?**
You find a group you like and share common interests with, and they put you in.
3. **What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?**
Supporting a like-minded community, because the internet trolls do want to destroy everything nowadays.
4. **Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?**
Everyone knows everywhere, and it's common to join forces. However, in Macedonia, everyone hates 'influenserki' so even when united, they fight each other for brand deals, and they can't have an effective pod.
5. **How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)**
The ones outside of North Macedonia are extremely rewarding. I like a healthy sisterhood.
6. **How long have you been participating in pods?**
A year
7. **How many pods are you participating in?**
 - Four or more
8. **How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?**

- Other: Depends if I like it or not, or if I'm on Instagram that day or not.
- 9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?**
- In Instagram direct messages

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

- 1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.**

Spreading an important message, creating justice, making a change in the society through unity, equal rights, creative group collaborations, support for your mental health when the trolls get to you and you feel so low and like there's no real support or no one to turn to. It's a community. Not just a pod. But then again, it depends if you're into a toxic one or not.

- 2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).**

The only bad pods that I've been in are the ones in Macedonia. People seem too greedy, bossy, and like to push their own agenda. Or want to seem 'better' so they're like, oh no, I won't support a pod or be a part of one, I'm better than that. And that's fine, but then again, why are you lurking and don't leave the group? The only bad aspect I've seen is the terrible cancel culture that's toxic and prominent today, and people ganging up against someone for no reason, just because it's popular. Tana Mojo example. But then again, that should teach you to pick your group better, because you need better people, with stable hormones, priorities and ambitions.

- 3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?**

- Other: Again, pods in Macedonia are different than those from abroad. Join one and see the difference, maturity and growth people have. The hype house for example exists for a reason. And they're all friends. Also have you seen how celebrities that are verified have pods on their own and frequently support the fight against oppression?

- 4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?**

- Yes

- 5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?**

Some pods are completely vain, others are because of the 'right reasons' but then again, everyone has different 'right reasons' and who are we to judge?

- 6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?**

No. If I achieve a goal, I should give a helping hand to the ones that helped me achieve it. Unfortunately, In Macedonia, when someone achieves it, they usually forget the people who helped them achieve it, and they go on with the talk: I don't need you, I'm better than you now.

7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

Only toxic ones that are superficial.

Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?

It helps if you have a group project or if you have a brand and you feel isolated doing it yourself. I usually pass on collaborations when I'm not in Macedonia, to help create a culture of pay for a collab back there, because I am not in the place to do it or film it. And yes, even to people that have so much against me, I've helped. And yes, they're not appreciative. The pods mindset is so toxic sometimes back there.

2. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?

You pick what you like. And what you believe in. A proper group wouldn't push you to do things you dislike. But pods to help in pushing the algorithm in your favor, because Facebook/Instagram etc won't help you if you don't pay, and even if you do pay, the result isn't the same as with pods, to be honest.

3. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?

Time management. Real life outside of Instagram. Luckily so many back home don't have it, unfortunately and they're so addicted to social media. It's like a status symbol for them. LMFAO

Section five: Interest and Commitment

1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?

- Other: With the exception of North Macedonia :D

1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?

- I only engage with posts from participants whose content I am interested in

2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.

No. If I don't like it, I won't support it. HOWEVER, I am not judgmental, and I do not come from a privileged position of mind (I am always right, my decision is always the best, my opinion is accurate, etc) so I do not JUDGE people and let them be whoever and whatever they want to be online. Which isn't the case in Macedonia. A female influencer will say she is against booty pictures (a typical pick me up girl) and side with chauvinist men, and then she

will post a 'proper' butt of her and her friend, and she will be against nudity to get 'likes and engagement' and then will post a nude picture of her, telling it's unlike her, but she 'had to do it'????? A boy will do a live saying that certain profiles are only bikini profiles, and he is against that on Instagram, then just a day after he will make a video saying that he is against 'javna soba' and bikini sharing of girls, and girls can take whatever kind of pictures they like. I am so baffled, and so astonished that the audience doesn't recognize the fakeness and hypocrisy and that the hate is selective, and 'arena like' momentum, like, it's popular to hate and cancel people, but not all of them. It's so baffling to me.

Section six: The Ethics

- 1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.**

Literally, no one should care. It's just Instagram.

- 2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?**

The support is obvious. And back in the day, (a year ago) people who didn't 'got in' because they were women haters etc, were filming videos against this, publicly, because they felt left out and they were all men, losing the power. I keep track. ;)

- 3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?**

It's not secret. Again, the hype house? Makeup artists joining a squad? It's known everywhere. I do not understand WHY is it taboo in Macedonia.

- 4. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)**

I'll never leave my cosplay prop group for example. Or my Cosplay Pod. It's so useful. If Reddit and YouTube can have communities, why shouldn't Instagram have them too? Find your space and create.

- 5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.**

No. If 10 bloggers comment on my posts, but more than 200 fans comment too, I don't think it's a deceiving popularity. :) Do people peep at comments now? Is that how low we've gotten? We're gonna obsess over not just like counts but comment counts? What a world to live in.

- 6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?**

The genuine comments overflow the pod comments at ALL TIMES.

7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?

- ☐ Yes

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?

I did my best to answer honestly, hope you like it.

Respondent 9

Section one: Demographics

Age: 21-30

Gender: Female

Country/City: Canada

Education: Acupuncturist

Occupation: Postgraduate Education

Marital Status: Married

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

For fun.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

I only joined one because it's nice to connect with other people.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

No.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I think a lot of people know.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

Facebook

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

Over a year.

7. How many pods are you participating in?

- One

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

- Other: Depends on the day can be 15 minutes haha

9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?

- In Instagram direct messages

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

- 1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.**

The connections I've made with other people in different countries.

- 2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).**

None

- 3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?**

○ Yes, with a lot of them

- 4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?**

○ No

- 5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?**

To increase engagement with their posts.

- 6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods?**

If yes, why, if not, why not?

No, I like the social aspect.

- 7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?**

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Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

- 1. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?**

I don't think so...maybe?

- 2. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?**

I do it randomly throughout the day.

- 3. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?**

Because of work and school mainly.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

- 1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**

○ Participants mainly care about promoting and helping each other

1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?
 - I only engage with posts from participants whose content I am interested in
2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.

I don't comment if they are opinion posts I don't agree with :)

Section six: The Ethics

15. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.

No, I find it's a good way to connect.
16. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?

I don't think anyone would care.
17. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?

I don't have any.
18. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)

I am biased. My pod makes me happy to connect with others.
19. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.

No, I mean I'm only in one pod.
20. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?

I'm in a like only pod so no one is obliged to comment. They do if they want to, so it's always appreciated :)
21. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?
 - Yes

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?

No answer

Respondent 10

Section one: Demographics

Age: 21-30

Gender: Female

Country/City: North Macedonia/ Skopje

Education: Postgraduate Education

Occupation: Social Media Manager

Marital Status: Single

Children: None

Section two: Main Purpose of Participation and Activity Level

1. What is your main purpose in using Instagram?

I want to create visibility about my brand and my services. I offer social media content creation services as well as social media managing and I meet most of my clients through the application. I also use it for personal communication with friends and family and staying up-to date with the latest trends.

2. How do Instagram Engagement Pods function and how did you join them?

I found most of the pods I participated in via Facebook Groups. If you look around the platform, you will find a lot of groups where "creators support creators" or groups created by an Instagram influencer who offers people the change to exchange knowledge and help each other. There are a lot of follow threads as well. In some groups, for example, Fridays are reserved for exchanging follow for follow, so you can drop a link to your Instagram username and people who like your profile will follow it. You must also follow theirs back. Sometimes, some of these posts in these groups are calls for joining private commenting groups or pods that are organized on messaging apps like Telegram or, most commonly, in Instagram DM. As a member in a pod, you are supposed to like and comment each post that the other members send, and they should do the same for your posts.

3. What first motivated you to participate in pods? Did you have a particular goal in mind that you wanted to achieve when you joined pods?

Yes, I wanted to grow my following in order to meet more clients, collaborate with brands, and be able to grow my influence on social media. Sadly, the Instagram algorithm killed my reach and people barely saw my posts. I read a lot about engagement rate and I knew that I needed to have more interactions with my posts in order to grow my audience.

4. Do you think more people on Instagram know about pods, or is it still an unknown practice?

I don't think that regular folks know. Unless you really want to grow on Instagram and you start researching that, I don't think you will know. Of course, you might find out through friends. That's how I introduced one friends to pods and even included her in some of mine.

5. How did you find the pods you are participating in? (Google/ Facebook/ friends/ etc)

Facebook Groups mainly.

6. How long have you been participating in pods?

For around 2-3 years.

7. How many pods are you participating in?

- Four or more

8. How much time a day do you spend engaging with other participants' posts?

- One hour

9. Where do you usually communicate with the other participants?

- In Instagram direct messages

Section three: Engagement Pods Participation Outcomes

1. Tell me some of the good aspects (if any) that came out from participating in these pods that you weren't expecting when you first joined.

I made a lot of new friends and found some wonderful ladies to follow. I also got a lot of new followers, and more engagement on my posts.

2. Tell me some of the bad aspects (if any).

I don't feel like commenting on all of the members' posts. Some post only selfies, then there are the moms who constantly post photos of their kids and there is a limited number of times I can comment "aww so cute". In pods, they also make you write comments with at least 4 words which according to information online, is how Instagram distinguishes real people from bots. So you can't simply comment with emojis. People get angry if you do that and they see it as not engaging with their content. Also, I sometimes feel like a fraud. I try to tell myself that I am doing my best to get ahead in a very crowded platform, but I don't fully find happiness in fake likes and comments.

3. Have you become friends with the people you've met in pods?

- Yes, with a few of them

4. Have you ever personally met with other participants?

- Yes

5. According to you, what are the main reasons other participants joined these pods?

I want to say same as me: to grow their personal brand on Instagram and grow professionally, but honestly, I am not sure. Some people really post random photos, and they expect you to engage with them. We had a lady from the US who posted only random photos with Biblical quotes and being an atheist, it was hard for me to comment anything. She soon saw that I wasn't saying anything just liking her photos and she also stopped interacting with my posts. Some people might want to become famous, but others... I am not sure what they gain from participating in pods. I think sometimes some do it for the vanity to show other people around them that people are interested in what they have to say or post.

6. If you achieve your goal, will you stop participating in Engagement Pods? If yes, why, if not, why not?

Yes, well I have been thinking of leaving all the pods I am a part of. Honestly, my income doesn't come from Instagram and I really tried hard to grow my following, but it is not really happening. Engaging with other people's posts is sometimes time-consuming and exhausting and I don't really want my profile to appear under posts that I wouldn't have liked if I wasn't part of these pods.

7. (if you are no longer participating) Why did you stop participating in Engagement Pods?

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Section four: Engagement Pods and Time Management

13. Does increasing your engagement rate and gaining influence on Instagram help your job? If yes, how?

Well, I do work in the field of social media. It shows that I know how to create engaging content and that people interact with me. That is really important for brands and clients because they will work with you if you have a good track record. Sadly, that track record is mainly based on numbers rather than content quality.

14. How do you manage your time to be able to engage with all the posts of other participants?

I honestly do it in the evening. During the day I am busy with work and sometimes, I don't comment for a few days and then do it all in one night. I don't want to be pinpointed as the member who doesn't do her part, so I try to be consistent. But I am losing the will to participate.

15. What are the limitations or obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in these pods?

My daily job. As I said, I don't earn income from Instagram due to my low following despite my participating in these groups, so honestly, I am not motivated to spend too much time doing that. Perhaps if my following grew

more and I had at least 30k followers, I would be more motivated. But now, I have to focus on earning money from sources that actually pay.

Section five: Interest and Commitment

- 1. Are participants in these groups genuinely interested in each other's content, or do people participate mainly to promote and help each other?**
 - Participants mainly care about promoting their own content
- 1. a) (If you think there is no genuine interest) Do you still engage with every participant's posts even though you are not interested in their content?**
 - Yes, I engage with all participants' content, but not with each and every single post
- 2. Were there any times when you felt uncomfortable with commenting on another participant's post? If yes, please explain why and what type of content that was.**

I mentioned previously, but I am an atheist and one lady who was very Christian kept posting Biblical quotes under her posts. I didn't really have anything to comment. At the beginning I tried to avoid the topic by commenting "the dog is cute" or "love the colors of the sky", but there is a limited number of things you can say. Also, there was a lady who kept posting close up selfies and at the beginning I would write "love the makeup" or "your eyes are pretty", but as time went by, I couldn't really do it anymore. And if someone were to sit and analyze her profile, there is no way they would believe that I am such a fan that I comment on her every single selfie. It was ridiculous. At least I posted outfit and product photos and each of my posts was unique and different.

Section six: The Ethics

- 1. Do you think that it is important for Engagement Pods to remain secret or are they more of an open secret? Please explain your opinion.**

I think that they are out in the open. I mean, if you can Google them, then they are not a secret. But if you are participating in them, you should probably keep it a secret. I wouldn't post on my Instagram stories saying that I participate in these groups. I would be admitting that my comments are fake in a way and that my engagement is not real. I think it would discredit me with my real followers.
- 2. What do you think would be the consequences if your followers found out that you are participating in Engagement Pods?**

I don't really know, but I think some of them would be disappointed. I don't think that many people think of Instagram as I do. I think of it as a business and in business, sometimes you have to do things you don't like in order to succeed. Some might think I am fake, although I put so much effort in my content. Some might not even care if they enjoy my content.

3. What sort of precautions, if any, do you take to ensure the secrecy of Engagement Pods?

I just don't talk about them. The only people who know are those I included in these pods. The others don't.

4. What is your attitude towards Engagement Pods? Going ahead, do you think they should be used more often or avoided? (For example, if you had to provide arguments on whether a person should or should not use these groups, what would your arguments be?)

Honestly, I don't think people will stop participating in them. If I could give people a piece of advice it would be to work on their content more and try to engage organically with people. Ultimately, if it doesn't work, just to continue with another job that pays the bills.

5. Have you ever felt that you are deceiving your followers of your popularity by participating in Engagement Pods? Please elaborate on your answer.

Yes. I am thinking of quitting pods soon just because I am not thick skinned and this feeling of me being a fraud is really getting to me. Not that I judge people who participate in pods. I mean, if that really works for you, go ahead, but I am one of those people who work hard and I want to be able to proudly say that it was my creativity and my content that got people to come to my profile, not behind the scenes work. I know that a lot of jobs have a darker reality in the background, but I really want to feel good about creating content. Posting started feeling like a chore and commenting on other people's posts feels like an even bigger chore.

6. How do you feel when you get genuine comments from followers versus comments from Engagement Pods participants?

Oh I am elated when random people tell me my posts inspired them or when they decide to share something with me. On the other hand, I kinda feel like I am policing comments from pods participants thinking "hmm I see you didn't comment on my newest post, so I am not going to comment on yours as well". It's really petty, I know. And I don't feel like that about all of them, of course. Some members in pods are genuinely nice people and they really make me feel good with their comments. I return the favor by writing really engaging and long comments on their posts.

7. Lastly, would you recommend using Engagement Pods to other people in the future?

- No

Section seven: Additional Comments by Respondents

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with Instagram Engagement Pods?

I don't want to villainize people who participate in these groups. As I mentioned, some of them are really good people and of course, I was a part of them as well. But if it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. The only reason why I haven't quit yet is because it feels awkward just to leave a group. What am I supposed to say "okay... nice knowing you. Bye now!" I think that awkward moment is why I am postponing it.