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**Kaley N. Martin** is a current doctoral student and Broadcast Producer at The University of Alabama. Kaley is pursuing a Ph.D. in Communication and Information Sciences from the College of Communication and Information Sciences. She is also a Broadcast Producer for the Division of Strategic Communications. Kaley holds a Master of Arts in Strategic Communication from Texas Tech University and a Bachelor's degree in Broadcast Production from the University of Montevallo. Her research interests surround the sociology of media producers and the effects of that content on the greater society.

**Dr. Shaheen Kanthawala** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media at The University of Alabama. Her primary research interests lie at the intersection of health communication and technologies; and recently has been examining the effects of social media and the spread of health misinformation. Dr. Kanthawala holds a Ph.D. from Michigan State University (2019), two Master of Arts degrees from Michigan State University (2015/2012), and a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Mumbai (2009).

### **Abstract**

Social media influencer research has been a new and emerging area in mass communication, advertising and media studies, but few have examined social media influencers in relation to roles, professions, gender and race. Influencers of color are beginning to speak out about diversity problems within the influencer industry and their efforts to legitimize themselves within a complex system of mediated communication between brand, consumer and influencer. This study seeks to add to this existing literature and expound on the study of roles and professions through the lens of legitimation strategies of social media influencers of color on Instagram as an emerging profession and the impact this shaping has on not only media culture, but society as a whole. Through in-depth interviews with approximately 30 social media influencers of color on Instagram, this study aims to add to the body of knowledge surrounding roles and professions by analyzing an "emerging profession" in the digital media-sphere.

The findings of this work will have both theoretical and practical implications as it furthers the sociological study of roles and occupations specific to gender and race within new media spaces, while also providing practical application for not only content creators, such as influencers, but also utilizers of those creators, brands. Additionally, the data provided from this study will further research on the legitimation strategies of roles and social media influencers by bridging a new path of gender and race centered studies.