

Social media influencers develop and deploy performances that rely on a sense of authenticity to create a personal brand and build an audience. Select an example of a social media influencer and assess how they build their audience through forms of identity work.

Tone: Academic

Nowadays, in the digital era, where technology flourishes; where human interactions are oftentimes mediated through social media platforms across the internet; the proliferation of social media influencers becomes a brand-new trend. Nobodies who rise to fame in the celebrities' world are no longer impossible myths. Even they acquire funds and have their very own fanbases. Yet, the process of building those dedicated-fans is not an easy feat. They often need to carefully create entertaining contents, compound them along with their respective uniqueness and marketable quality; thus, establishing their personal brand to their target audiences. Not to mention the necessity to maintain their followers' engagements to their uploads for revenue's assurances. Such things are apparent in the life of a Venezuelan Instagram influencer, Lele Pons. This essay will argue that Pons build her audience through her expanded-personal branding reflected through her contents and interactions, by chronologically dissecting: Pons's sense of authenticity and its development throughout her social media years; the construction and expansion of her personal branding; and eventually her expanded targeted-audiences along with her tactics to retain them.

To begin with, Pons ventured for popularity by playfully displaying her authenticity of being the jokester character through being a **family influencer**. At first, she began through the video-sharing social media platform, Vine. Since she was only seventeen at the time, her earliest videos are mostly – similar to many amateurs – “anchored” in herself and her circle, particularly her mom and siblings; aligning to Abidin's (4) notion of **their** content revolving around their families. She would often play pranks on them along with her usually-deemed 'extra' attitudes of reacting to situations, which often lead to dramatized responses from her families. For example, Pons splashed water at her mother's face, then she ran away from her until she was hungry and asked for food, and then her mother fought back, splattering milk and cereals to her face mockingly (*“Lele Pons first ever vine videos”* 00:13 – 00:24). Thus, further displaying her *“errands filler”*, i.e. daily-life familial interaction content (Abidin 12) while highlighting her family's 'novel' playfulness in the process. As years progressed, she continued creating videos, only that, her seemingly shapeless, for-mere-fun family videos

started to shift, permeating into her brutish daily school-life, and therefore, bolstered higher authenticity and intimacy with her life and clumsy personality. Her humours slowly evolved, expanding around school jokes and students' relatable in-class actions as well, aside from familial comedy as they were before. One of her school videos was the stereotypical-nerds who reminded the teacher of forgotten homework, where her infuriated peers actually threw bags directly at her face ("*School Vines – Lele Pons*" 00:52 – 00:58). Such videos became more impactful, as they are not only inherently comic but also easily relatable in school-settings. Henceforth, Pons became well-known for being a comic 'slapstick' icon, whose video-stunts would end up with her 'hurting-herself' out of her clumsiness (Bartleet 2018). However, the combination of those humorous and savage elements was not entirely original either. In accordance to Cotter's account (12-13) about 'learning the game' i.e. Instagram's algorithmic rule that determines influencers' posts, Pons also learned to align her 'slapstick' videos with Vine's algorithm as well. Under the drive of the #Doitforthevine, which was "used to urge someone to perform a dare on camera for a Vine video" ("Do It For The Vine"), Pons' videos were not only "rewarded with exposure" as Cotter coined (16), but also a boosted-sense of authenticity, affixing the "slapstick" label as her own. Therefore, this would pose as the foundation for the establishment of her personal branding later on.

After numerous exposures of her authentic identity, her audiences eventually wired such identity to her, though not yet a personal brand. It was until Vine's collapse in 2016, that Pons was actually able to fully expand her identity further, and build her personal brand of being a slapstick but sophisticated idol-worthy individual. Due to Vine's nature which afforded video-based interaction with awards avalanching the most daring video, Pons was not able to properly construct her personal brand, aside from her being a 'slapstick' person uploading videos of the same content. Moreover, since influencer role-models were very important due to them being the resource pool to rising influencer's self-construction and presentation (Marwick 232 and Marwick and Boyd qtd. in Marwick 229), Vine's lack of those figures made Pons' personal branding even more neglected. Hence, by the time, Vine closed down and she moved to Instagram and Youtube, her personal branding's process burgeoned among the rich figures of advanced Instagram influencers and Youtubers. Pons herself eventually became more aware of Beck's (qtd. in Bridgen, 64) idea of "selling me" and its importance from the available exemplars; as she began modifying her Instagram posts and Youtube uploads for

her identity's marketable-purposes. A point where she chooses to sophisticate herself to be more inspirational for her followers, attuning to Adam Jackson's (Marwick 246) created-persona to inspire his followers. Hand in hand with the platform's (Instagram) affordances in producing refined and graceful pictures, Pons had successfully embedded her elegance into, and without abandoning her authentic 'slapstick' personalia (though no longer school-based) ([@lelepons](#)), compounding an authentic self-branding of a "humorous but elegant" individual unique to her own. Thus, while doing so, 'conforming to the gameplay' of Senft's (2) notion that, what one does on the internet equals their self-represented identity. As it is also because of what one does that make them branded, stamped for audience's consumption (Goffman, Lampel and Bhalla qtd. in Chen 334). In addition, Pons also emphasised her self-branding of being sincere, humble and caring to her fans. She would call them supporters instead of fans to boost intimacy with them ([@lelepons](#)), even voicing her ideological views and agony over socio-environmental issues, e.g. inspirational reminder for fans ([@lelepons](#)) plea to pray for fires in rainforests ([@lelepons](#)). Consequently, she would strengthen her self-branding, garnering good reputation, while also fulfilling Aaker's study (qtd. in Chen 335) of brand personalities, of invoking excitement, sophistication, and sincerity. Henceforth, her solid self-brand formation not only maintained but also attracted new fans who were interested in aspects of her new distinct self-branding.

Through Pons's unique self-branding strategy that she displayed through her uploads, she had expanded the opportunity for a broader target audience. First of all, corresponding to her growing contents from mere 'slapstick' videos to also include her gorgeous pictures, indefinitely impacted the perception of her fans towards her. The perception on her brand identity which was mainly established from her funny slapstick-ness was then added another value from her elegance and inspirative-ness. Even more, was her portrayed-kindness and humility on-screen. This altogether had created a seemingly impeccable self-branding for Pons, since, not only that she is hilarious to watch, but she is also beautiful and most importantly, humble and sincere in wanting to connect with her fans; making her a perfect idol. This was often displayed through many Instagram affordances, e.g. She would often use relatable captions with brackets to communicate directly with her fans, furthering their engagements in the process e.g. We all have two sides 😞 😊 ... (how are you today?) @lou_flores ([@lelepons](#)). Additionally, she also began liking and replying to her posts'

comments, even replying some DMs of her fanbases. From her attempt to interact, it could be inferred that she understood that brand is sustained through interaction with fans (Arvidsson and Caliandro 731). By following the rules, Pons most likely wanted to ensure fans' high engagements by replying them at times. The strategy was also vividly shown to be practiced more often in her 2019s ([@lelepons](#)) post as opposed to her 2017s ([@lelepons](#)). From her increasing interactions with her fans, it could also indicate that Pons had actually started to be more aware of the issue due to her videos' decreasing engagements. This approach once more resonated to Mc Roberts', Bonsignore's, Peyton's and Yarosh's (335) idea that generally videos gain more attention if vloggers interact directly with their audience. By doing so, it may be Pons' tactic to protect her self-branding of being a kind and "relational influencer", i.e. an influencer whom promoted the truly-real intimate relationship with his/her fans. Yet, such ideals remained until a dispute with her best friend Amanda Cerny emerged to tarnish her brand. Cerny, Pons' fellow influencer who often starred at her videos revealed that Pons had sabotaged her account, deleted popular posts from her Instagram to hinder new followers (Feldman). As a result, Pons' fault to Cerny (which she admitted), could have also affected her engagement numbers as many began to realise her behaviours may not be as pretty as it was represented on brand-value. Therefore, it could have influenced Pons to administer closer-bonds with her 'supporters' by publicising her phone number ([@lelepons](#)) for real-intimacy to her fans.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that Pons build her audience through her expanded-personal branding of being: 'slapstick' humorous, yet elegant and kind which are reflected through her contents and interactions with fans. Pons firstly built her sense of authenticity from her hilarious vine videos as a family influencer. Then she affirmed it through her algorithmic authenticity of 'slapstick' humour videos of her and her friends before being able to fully establish her expanded-personal brand through Instagram and Youtube. The expanded-personal brand also attracted more fanbases, yet due to a scandal, it was tainted, putting her popularity and fans at stake, to which she tried to retain by publicising her phone number for a promised-real-engagement with her fans.

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