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Instagram Influencers: The Effects of Sponsorship on Follower Engagement With Fitness Instagram Celebrities

Morgan Neal

mvn1738@rit.edu

Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

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Instagram Celebrities

by

Morgan Neal

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of

Morgan Neal presented on December 1, 2017.

_____

Ammina Kothari, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Communication
Thesis Advisor

_____

Jonathan Schroeder, Ph.D.
William A. Kern Professor in Communications
School of Communication
Thesis Advisor

_____

Andrea Hickerson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Director
School of Communication

_____

Grant Cos, Ph.D.
Professor and Director for Graduate Programs
School of Communication

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Morgan V. Neal

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

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Abstract

Instagram influencer marketing is one of the fastest growing trends in advertising. Part of

what makes influencers so powerful is their ability to foster parasocial relationships with

their followers. But does this relationship change when an influencer becomes affiliated

with brands? This study assessed how brand promotions affect follower engagement with

influencer posts through the lens of source credibility theory. A quantitative content

analysis was performed on 100 fitness influencer posts and their comments (N = 7,716) to

determine if followers interact differently with sponsored and organic posts. Significant

differences in follower engagement and sentiments were found between sponsored and

organic content. The researcher also conducted interviews with ten Instagram fitness

influencers and found that influencers notice these effects and take steps to mediate them.

These findings can benefit influencers and brand managers by providing them with some

best practices for keeping engagement up during influencer campaigns. It also provides us

with a greater understanding of the power of online communities and their influence on

consumer opinion.

Instagram Influencers: The Effects of Sponsorship on Follower Engagement With Fitness

Instagram Celebrities

What does it mean to be famous in the 21st century? Before the Internet, it took

either impressive wealth, industry connections, or a whole lot of luck to thrust yourself into

the public eye (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013). Brands, politicians, celebrities, and

organizations used to enjoy one-way communication with the masses through traditional

media outlets like television, radio, and print media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However,

these once impossibly steep barriers of entry have been softened by the accessibility of a

mass audience allowed by social media. Today, all you really need to obtain a large

following of listeners is a point-of-view, a smartphone, and an account on one of the many

social platforms that have emerged from this rapidly growing trend. On Instagram, some of

the most popular accounts are not owned by musicians, athletes, actors, or models, but by

ordinary consumers who have built a strong following through sharing interesting, original

content that entices, educates, and entertains other users with similar interests.

The term "Instafamous" is often used to describe these otherwise everyday people

who, despite having thousands or sometimes millions of followers on Instagram, do not

command the same level of attention offline as traditional celebrities. These Instagram

influencers straddle the line between megastars and the average Joe, making them a new

kind of micro-celebrity that has only been made possible by Web 2.0.

Social media has forever changed the way we seek entertainment, information, and

interaction with others. It has also changed how brands attempt to reach us and influence

our attitudes and purchase intentions toward their products and services. Brands have

used endorsers in their advertising for decades, armed with the knowledge that using a

credible speaker to relay product information typically has positive effects on consumer behavior (Friedman, Termini, & Washington, 1976). Most often, these endorsers are celebrities who are very effective at catching and holding consumers' attention and increasing brand awareness. Celebrity endorsements, however, tend to be expensive and are sometimes viewed as untrustworthy because the stars are motivated by money and not by sharing honest opinions and experiences (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997). Other campaigns use peer endorsers, ordinary consumers who potential customers can relate to, to spread positive word-of-mouth and create powerful brand associations of trust and service. While this tactic is far more accessible to brands with tight budgets, peer endorsers do not catch our eye the way celebrities do and therefore are easily forgotten (Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016).

In the past few years, brands have started catching on to another type of endorser who possesses traits of both celebrities and peers: the social media celebrity (Booth & Matic, 2011). Because of its visual nature and astounding growth, Instagram has emerged as a powerful tool for marketers. Instafamous users possess visibility and popularity similar to traditional celebrities, but also appear more relatable to consumers because they typically live normal lives offline. These celebrity-peer hybrids, therefore, have the potential to be very effective ambassadors for brands looking to increase their awareness in the social media sphere.

Many of these Instagram influencers exist within niche online social circles, like the focus of this study - the fitness community. Fitness-focused users have found a home on Instagram where they can find advice and information about workouts, clean eating, and healthy living. They also share pictures and videos depicting their own progress to keep

themselves accountable and obtain praise and encouragement from other users. At the center of this online community are the influencers. Because most of these Instafamous users have a certain physique or skill set that followers aim to achieve, they become the source of important information, advice, and motivation for their followers. Their perceived credibility as fitness professionals makes them ideal endorsers for companies that sell workout equipment, attire, healthy foods, supplements, and other fitness-related products.

While the topics of celebrity and peer endorsers have been frequently studied in communication and marketing research, the emerging trend of micro-celebrity endorsers has received far less attention and the effectiveness of this type of endorsement is largely unknown. Despite uncertainty surrounding this tactic, the influencer industry has recently experienced rapid growth and is projected to be valued at $5 billion to $10 billion by 2020 (Hershman, 2017). It is also unclear whether affiliating with a brand changes followers' perceptions of social media celebrities, since their relatability is what makes them feel like friends rather than stars. In addition, most of the previous studies on social media influencers have tested their effectiveness as endorsers using random samples which included participants who did not have prior experience with the influencer (Brison, Byon, & Iii, 2016; Fred, 2015), and thus, did not take into account how the preexisting bond followers feel with a social media celebrity affects their perceptions of an advertising message. This study explored strategies used by successful Instagram influencers to shape and maintain their online image, partnerships with brands, and relationships with their followers. How are influencers able to propel themselves from ordinary social media users to online celebrities? How do brands use them to relay marketing messages to their

followers? And does using their online fame to make money impact how followers perceive and interact with their favorite influencers?

Using a content analysis of sponsored and organic Instagram posts by popular influencers and the associating comments, I looked for trends in sentiments and purchase intentions of endorsed brands, follower feelings about sponsored influencers, and fan engagement with Instagram celebrities. I also interviewed ten influencers in the fitness Instagram community to learn how they attract and engage followers, select and promote brands, and perceive the influence of brand affiliation on their online reputations. These findings could potentially offer valuable insights to brands considering the use of social media influencers in their promotional mix as well as Instafamous users contemplating pursuing brand ambassadorship as a way to make money based on their online popularity.

Theory

This study looked at the influencer trend through the lens of source credibility theory. Due to the novelty of this marketing tactic, few researchers have used source credibility to understand the impact of social media influencers on consumer opinions and behavior. However, extensive research has been conducted on the credibility of endorsers used in traditional advertisements. This section will provide an overview of prior research on celebrity endorsers and peer endorsers as well as the few studies that have looked at social media influencer endorsers.

The concept of source credibility can be traced back to Aristotle's treatise *The Rhetoric*; the philosopher identified three elements of persuasion: pathos, logos, and ethos (Omeogu, 2012). Ethos, which Aristotle described as the most important persuasive element, refers to a speaker's knowledge, moral authority, and helpfulness. At its most

basic level, source credibility theory states that when a communicator is perceived as credible, their message is more likely to be accepted by receivers. The theory was originally developed in a study by Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss (1951). The researchers used a survey to test audiences' attitudes toward speakers and the perceived validity of their messages based on information regarding the speakers' identity and experience. They found that participants who were exposed to identical communications presented by credible and non-credible sources ranked the credible sources as overall "more fair" and "more justified" in their opinions. They also noticed significantly more participants changed their opinions to match the credible communicator than the non-credible one (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). This principle has been applied to communications in business, politics, religion, public affairs, and marketing.

The various dimensions defining credibility have been extensively debated and researched by source credibility scholars (Applbaum & Anatol, 1972; Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McCroskey, 1966; McGuire, 1985; Wynn, 1987). Two of the most frequently cited models for determining a communicator's persuasiveness are the source-credibility model (Hovland et al., 1953) and the source-attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985). Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) identified expertise and trustworthiness as two essential qualities for source credibility. The researchers defined expertise as "the extent to which the communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" and trustworthiness as "the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid" (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21). They argue that both qualities are equally important in receivers' acceptance of a message as factual or valid. Even a communicator who has enough

perceived experience on a given topic to communicate valid assertions may lead receivers

to reject their message if they are judged to have something to gain by persuading listeners

in a particular direction. Likewise, a communicator who is perceived as unbiased with no

ulterior motives for communicating a particular position may not persuade receivers if

they do not appear to be an expert on the topic. McGuire (1985) argues that, apart from the

need to develop attitudes that are valid, another underlying motive for receivers'

acceptance of a message is their need to enhance their self-image by identifying with a

source that is considered likeable or attractive. In his source-attractiveness model, McGuire

identifies physical attractiveness, similarity, familiarity, and likability as the most

important factors for persuading a receiver who is motivated by social or self-gratification

needs.

        Source credibility has been frequently applied to advertising research involving

both peer and celebrity endorsers, but there has been far more focus on the latter. Studies

relating to source credibility and celebrity endorsements over the past several decades

have used one or both of these models as well as other, less researched dimensions of

credibility. DeSarbo and Harshman (1985) focused on expertness, trustworthiness,

attractiveness, and likeability while Whitehead (1968) used trustworthiness, competence,

dynamism, and objectivity. Ohanian (1990) recognized the need for more consistency in

source credibility studies and developed a fifteen-point tri-component scale for ranking

celebrity endorsers using the expertise and trustworthiness dimensions from Hovland et

al. (1953) and the attractiveness dimension from McGuire (1985). The attractiveness

dimension is a combination of physical looks and overall likability (Ohanian, 1991). She

found a strong correlation between celebrity spokespersons ranking highly on all three

dimensions and increased product inquiry, consideration, and purchase intentions of the endorsed products among participants. This tri-component scale is widely used in source credibility studies related to celebrities and their effectiveness as endorsers (Brison et al., 2016; Choi & Rifon, 2012; Fred, 2015; Munnukka et al., 2016).

Alternatively, McCracken (1989) criticizes the source-credibility and source-attractiveness models for failing to explain why some celebrities, despite ranking well on all dimensions of credibility and attractiveness, are not good endorsers for all products. He, instead, proposes the meaning-transfer model to explain why some level of congruence between the celebrity and the brand they are promoting is necessary for the endorsement to have the desired effects on consumer behavior. This approach suggests that celebrities, through their presence in the public eye, possess certain cultural meanings that get symbolically transferred to the brand they endorse and eventually to the consumer who buys the product. Consumers often look to celebrities as inspiration for constructing their own identities (Hung, 2014) and, therefore, will respond well to ads featuring celebrities endorsing products congruent with their perceived cultural meanings and whose own image is similar to the consumer's ideal self-image (Choi & Rifon, 2015).

Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta (2010) found evidence to suggest that the meaning transfer model is not just a one-way path where meanings transfer from the celebrity to the brand and eventually to the consumer. Brand meanings can sometimes also transfer from the brand or product to the endorser, making the choice of whether or not to endorse a brand a very important one for celebrities. When used in conjunction, both the meaning transfer model and source credibility theory can help brands and celebrities forge endorsement contracts that enhance their image in the consumer's mind.

A common area of interest for source credibility studies and celebrity endorsements is how effective the individual dimensions of Ohanian's tri-component scale are at influencing consumer behavior, and how expert, trustworthy, and attractive celebrities used in advertising are perceived to be, by consumers. Ohanian (1991) isolated the individual dimensions in her model and found that only perceived expertise had a significant impact on consumer purchase intentions of the endorsed product. Similarly, O'Mahony and Meenaghan (1997) surveyed consumers on their attitudes about celebrity endorsements, perceptions of various celebrities' expertise, trustworthiness, likeability, attractiveness, and personality, and their purchase intentions if those celebrities were to endorse a variety of products. The researchers found that only the celebrities' perceived expertise had significant effects on purchase intentions across a wide range of product categories. Respondents also indicated that while, overall, they felt celebrity endorsements were entertaining and attention-gaining, they did not feel they were believable and ranked all the celebrities lower on trustworthiness than any other dimension tested.

Another popular type of endorser used by brands to influence consumer attitudes is the peer endorser. A peer endorser is typically a satisfied customer and is most effective when the objective of the ad is for the consumer to relate to the endorser (Ohanian, 1990). Research shows that ordinary people used in endorsements are perceived as very trustworthy and similar to other consumers but are not typically seen as experts (Munnukka et al., 2016; Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2012). Peer endorsers' ability to appear trustworthy and relatable differs from celebrity endorsers, who are often perceived as very attractive and possessing a lot of expertise. But, while using an ordinary person to deliver advertising messages is certainly much cheaper than employing a celebrity, the

attention celebrities command cannot be matched by peer endorsers.

The body of literature related to source credibility theory and endorsements has focused mainly on the use of celebrity endorsers and has also touched on peer endorsers. There is evidence in the literature to support the use of both types of endorsers, with celebrities scoring well on expertise (Ohanian, 1991; O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997) and peers being perceived as more trustworthy and similar to consumers (Munnukka et al., 2016; Willemsen et al., 2012). Because social media celebrities possess traits of both celebrities and peers, they have the potential to be even more influential to consumer behavior than either of the previously discussed endorser types. However, because of the novelty of using social media influencers as endorsers, more research is essential to determine how followers actually react when their favorite Instafamous accounts start endorsing brands.

The few studies related to source credibility and social media influencers have come to different conclusions about how consumers rank influencers before and after they affiliate with a brand. Brison, Byon, and Iii (2016) tested how a Twitter endorsement from a fictitious athlete of an unknown brand affected both consumers' attitudes toward the brand and the athlete. The results revealed positive effects of the athlete's endorsement on attitudes toward the brand and reported higher scores of trustworthiness, and no change in expertise and attractiveness, for the athlete after he engaged in an endorsement. Fred (2015) studied the effects of endorsement on a YouTube makeup artist and reported a negative impact on the YouTuber's trustworthiness and expertise after engaging in an endorsement.

It is important to note, however, that both of these studies used participants who

were unfamiliar with the influencer. This research examined Instagram celebrities who have established a loyal group of followers, many of whom feel a parasocial bond with the influencer. These followers' preexisting feelings towards the influencer may have an impact on their reactions to the endorsement that did not influence the participants in Brison et al. (2016) and Fred's (2015) research. Taking into account the close relationship followers have with influencers, this study analyzed how the influencers' endorsements impact their followers' attitudes and purchase intentions of the brand and the differences in follower engagement on organic posts and posts containing an endorsement.

Related Studies

Before the Internet, brands had near complete control over the information being disseminated about their products. Brand managers took advantage of integrated marketing communications (IMC) to ensure all the elements of the promotional mix - advertising, public relations, personal selling, publicity, direct marketing, and promotions - were communicating a cohesive message about brand attributes and values (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). While word-of-mouth communication between consumers still took place, it was typically face-to-face and had limited reach. However, when sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter started popping up in the mid-2000s, brands lost a great deal of control over the IMC process. These new social platforms take some power away from brand managers and give consumers the ability to spread brand information, both positive and negative, instantaneously, across multiple social networks with the potential for worldwide reach. Researchers have found that consumer-generated content has greater effects on purchase intentions and is perceived as more trustworthy, authentic, and credible than company-sponsored communications (Lawrence, Fournier, & Brunel, 2013).

Because consumers today are increasingly turning to social media to seek product

information and trust other consumers over any form of paid advertising (Mangold &

Faulds, 2009; Whitler, 2014), harnessing the consumer's power to influence brand image is

extremely important for marketing managers.

        One way for firms to steer conversations in a positive direction is by taking

advantage of online communities that form on social platforms and link consumers with

common interests together to discuss, critique, and share information. At the center of

these online communities are social media influencers who are often seen as a source of

entertainment and information by other like-minded social media users (Holt, 2016). The

"megaphone effect" refers to the newfound ability of ordinary consumers to reach a mass

audience through sharing of exemplary taste and talent on social media and blogs

(Mcquarrie et al., 2013). Social media influencers typically start-off as normal, everyday

people, but as they develop a substantial online following, they are able to convert their

cultural capital into actual capital in the form of free products, endorsement deals,

invitations to industry events, and even careers in their chosen field of interest.

        The trend of using online personalities as product endorsers started in the mid-

2000s on blogging platforms and has gradually transferred to social media, mainly Twitter,

YouTube, and Instagram (Abidin, 2016). Today, the use of online influencers has become

one of the hottest marketing trends with the Instagram influencer market alone projected

to reach $2 billion by 2019 (Hershman, 2017). On Instagram, hashtags link like-minded

users to each other, creating niche affinity groups like fitness, fashion, travel, or parenting.

Influencers in these affinity groups develop a following by demonstrating their expertise in

the specific niche and helping to educate and inspire other group members who use them

as a source of information (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). Their roles as leaders in these

online communities give them the power to sway other users' opinions on certain trends,

brands, and products. In some cases, Instagram influencers use brands to help build their

own personal identity online (Presi, Maehle, & Kleppe, 2016). Featuring iconic brands in

their posts allows them to assume some of that brand's distinct associations as their own.

Posing with an expensive Chanel bag, for instance, posits the influencer as someone

fashionable and wealthy enough to wear very high-end clothing. Their popularity and

positions as opinion leaders also gives influencers the potential to extend brand

associations and meanings. Whether or not the company paid for this exposure, a popular

influencer post featuring a brand contributes to online brand conversations and awareness

in the consumer's consideration set.

Instagram influencers are a type of public figure who bridges the gap between

megastars and ordinary people. Their popularity and influence in the social media sphere is

similar to that of traditional celebrities, but they also work hard to appear down-to-earth

and relatable. The concept of parasocial bonds, first introduced by Horton and Wohl

(1956), refers to the ability of the media to create the illusion of a face-to-face relationship

between a personality and a viewer. While originally applied to new media, such as

television, social media also helps online personalities cultivate one-sided relationships

with their audience by using conversational tones, sharing personal information, and

inviting followers to interact with them on the social platform. Because buzz marketing,

also known as sponsored word-of-mouth, is most effective when the communications come

from a friend instead of a stranger, maintaining the appearance of normalcy and nurturing

parasocial bonds with followers is essential for maximizing their power as an influencer

(Abendroth & Heyman, 2013). In fact, most Instafamous users refer to their admirers as followers instead of fans to maintain a perceived closeness in social standing to other users (Abidin, 2016). They often interact with their followers by responding to their comments, liking or commenting on pictures they are tagged in, and offering "shout-outs" and "follow-backs" to particularly engaged users. Some also organize live-streamed Q&As and physical meet-ups with their followers (Abidin, 2015).

According to Eagar and Dann (2016), Instagram users compose their own self-brand by posting different types of pictures painting them in their desired lifestyle. Many Instafamous users use these techniques to position themselves between a celebrity and an everyday person and to assert themselves as credible sources to their followers. They post "autobiography" selfies, pictures portraying mundane, everyday events like grocery shopping or lounging on the couch, to appear relatable to their followers. In contrast, they post "propaganda" selfies with their makeup and hair perfectly done, typically retouched with flattering lighting and camera angles, to remind us of their physical attractiveness and elevated status. To build up their position as an expert or role model in their online circles, they post "self-help" selfies depicting their mastery of a skill. In combination, these posts construct the influencer's image as elite, but down-to-earth, attractive, but not without flaws, and as a source of valuable information for followers who want to be more like them.

There are three basic ways in which Instagram influencers promote brands: advertorial dissemination, advertorial aggregation, and advertorial instigation (Abidin, 2016). Dissemination refers to basic influencer posts featuring a brand, usually along with some information about the product. Aggregation involves a call for followers to interact with the post for some reward, like a product sample or a shout-out from the influencer.

Instigation, which involves requesting followers to generate their own, similar content using a hashtag for the possibility of a reward, has the potential for reaching the greatest number of consumers because it extends the scope of the influencer's post to all the followers of all the people who comply.

Based on the literature on celebrity and peer endorsements, influencers have the potential to have a powerful impact on consumer behavior because of their popularity, leadership in their respective communities, and perceived relatability to their followers. But does publicly promoting brands damage their carefully crafted just-like-everybody-else persona? Because much of Instafamous users' popularity is due to their perceived similarity to their followers, announcing a partnership with a brand may make them appear to be in a higher social standing than ordinary consumers and cause followers to question their motives. Due to Federal Trade Commission regulations, social media influencers must disclose their relationship with the brands they endorse to avoid deceiving consumers into thinking the information was disseminated organically (Federal Trade Commission, 2009). Abendroth and Heyman (2013) found that disclosure by paid buzz marketers causes negative effects on how message receivers perceive the communicator promoting a brand. In addition, evidence suggests that if the brand performs poorly, negative attributes about the brand may be transferred to the Instagram celebrity's own persona, resulting in fewer followers and less influence as a brand ambassador (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010). These issues need to be carefully weighed by influencers before deciding whether or not to partner with a brand. To investigate the relationship between Instagram influencers, their followers, and the brands they endorse on Instagram, I pose the following research questions.

Research Questions

Content Analysis

Impact of endorsing products on follower perceptions of Instagram influencers.

- RQ1- Is the frequency of positive sentiments about Instagram influencers higher on sponsored or organic posts?

- RQ2- Is the frequency of negative sentiments about Instagram influencers higher on sponsored or organic posts?

Effectiveness of Instagram influencers on consumer behavior.

- RQ3- What is the frequency of positive and negative sentiments about endorsed brands on sponsored Instagram influencer posts?

- RQ4 - What is the frequency of comments inquiring about endorsed brands on sponsored Instagram influencer posts?

- RQ5- What is the frequency of comments indicating purchase intentions of endorsed brands on sponsored Instagram influencer posts?

Influencer-follower engagement on sponsored and organic posts.

- RQ6- Is the frequency of follower questions about the influencer higher on sponsored or organic posts?

- RQ7- Is the frequency of follower compliance with influencer commands (tag a friend, answer a question, use a hashtag) higher on sponsored or organic posts?

- RQ8- Is the frequency of influencer response to follower questions and comments higher on sponsored or organic posts?

- RQ9- Are there more "likes" on sponsored or organic posts?

- RQ10- Are there more comments on sponsored or organic posts?

Interviews

- RQ11 - What is the background of a fitness Instagram influencer?

- RQ12 - How do fitness influencers go from being ordinary Instagram users to social media celebrities?

- RQ13 - What qualities are most important to building and maintaining an online image?

- RQ14 - How do fitness Instagram influencers select and build relationships with the brands they work with?

- RQ15 - What strategies are used by fitness influencers to build and maintain relationships with their followers?

Methodology

This study used content analysis and interviews to answer the posed research questions about Instagram influencers, their partnership with brands, and relationship with their followers. First, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to analyze information from popular fitness Instagram influencers' posts and their corresponding comments. Quantitative content analysts search for specific items in samples of texts and record those units, transforming them into numbered data that can be used to make inferences that tell a story about the texts being analyzed (Krippendorff, 2004). While previous quantitative studies on source credibility and social media influencers have used survey instruments to collect their data (Brison et al., 2016; Fred, 2015), this study's focus on the parasocial relationship between Instagram celebrities and their followers called for an instrument that takes into account these bonds and their influence on consumer behavior. Performing a content analysis on Instafamous users' posts and their

corresponding comments allowed for indirect examination of the relationship between influencers, their followers, and the brands they endorse.

To obtain a more narrative explanation of the influencer phenomenon, the researcher also interviewed ten Instagram influencers in the fitness community about the strategies used to build their online brand, partnerships they have with brands, and the relationships cultivated with their followers. Interviews are effective at capturing people's opinions in their own words and attaining unique insights and reasonings that quantitative methods cannot uncover (Treadwell, 2017). While the content analysis captured the followers' reactions to influencers on Instagram, the interview portion was able to provide the influencers' perspectives of their online activities. The interviews also offered narrative explanations of many of the trends observed during the first part of the study.

This study focused on influencers in the fitness Instagram community, because according to ShortStack, an app that helps brands build engaging social media campaigns, #fitness is projected to be the 35th most popular hashtag in 2017 with #healthy, #gym, #fit, and #workout also ranking in the top 100 (ShortStack, 2016). The fitness community has found a home on Instagram and uses the platform to share workout videos, healthy meals, before-and-after weight loss shots, and "outfit of the day" pictures of on-trend workout clothes. The widespread reach of the fitness community has made it a popular target for workout clothing, weight loss, and healthy food brands that want to associate their products with attractive, fit, and influential users.

Content Analysis

Data Collection

Five Instafamous fitness influencers were selected for the quantitative part of this

study partially based on Booth and Matic's (2011) suggested measurement scale for identifying valuable social media influencers capable of shaping brand perceptions. All five of the chosen influencers had more than 100,000 followers, posted multiple times a week, had received attention from media outlets outside of Instagram, and were affiliated with at least one brand at the time of the study.

Amandabisk: an exercise physiologist, former pole vaulter, and licensed yoga teacher from Perth, Australia with 665,000 followers.

Effortlyss: a fitness, fashion, and lifestyle influencer from New York City with 1.3 million followers.

Hannahbronfman: a New York City based DJ, fashion enthusiast, and fitness blogger with 356,000 followers.

Jessiebabyfit: a former dancer and fitness enthusiast from San Diego, California with 519,000 followers.

Nessasphere: a 39-year-old fitness blogger from Luxembourg with 230,000 followers.

Using an online random sample generator, 20 posts from each influencer published within 6 months at the beginning of the study in March of 2017 were selected for analysis for a total of 100 posts. Using a random sample of all the available posts from each influencer means that every post in the population had an equal chance of being selected for analysis. Therefore, the results can be generalized to the entire population of posts published to each influencers' account in the past 6 months (Creswell, 2014). Each selected post was coded for sponsorship, number of likes, and number of comments. Then, each comment published on the post was individually coded for influencer sentiments, brand

sentiments, and follower engagement variables (see Appendix A). A total of 7,716

comments were coded.

Reliability

To ensure the codebook used in the quantitative content analysis was reliable, the

researcher and one other coder analyzed 10% of the sample of posts and their

corresponding comments for the selected variables. The coder was trained by the

researcher and coded several sample posts until the coder understood the correct

procedures. Once both the researcher and second reader finished analyzing 10% of the

posts, they compared results, discussed discrepancies, and decided on a final set of rules.

Acceptable levels of intercoder reliability via Krippendorff's alpha were achieved and

ranged from 0.81 to 1.0 for each variable tested. Given the reliability scores, the codebook

used for this study is considered reliable.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, the posts were separated into two data sets, one for

sponsored posts and one for organic, and examined using IBM Statistical Package for the

Social Sciences software to reveal the frequencies of each variable. The two sets were then

combined and run through IBM SPSS frequency tests again to obtain a breakdown of

sponsorship, likes, and comments. Most of the posts selected were organic (n = 70; 70%),

with between 1 and 5,000 likes (n = 42; 42%) and 51 and 100 comments (n = 41; 41%). An

overview of the distribution of comments and likes can be found in Appendix B. A

complete breakdown of sponsorship, comments, and likes for each individual influencer

can be found in Appendix C.

To test the relationship between sponsorship and influencer sentiments and

engagement, a Chi-square test of independence was run on the combined data set using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software. Chi-square test of independence analyzes simple frequency data and the relationships between variables that fall into specific categories (Wilson & Joye, 2017).

Interviews

Data Collection

After completing the content analysis, the researcher conducted interviews with ten influencers from the Instagram fitness community about their experiences on Instagram. The interview questions were derived from trends observed during the content analysis phase of the research (see Appendix D). Due to the varying geographic locations and busy schedules of the interviewees, the interviews were conducted either over the phone or via email.

The researcher selected potential participants by searching Instagram hashtags, reading online articles about popular influencers, and looking at suggested accounts on Instagram's "Discover" page. All five influencers studied in the content analysis phase of this research were invited to take part in the interview phase, but only one participated. The rest of the participants were required to have a fitness-focused theme, post consistently, be affiliated with at least one brand, and have a minimum of 32,000 followers - the average following of a sponsored Instagram influencer according to Hershman (2016).

The participants were recruited using Instagram direct messaging or email. The researcher contacted 61 influencers to participate in the study but 45 did not respond, three declined, and three were sent questionnaires but never returned them.

Data Analysis

Once all the interviews were complete, the researcher split the interview questions into five research questions. She entered the questionnaires into Dedoose software and looked for common themes in the interviews that help answer the research questions.

Confidentiality

To protect the personal and business interests of each influencer who agreed to participate in the interview portion of this study, the researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym.

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Results

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Content Analysis

Impact of Endorsement on Perceptions of Influencers

Research questions 1 and 2 had to do with the effects of post sponsorship on the frequency of comments containing positive and negative sentiments about the influencer. Chi-square test of independence showed a significant relationship between sponsorship and positive sentiments, $\chi2$ (1) = 10.844, p < .001. The frequency of comments containing positive sentiments about the influencer was higher on organic posts (n = 2,331; 38.8%) than sponsored posts (n = 580; 34.6%). The relationship between sponsorship and negative sentiments about the influencer yielded no significant results, $\chi2$ (1) = 1.745, p = .187. Although the relationship was not significant, there were slightly more comments containing a negative sentiment about the influencer on sponsored posts (n = 17; 1%) than organic posts (n = 42; 0.7%)

Effectiveness of Influencers on Consumer Behavior

Research questions 3, 4, and, 5 inquired about the frequency of positive and negative brand sentiments, questions about the brand, and purchase intentions of the

brand on sponsored posts only. The results revealed that 5.8% (n = 97) of comments on

sponsored posts contained a positive sentiment about the brand or product being endorsed

and 0.08% (n = 14) contained a negative sentiment. 1.1% (n = 19) of comments asked a

question about the brand or product, and 1.7% (n = 28) indicated an intention to purchase

or a prior purchase of the brand or product.

Impact of Endorsement on Influencer-Follower Engagement

Research questions 6, 7, 8, and 9 dealt with the level of follower and influencer

engagement on sponsored and organic posts. Chi-square test for independence was run on

the combined data set and found no significant correlation between sponsorship and

comments where the follower asked a question about the influencer, χ^2 (1) = 2.039, p =

0.153. While no significant correlation was found, frequency tests on the separated data

sets showed a slightly higher percentage of comments inquiring about the influencer on

sponsored posts (n = 104; 6.2%) than organic posts (n = 318; 5.3%). There was also no

significant relationship between sponsorship and the frequency of comments in which

followers tagged another user, χ^2 (1) = 0.655, p = 0.418. Comments containing a tag were

slightly more frequent on organic posts (n = 1281; 21.3%) than sponsored posts (n = 341;

20.3%). A significant relationship was found between sponsorship and follower compliance

with influencer requests, χ^2 (1) = 50.051, p < .001. Comments indicating some level of

compliance were more frequent on organic posts (n = 589; 9.8%) than sponsored posts (n

= 72; 4.3%). A significant relationship was also found between sponsorship and responses

from the influencer, χ^2 (1) = 13.482, p < .001. Influencers responded to their followers'

comments more frequently on organic posts (n = 491; 8.2%) than sponsored posts (n = 92;

5.5%).

Research questions 10 and 11 looked at the effect of sponsorship on the number of likes and comments on influencer posts. Significant relationships were found between the sponsorship variable and both the number of post likes, χ2 (7) = 432.626, *p* < .001 and comments, χ2 (6) = 720.723, *p* < .001. The organic posts analyzed had more likes and comments than the sponsored posts.

Interviews

Research question 11 asked about the background of the interviewees. The average age of the ten influencers interviewed for this study was 30 with the youngest being 25 and the oldest 47. All of the influencers identified as female, had between 45,000 and 506,000 followers at the time of the interview, and were working with at least one brand. Almost all had completed their bachelor's degree and one was applying to graduate schools to continue her education. Only two were using their Instagram account as their primary source of income. Four worked as fitness instructors or fitness entrepreneurs and four were in the medical field.

Research question 12 was about fitness influencer's journey from ordinary Instagram users to "Instafamous" users. All of the participants started their Instagram journey without any significant recognition offline. Some joined Instagram simply to interact with friends and families and shifted to a fitness focus later on. Others created their accounts to promote their own fitness-related businesses, like personal training or athletic apparel. One of the most interesting themes, however, was influencers who started their current accounts to document their own fitness journeys and hold themselves accountable for reaching their goals. Four of the influencers started their Instagram accounts with this intention. They became members of the fitness Instagram community

and looked to other Instagram users, most of whom had much larger followings than them at the time, for information about workouts and healthy eating and motivation for living a healthier lifestyle. Most of these former "ordinary" Instagram users expressed surprise at their newfound success because they did not join with the intention of becoming a public figure.

Jennifer, a 29-year-old influencer with 127,000 followers said,

I originally started my account because I wanted to live a healthier lifestyle, and I wanted to follow others to gain motivation and inspiration to do so. I never created my account with the intention of becoming an influencer. As time passed though, I started realizing that other people were coming to me for inspiration; I guess you could say I became one of "those" accounts that I went to when I first started my fitness journey.

Jennifer is one of several interviewees who joined the Instagram fitness community to seek information and information from Instafamous users. Another influencer, Amanda, started her account to hold herself accountable for losing her pregnancy weight as well as to get motivation from users in a similar situation.

Amanda, a 28-year-old influencer with 69,000 followers said,

I never had the intention of creating an Instagram and gaining a following. I started my fitness Insta after I had my little boy. Pregnancy had changed my body quite a bit and I thought it would be a good way to keep myself motivated and accountable as I worked to get back in shape postpartum. I found other women and mamas in my same situation and it really inspired me to stick with my workouts.

Both these quotes represent a trend of ordinary members of the fitness community bridging the gap between influencer and follower and gaining a following of their own. As their online popularity grew and more fitness-focused users began to look to them for information and motivation for their own fitness journeys, these Instafamous users were offered opportunities to participate with brands for various rewards, like free products, exposure on brand-owned pages, and money.

Research question 13 asked about the qualities influencers feel are most important to building and maintaining their online image. Three major themes emerged from their answers: authenticity, value, and content quality.

Six of the ten influencers mentioned the importance of being real, authentic, and opening up to their followers about their real-life struggles. As mentioned previously, Instagram influencers are able to form meaningful, parasocial relationships with their followers by appearing relatable and down-to-earth despite their large number of followers. The influencers interviewed in this study seem to confirm the importance of being real when connecting with their followers and preserving their online personas.

Amanda said,

I think you really have to open yourself up and be genuine. People can tell when you're just posting for the sake of posting or just saying what you think they want to hear. You'll only make real connections and really reach people if you're raw and genuine.

Sarah, a 28-year-old influencer with 237,000 followers said,

I take a lot of pride in keeping it real...I've cried on my story, I'm not going to lie...If I

have a zit, I'm going to talk to you about how I have a zit because I'm a real

person...everyone's human and everyone has those flaws.

Heather, a 25-year-old influencer with 121,000 followers said, "I get a lot that I am

relatable and real. Which is one of the best compliments to receive!"

This fits in with Abidin's (2015) observations of influencers posting about mundane

aspects of their lives to engage with their followers by appearing to be just like them.

Another common theme in the interviews was the need to provide value to

followers by offering them inspiration, advice, or information about fitness-related topics

weight loss, workouts, and clean eating.

Stephanie, a 31-year-old influencer with 249,000 followers said, "They need a

passion for creating amazing content that helps people in some way. It can be to make them

laugh or motivate them to make changes in their life."

Some of the influencers interviewed focus on education by posting workout videos

and healthy recipes while others hope to motivate followers with fitness challenges and

before-and-after pictures. While the ways in which the influencers tried to be valuable to

their followers differed, they all mentioned the desire to help their followers in one way or

another.

A final theme that was prominent in the interviews was content quality. Five of the

ten interviewees expressed that devoting time and effort to posting high quality, visually

pleasing images was important to building their online image.

Amanda said, "It's time consuming and it can become a bit of an obsession but

having a nice feed aesthetic and photos with some thought behind them goes a loooong way."

Rachel, a 47-year-old influencer with 349,000 followers said, "Take high quality photos to showcase what your passion is...I think of yoga as art and share images I think showcase that. I switch from indoor to outdoor, color to black and white to keep things visually interesting."

Clearly, devoting time to creating content that is visually pleasing and engages followers is an important element in building and maintaining an online image. When asked how much time they spend weekly on creating, editing, and posting Instagram content, the average commitment was about seven hours.

Research question 14 inquired about influencers' strategies for selecting and building relationship with brands. All of the influencers interviewed for this study were working with at least one brand at the time of the interview. Most of the brands they were affiliated with were fitness or health-focused, including activewear companies like Lorna Jane, ALO Yoga, Adidas, Under Armour, Reebok, and Fabletics, healthy food and supplements like Muscle Milk, PEScience, Kiwami Greens, and Quaker, and athletic equipment companies like TRX, Dick's Sporting Goods, Paddle Board Bliss, and Polar Global. A few were also working with brands outside of the fitness genre, like JCPenney, Kohls, Lee Jeans, Target, Crest, and Alcon.

All of the influencers said they are approached by brands about sponsorships rather than them reaching out to the companies. When asked about how they select a potential sponsor, all the influencers say they do background research about the company before deciding whether or not to partner with them. While they all use different criteria to decide

which brands to work with, congruity between the brand's image and values and the influencer's image and values was a common theme among most of the influencers.

Melissa, a 26-year-old influencer with 193,000 followers said, "I only work with a brand or a product that I would actually normally use, and like, and recommend to a friend. Nothing forced or that doesn't make sense with my page."

Elizabeth, a 30-year-old influencer with 152,000 followers said, "Many that I pass on are fitness and diet companies that say they understand what I'm all about but have no clue that the stuff they promote doesn't align with what I believe in."

Some of the common types of endorsements the influencers engaged in are single product posts, coupon codes, product reviews, product giveaways or sweepstakes, and brand ambassadorship - where the influencer is under contract by the brand for a set period of time. All participated in at least two of these types of endorsements, but their exact mix varied considerably.

Brand ambassadorship was the most commonly mentioned type of sponsorship with seven of the influencers having been an ambassador for at least one brand. Many expressed this as their preferred type of partnership because of the long-term relationship they are able to form with a brand they work well with.

Stephanie said, "I prefer to work with brands in long term partnerships. If I don't like a brand enough to want to do multiple shares, it might not be the right fit anyways."

Sarah said, "I will renew my contract with [name of brand] because I'm happy...I know they really appreciate my honest approach which makes me happy to work with them."

Five of the influencers have also used coupon codes to promote brands while passing along a discount to their followers and collecting a portion of each purchase made using their unique code. While some of the influencers like using this method because there is an additional benefit to their followers, Megan, a 29-year-old influencer with 506,000 followers expressed a distaste for coupon codes saying, "they diminish your value and make your page appear cheap."

Each of the interviewees participated in a different mix of endorsements and had different strategies for selecting brands. However, they all expressed the necessity of selecting brands and endorsement techniques that enhance their image, or at least do not diminish it significantly. Because brand perceptions, both positive and negative, can be transferred from the brand to the endorser's own image (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010), avoiding companies with poor quality products, bad customer service, or values that clash with the influencer's is very important for protecting their online reputation.

Research question 15 asked about the strategies influencers use to build and maintain relationships with their followers. One of the most important takeaways from these interviews was the importance of the relationships influencers have with their followers. It is clear that most think of their followers as a vital part of their success and make it a priority to help them build and maintain the connection. A few even referred to them as friends:

Jennifer said, "I hate using the term followers because I don't think of anyone who follows my page as that. I look at everyone as a friend—as part of a community."

Amanda said, "My following is really important to me. I feel like they're friends. I try to encourage them to reach out to me and I try to make sure I connect with them."

There were several common techniques the interviewees used to connect and engage with their followers. While most followers will never meet their favorite influencer in person, every influencer interviewed said they had met at least one of their followers in real-life. Many of these meetups were coincidental, but six of the influencers have arranged events where members of their followers are invited to meet, chat, or take a workout class with them.

Another way the influencers connect with their followers is by responding to comments, direct messages, and hosting Q&As via Instagram's live streaming feature. Despite sometimes getting overwhelmed with comments and direct messages, all but one of the influencers interviewed say they try to respond to most, if not all, of their followers' questions, comments, and direct messages. Many also try to engage by asking their followers' questions about themselves and what kind of content they want to see more.

Amy, a 31-year-old influencer with 46,000 followers said,

I like to ask questions to people are more likely to engage and share their story. I think just trying to be authentic in general - telling them about my struggles, asking about their struggles - to see if I can help in any way.

Jennifer said, "I love using the new poll feature on IG to see what my audience wants to see more of from me, or to see how they liked a new blog post topic, etc. "

Apart from the common engagement techniques used by the interviewees, one outlier, Sarah, goes above and beyond to connect with her followers and make them feel like friends. She said she responds to every single direct message, sends her followers care packages, and even took two followers through an online total body transformation free of

charge. These are some quotes from her interview about how she tries to engage with her followers and help them out:

"I have taken two girls through a full transformation for free - just people who DMed me and I felt for them, I connected with them, and I said, 'Alright let's do this!'"

"If somebody sends me a message that really hits my feelings I will video message them back instead of typing because I feel like it's more personal."

"I actually have to go to the post office today because some girl from New York messaged me about the dill mustard I use...so I went to Walmart yesterday and bought four bottles for her and I'm gonna send it to her."

"Everyone is supporting me and using my code for [name of brand] and I obviously make a kickback off of that so $7 or $8 here and there to help my supporters is no big deal."

While Sarah's responses were not typical of the rest of the sample, they show that some influencers go the extra mile for their followers and truly appreciate how they have contributed to their Instagram fame and the rewards they have received from it.

Despite these powerful relationships influencers have with their followers, affiliating with brands seems to have some effect on how followers engage with their favorite influencers. All but two of the interviewees say they have noticed decreased follower engagement on sponsored posts as opposed to organic content. Many of them cite this as one of the reasons they are picky about which brands to work with and try to diminish the impact of sponsorship by making sure their sponsored content still seems like them.

Amy said,

I definitely feel like people get a little more wary of sponsored posts... I try to keep

sponsored posts in my own voice. Every once in awhile there's a brand I work with

that wants to determine the copy of the post and that's the worst. Even if I believe in

the product that's not how I talk and that comes across to the readers as well.

All but one of the influencers also try to keep their feed from seeming too

commercial by balancing out sponsored content with organic posts. Some have a formula

for how often they post about brands, but sometimes a brand's demands take priority over

follower engagement.

Heather, a 25-year-old influencer with 121,000 followers said,

With this being my only means of income right now I do find myself considering

more sponsored posts but I would say 95% of my feed is not sponsored. That is not

why I started this page and not what I am about but I hope people do understand I

have opportunities and this is my money maker right now!

Sarah said, "My contract says that I have to post once a week for [name of brand]. So

I prefer to make most of those posts be my recipes so people can get something out of it

and not feel like I'm trying to sell them something."

Jennifer said,

Sometimes the brand tells you which day you're posting for a specific campaign so

there may not be a lot of room for adjustment. But I always accept a collaboration if I

feel like it's a good fit—I'll never turn something down because I think I will have

too many sponsored posts.

Despite nearly all of the influencers noticing a lower engagement on sponsored

posts, only four say they have received negative comments from followers in response to

getting paid to promote brands. Of those four, three say that negative comments are very rare. Those who did not get negative feedback seem to believe they avoid it by only posting about quality brands that fit within their account aesthetic. The experience of the interviewees seems to line up with the results of the content analysis. While there were more negative sentiments about the influencers in the comments on sponsored posts than organic posts, the difference was not drastic enough to yield a significant result. The lower levels of engagement on sponsored posts shows that followers do not like branded content as much as personal posts, but may not feel strongly enough to voice their distaste to the influencer.

Discussion

The first part of this study examined the Instagram influencer phenomenon from the perspective of the follower. In particular, it sought to analyze follower reactions to endorsed brands on sponsored posts and the differences in follower engagement and reactions to the influencer on sponsored and organic posts. The second part focused on how the influencers themselves perceive their online popularity, relationships with their followers, and how partnering with brands impacts their success on Instagram. While previous studies on source credibility theory and social media influencers used survey instruments to test the effects of brand affiliation on popular social media users (Brison et al., 2016; Fred, 2015), this study's focus on the relationship between influencers and their followers called for a different approach. Performing a quantitative content analysis allowed for indirect observation of these interactions and conducting interviews offered narrative explanations of how sponsorship impacts influence-follower relationships and how influencers try to mediate those effects. Both sections produced several significant

findings that can help brand managers and social media influencers considering using this

rapidly growing marketing tactic.

Previous studies on source credibility and social media influencers produced

conflicting results about the effects of brand affiliation on user perceptions of social media

celebrities. Fred (2015) found that sponsorship had negative effects on the perceived

trustworthiness and expertise of a popular YouTube star. However, Brison et al. (2016)

found that sponsorship had positive effects on a Twitter celebrity's perceived

trustworthiness and did not affect perceived expertise or attractiveness.

While this study used different variables and different methods than both of the

aforementioned studies, the results are more in line with Fred's (2015) research.

The content analysis found significant differences in follower engagement and reactions

between sponsored and organic Instagram posts. Sponsored posts overall had fewer likes

and comments than organic posts and contained fewer positive sentiments about the

influencers. While not statistically significant, the frequency of negative sentiments about

the influencers was also higher on sponsored posts. This suggests that followers prefer

when their favorite Instagram celebrities post personal, genuine, spontaneous content as

opposed to content that has been incentivized by a brand.

The content analysis results also revealed some differences in follower-influencer

engagement on sponsored posts and organic posts. A significant relationship was found

between sponsorship and compliance with influencer requests. The compliance variable is

important because it shows how willing followers are to follow instructions from the

influencer, like tagging a friend, answering a question, or creating a post on their own page

using a specific hashtag. High levels of compliance suggest that followers are attentive and

eager to interact with their favorite Instagram celebrities. Some types of compliance, such as using a specific hashtag, also extend the influencer's reach to other users who do not currently follow them. While not statistically significant, the analysis also found that more followers tagged another user in the comments on organic posts than sponsored posts. Tagging someone who is not a follower also extends the influencer's reach and has the potential to increase their popularity and the visibility of their posts across different audiences.

These results could provide important insights to both influencers and brands. From the brand's perspective, it may seem like a good idea to have an endorser try to engage their audience by requesting followers tag a friend or create a post using a hashtag for a reward from the brand, like a free product sample. While this tactic could yield some increased consumer response, they may not be able to expect the same level of engagement that the influencer gets when they use the same strategy in an organic post.

A few variables tested in this study yielded surprising outcomes. For example, the frequency of questions for the influencer was slightly higher on sponsored posts, which seems contrary to the other engagement variables (tags and compliance), which were higher on organic posts. Though this relationship was not significant, it may suggest that followers perceive fitness influencers to have more expert knowledge when they are endorsed by a brand, like a workout equipment company or a healthy food brand.

The difference in the frequency of influencer responses on organic and sponsored posts was also unexpected. One might anticipate that the influencer would be more inclined to respond to followers' comments on sponsored posts because they are getting paid to promote the brand. However, the frequency of responses was significantly higher

on organic posts. This may suggest that, while influencers are getting paid to promote brands, they are more concerned with building relationships with their followers than pushing them to buy a product.

The interview portion of this study also provided some interesting insights on how sponsorship impacts influencers' relationships with their followers. Eight of the ten interviewees say they have noticed lower levels of engagement on sponsored posts than organic posts, which confirms the results from the content analysis. Some of the influencers expressed disappointment in the lack of engagement on sponsored posts because they see it as a necessary evil. Just as advertising is used to pay for radio, the Internet, and other "free" media, sponsored posts on Instagram support influencers for the time and energy spent creating informative, entertaining, and inspiring content that is free to their followers.

Despite a noticed lack of engagement on sponsored content, however, many of the influencers did offer solutions for diminishing the effects of endorsements and reducing the likelihood of receiving negative feedback from followers. Being selective about the types of companies they promote may help influencers avoid backlash from publishing sponsored content. Selecting companies that align well with their online image and products they would use in real life may make endorsements more genuine and authentic than brands that are drastically different than the influencers' usual image. Writing the post captions in the same voice used in organic posts may also help promotions seem more like an honest recommendation than a corporate message. Another best practice is incorporating sponsored brands into the type of content the influencer often posts. For example, one influencer who rarely notices less engagement on sponsored posts said she uses her

sponsor (a brand of protein powder) in healthy recipes that she shares with her followers

on a regular basis. Another example may be posting workout videos wearing the workout

clothes or using equipment sold by a sponsor.

Nine of the influencers also mentioned trying to mediate the effect sponsorship has

on their levels of engagement by balancing sponsored content with organic content so their

feed is not overwhelmed by ads. However, a few also said that sometimes the brand's

demands get in the way of their efforts to keep their page from becoming too commercial.

From a marketing manager perspective, it is easy to see why certain campaigns may

require influencers' product posts to align with their own promotions. That being said, if an

influencer publishes too many sponsored posts in a given time period, engagement on

those posts, as well as the influencer's page in general, will probably suffer. Greater

planning and communication between influencers and brands could help influencers

schedule when they need to have more organic content available to balance an uptick in

sponsored posts. Giving the influencers freedom to write their own copy, even if they are

provided with some guidelines, can also ensure sponsored posts do not stick out in the

influencers' feed and seem forced and inauthentic. Because previous research suggests that

messages coming from a peer have a greater influence on consumer behavior than

messages coming directly from a brand (Lawrence et al., 2013; Mangold & Faulds, 2009;

Whitler, 2014), tailoring sponsored influencer posts to match closely with organic content

could make a significant difference in the advertisements' effectiveness.

Limitations

While this study offered a perspective on the social media influencer phenomenon

that has not been looked at by prior research, it does have limitations. First, while the data

collected on follower engagement with promoted brands during the content analysis gives us some idea of their reactions to influencer endorsements, it offers limited information about this tactic's overall impact on consumer behavior. There is no way to verify that users who communicated a positive sentiment or intent to purchase a product actually followed through with that purchase. Likewise, consumers do not voice all their thoughts and questions about an endorsed product in the comments section of an Instagram post. Some may have visited the company website instead of asking the influencer about the product they are promoting. Others may have bought the product without commenting on the post about their purchase.

While the use of content analysis allowed the researcher to indirectly observe the influencer phenomenon, this instrument offers only a glimpse into the motivations of social media influencers and their followers' reactions to brand promotions. Most of the posts analyzed had between 1 and 5,000 likes and 51 and 100 comments despite every influencer having well over 100,000 followers. This means that the vast majority of followers' reactions were not analyzed by this research.

The interview section of the study, while helpful in providing narrative explanations of many of the trends observed by the content analysis, is based on a small sample of ten influencers. It would be helpful to get the perspectives of more influencers to see if their accounts match up with the sample from this study. Interviewing some of these influencers' followers could also offer some interesting insights that were not available in the comments analyzed in the content analysis.

This study also only looked at use of Instagram for product and brand promotions. While Instagram is the most popular and widely used platform for influencer marketing

(Hershman, 2017), social media celebrities also use other platforms, like YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat, to endorse products.

Lastly, the influencers selected for this research were all a part of the very popular and rapidly growing fitness community on Instagram. The fitness community is an attractive focus for this study, and for brands to target, because members use each other's accounts to obtain information and motivation for their own fitness journeys. However, there are several other online communities, like fashion, food, and beauty, that have their own micro-celebrities also involved in brand endorsements. The interactions between these influencers and their followers may differ significantly from those in the fitness community.

Future Studies

Despite this study's limitations, the results provide some interesting insights into the influencer trend that can be built upon by future researchers. Influencers exist on other social platforms besides Instagram. Future researchers could explore how influencer marketing affects credibility and consumer behavior on YouTube, a video-based platform, or Twitter, a text-based platform.

Instagram is constantly changing its algorithms and policies, which leaves the door open for future researchers to test the effects of these changes on influencers. Recently, Instagram has implemented a new advertising system that allows users to boost their posts, guaranteeing they appear in the feeds of their followers and some other users whose behavior indicates they may be interested in the page. It would be interesting to see how these types of sponsored posts are perceived by users who do not follow an influencer.

To address the question of the effectiveness of this type of endorsement,

researchers could also conduct interviews with brand managers who have used influencers in the past or followers who are particularly engaged with a specific influencer.

Future research could also test if the different types of endorsements (brand ambassadorship, coupon codes, product reviews, etc.) produce different levels of follower engagement. Those results could help brands and influencers craft campaigns that have positive effects on consumer behavior and perceptions.

Conclusion

There's no downplaying the ways in which social media has changed our lives. It has redirected our focus from traditional media, given us new ways to interact with people, enhanced our ability to search for information, and even expanded our definition of fame. The rise of influencers, both as a new type of public figure and a marketing tool, is just one of many unintended consequences of the social media age. Some Internet users consider influencers as a negative result of this phenomenon, viewing them as narcissistic, talentless, and sometimes portraying unrealistic standards of beauty, popularity, and happiness. Despite these naysayers, there is clearly a lot more to the influencers than most social media users get to see.

Online, they are viewed as opinion leaders and role models - even celebrities. Offline, they are real people with goals, setbacks, opportunities, and the need to make a living to support themselves and their families. The only real difference between influencers and the rest of us ordinary people is their willingness to share their lives with us online. They provide us with content that informs, inspires, and entertains us. They open up about their struggles, give us advice, and welcome us into their online circles with open arms. It is easy to think of people who make money by posting pictures of themselves on

the Internet as lazy, full of themselves, or trivial, but the value they provide to their

followers and to the brands they work with cannot be overlooked. Influencers are more

than pretty people who know how to pose for a smartphone; they are entertainers,

educators, life coaches, marketers, celebrities, and friends.

In the next few years, with the media landscape still rapidly changing and new

platforms popping up constantly, it will be interesting to see if the influencer industry

continues to explode or fizzles and dies. With any hot trend, once it becomes too

mainstream, it may lose its luster for early adopters. But for now, we can look at the

success of influencers as a case study for how to harness the power of online communities

to connect with people and form bonds that go beyond the superficial.

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Appendix A

Codebook Instructions

Instagram Influencers Codebook Instructions

Post Info
I. Influencer's handle
            Pick one:
      1. Amandabisk
      0. Effortlyss
      1. Hannahbronfman
      2. Jessiebabyfit
      3. Nessasphere

II. Post Number

III. Sponsored or Not Sponsored: As per Federal Trade Commission rules, endorsers must disclose the material connections they share with merchants (FTC, 2009). While not all sponsored posts explicitly follow these rules, for the purpose of this study I will assume only posts and influencers that disclose a relationship with the brand are sponsored. This disclosure could be mentioned in the influencer's bio or included in the individual posts with product giveaways, coupon codes, or using hashtags like #sponsored, #ad, #partner, or #brandambassador.

            Pick one:
      1. Organic
      2. Sponsored

IV. Brand/Product name: Enter the brand or product name or enter n/a for organic posts

V. Number of comments
        1. 0 – 50
        2. 51 – 100
        3. 101-150
        4. 151-200
        5. 201-250
        6. 251-300
        7. 301+

VI. Number of "likes:" For video content, Instagram shares the number of views instead of "likes." To display the number of "likes," click on the number of views.
        1. 0-5,000
        2. 5,001-10,000
        3. 10,001-15,000
        4. 15,001-20,000

       5. 20,001-25,000
       6. 25,001-30,000
       0. 30,001-35,000
       1. 35,001-40,000
       2. 40,001-45,000
       3. 45,001-50,000
       4. 50,001+

VII. URL of post

Comment Coding
Enter "1" if field is present and "0" if not present. If the post is not sponsored, enter "2" in all fields referring to brand engagement.

For any comments containing only emojis, or comments written in a language other than English, enter "0" or 3 all fields.

VIII. Comments about the influencer
       Positive sentiments about the influencer: compliments, congratulations etc.
       Negative sentiments about the influencer: any unfavorable comments referring to the influencer herself

IX. Comments about the brand/product: If the post is not sponsored, enter "2" for all fields in this category.
       Positive sentiments about the brand/product: favorable comments referring to the brand or product being endorsed (i.e. looks yummy, love that color etc.)
       Negative sentiments about the brand/product: unfavorable comments referring to the brand or product being endorsed. (i.e. looks gross, too expensive)
       Questions about the brand: any comment inquiring specifically about the brand or product being endorsed. (i.e. where can I buy that, does it taste good)
       Purchase intentions/prior experience: any comment where the follower expresses a desire to buy or shares their past experience with the brand or product being endorsed. This could overlap with positive sentiments or questions (i.e. I need that top, where can I buy that)

X. Engagement and Response
       Questions for the influencer: inquiring about the influencer's life, asking for advice, requesting a shout out etc.
       Responses by influencer: any comment apart from the caption that is posted by the influencer
       Tagging a friend: any comment where the follower tags another user other than the influencer or the brand
       Complying with influencer instructions: some posts will ask followers to interact with the influencer or brand by answering a question, visiting their website, using a hashtag, tagging a friend, or reposting or creating a response post on their own page. Any comments where the commenter complies with these instructions should be marked with a "1."
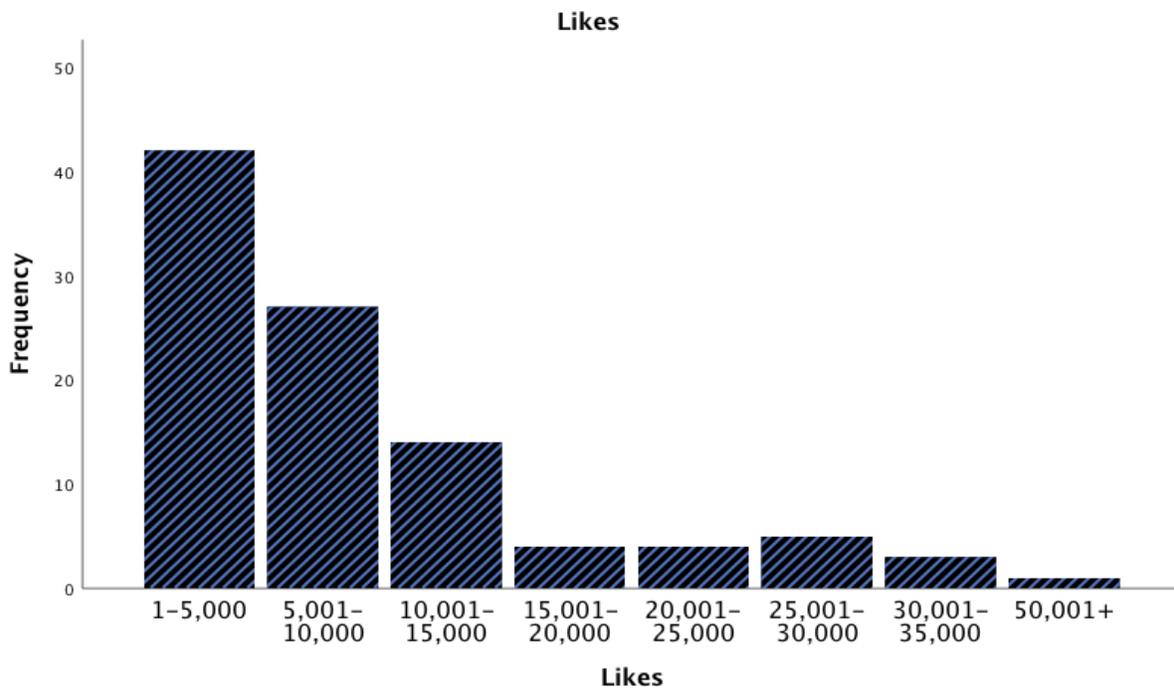
Appendix B

Figures

Figure 1. Distribution of the number of likes on influencer posts analyzed during the content analysis.
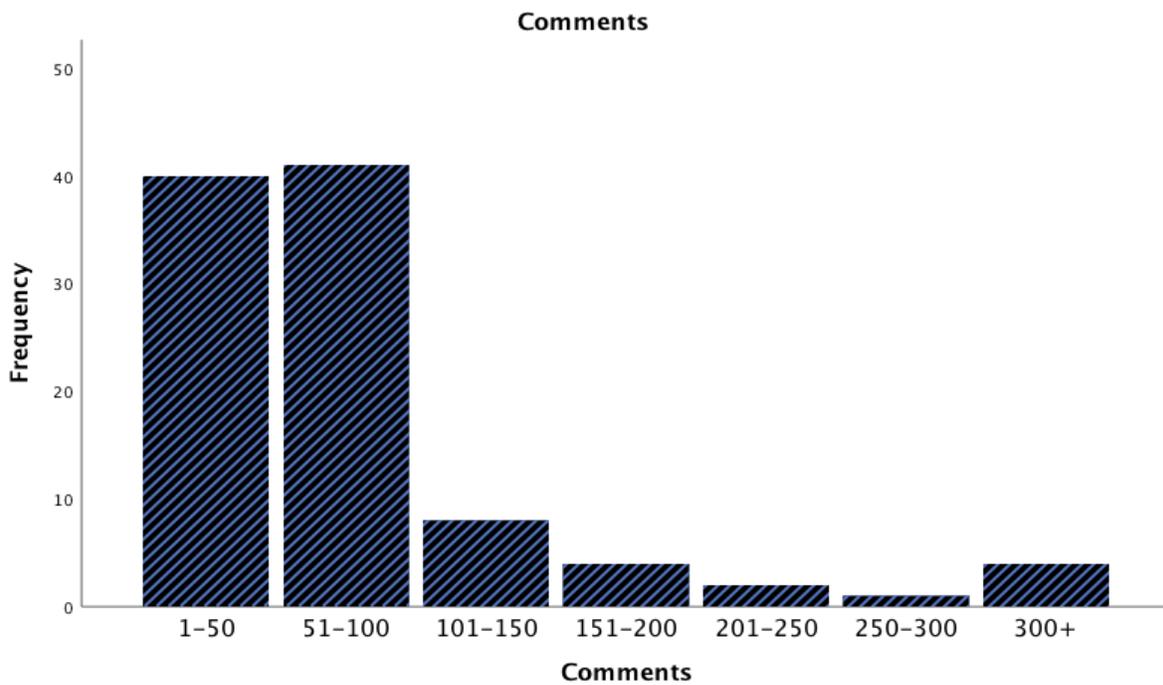

Figure 2. Distribution of the number of comments on influencer posts analyzed during the content analysis.

Appendix C

Table

Table 1

Breakdown of Sponsorship, Likes, and Comments by Influencer

Influencer	# of Followers	% of Sponsored Posts	Largest Distribution of Likes	Largest Distribution of Comments
Amandabisk	665K	10.3%	10,001-15,000	51-100
Effortlyss	1.3M	21.4%	25,001-30,000	51-100
Hannahbronfman	356K	35%	5,001-10,000	51-100
Jessiebabyfit	519K	21.9%	1,000-5,000	1-50
Nessasphere	230K	15.4%	1,000-5,000	1-50

Appendix D

Influencer Interview Questions

1. Background
How old are you?

What is your highest degree?

What is your occupation?

When did you become interested in fitness?

How long have you been a member of Instagram?

2. Influencer Experience
Can you provide a brief background of your journey on Instagram from when you first started your account to today?

About how much time do you devote weekly to the following Instagram activities?
        To create, post and edit content?

        To research other accounts/trends?

        To interact with followers?

How long has your Instagram account been monetized?

Are you active on social media channels other than Instagram?

How would you characterize your work on social media ?

In your opinion, what does one need to become a successful social media influencer?

Is there a particular theme or vision of your account you feel has led to your success as an influencer?

3. Work with Brands
What was the first brand you ever worked with? Did they approach you or did you reach out to them?

What brands are you currently working with?

Do you do any background research about a brand before deciding whether or not to work with them?
If so, can you describe that process?

Has that process changed at all since you have become a more experienced influencer?

Do you have a specific criteria for deciding which brands to partner with and which to pass up?

What kind of endorsements do you most often partake in?

How are you compensated for endorsing brands (ie. free products, money, other types of rewards)?

4. Influencer-Follower Relationships
Tell me a little bit about the relationship you have with your followers.

Have you ever met any of your followers in real-life?

If so, did you arrange the meet-up?

What was the purpose/ or circumstances?

Do you have any favorite techniques for engaging or interacting with your followers?

Have you noticed any difference between the levels of follower interaction on sponsored versus organic posts?

Do you make an effort to balance posting sponsored and non-sponsored posts?

If so, how do you decide how often to post sponsored content?

Have you ever received a negative response from a follower about being paid to promote products?

5. Follow Up
What are you planning to do next?

Is there anything else you would like to add?