

Instagram influencers: The effects of brand ambassadorship on source credibility and
brand perceptions

Abstract

Instagram influencer marketing is one of the fastest growing trends in advertising. Because of their visibility in the Instagram community and perceived expertise in their area of interest, influencers' voices have the potential to sway their followers' opinions and perspectives on different trends. Their popularity stems from their ability to foster parasocial relationships with their followers through appearing relatable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. But does this relationship, and their ability to influence consumer behavior, change when an influencer affiliates herself with a brand? This study assessed followers' perceptions of Instagram influencers and the brands they endorse through the lens of source credibility theory. A quantitative content analysis was performed on 100 influencer posts and their comments (n=7,716) to determine if followers interact differently on sponsored and organic posts. The researcher found significantly more likes, comments, positive sentiments, and levels of compliance with influencer requests on organic posts than sponsored posts.

Keywords: social media, influencer, Instagram, marketing, source credibility

Introduction

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 Internet 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 don't 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.

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' perception 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 (Fred, 2015; Brison, Byon, & Iii, 2016), 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 their followers' attitudes and purchase intentions of the brands they endorse. It also analyzed the differences in interactions between Instagram users and influencers on posts featuring an endorsement versus ones without an endorsement.

Using a content analysis of sponsored and organic Instagram posts by popular brand ambassadors 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. 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

Endorsements as an advertising technique has been extensively researched through the lens of source credibility theory. 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, Janis, & Kelley, 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, Janis & Kelley, 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 endorse products among participants. This tri-component scale is widely used in source credibility studies related to celebrities and their effectiveness as endorsers (Brison, Byon, & Iii, 2016; Choi & Rifon, 2012; Fred, 2015; Munnukka, Uusitalo & Toivonen, 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 aren't typically seen as experts (Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 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 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, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016; Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner). 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 study, examined Instagram celebrities who have established a loyal group of followers, many of whom feel a parasocial bond with the influencer. These preexisting feelings followers have towards the influencer may have an impact on their reactions to the endorsement that did not influence the participants in Fred (2015) and Brison, Byon, and Iii's (2016) research. Taking into account the close relationship followers have with influencers, this

study measured how the influencers' endorsements impacts 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-2000's, 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 looked to for both 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, Miller, & Phillips, 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, online communities form through sharing hash tags that guide users to accounts that reflect their hobbies and interests, like fashion, food, beauty, and fitness. Each community has their own Instafamous users with thousands or sometimes millions of online admirers who look to them for advice, entertainment, and opinions about the latest trends, making them attractive to brands.

Instagram influencers are a type of public figure that 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, like 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, or 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). In order to maintain a balanced image between that of an everyday person and a celebrity, influencers share shots that emphasize their glamorous lives alongside humanizing pictures of their everyday activities and struggles.

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 on 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 & 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 brand ambassadors, their followers, and the brands they endorse on Instagram, I pose the following research questions:

Research Questions

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?

Methodology

This study used content analysis to extract the answers to the posed research questions out of popular 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 studies on source credibility and social media influencers have used survey instruments to collect their data (Brison, Byon, & Iii, 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.

This study focused on influencers in the fitness Instagram community. 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.

Data Collection

Five Instafamous fitness influencers were selected for 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 of the beginning of the study 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 (Appendix A). A total

of 7,716 comments were coded.

Results

Reliability

The researcher and one other coder analyzed 10% of the sample of posts and their corresponding comments. The coder was trained by the researcher and coded several sample posts until acceptable levels of intercoder reliability via Krippendorff's alpha were achieved. Intercoder reliability 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).

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 (χ^2

(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 ($\chi^2 (1) = 1.745, p = .187$). 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 ($\chi^2 (1) = 2.039, p = 0.153$). 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 ($\chi^2 (1) = 0.655, p = 0.418$). 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 ($\chi^2 (1) = 50.051, p < .001$). 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 ($\chi^2 (1) = 13.482, p < .001$). 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 ($\chi^2 (7) = 432.626, p < .001$) and comments ($\chi^2 (6) = 720.723, p < .001$). The organic posts analyzed had more likes and comments than the sponsored posts.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore 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. 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 (Fred, 2015; Brison, Byon, & Iii, 2016), 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 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, Byon, and Iii (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 a different method than both the aforementioned studies, the results are more in line with Fred's (2015) research.

The 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 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, like 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 isn't 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 sample of a product. 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. From the influencer perspective, these results may indicate that followers are less engaged with content when it features a branded message. If this is the case, influencers trying to strengthen their relationship with followers or expand their audience with the help of their followers should limit how often they publish posts promoting a brand or product.

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.

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 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 don't 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

This study also only looked at use of Instagram posts 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. Following in the footsteps of Snapchat, Instagram rolled out a "story" feature this year that allows users to publish posts that disappear after 24 hours. This study's focus on Instagram posts published in the past 6 months also didn't consider the use of "stories" for product endorsement.

Lastly, the influencers selected for this research were all a part of the very popular and rapidly growing fitness community on Instagram. 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. Approaching the same topic with a qualitative method, like interviews, could give a narrative explanation of this study's results as well as offer a more complete look at this rapidly growing marketing strategy from the perspective of

influencers and brand managers.

During the content analysis, the researcher kept track of the usernames of each follower who left a comment and identified several particularly engaged followers who frequently interact with influencer posts. Interviewers could ask these followers about their motivations for following particular accounts, familiarity and opinions of brands that have been endorsed by their favorite influencers in the past, and feelings about influencers using their popularity to make money from promotions. It would also be helpful to speak with social media celebrities about the process of forging an endorsement contract, their criteria for selecting which brands to endorse, and the strategies that are used to maintain close parasocial relationships with followers while engaging in brand promotions. 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.

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Appendix

A – Codebook Instructions

Instagram Influencers Codebook Instructions

Post Info

I. Influencer's handle

Pick one:

1. Amandabisk
2. Effortlyss
3. Hannahbronfman
4. Jessiebabyfit
5. 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

7. 30,001-35,000
8. 35,001-40,000
9. 40,001-45,000
10. 45,001-50,000
11. 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

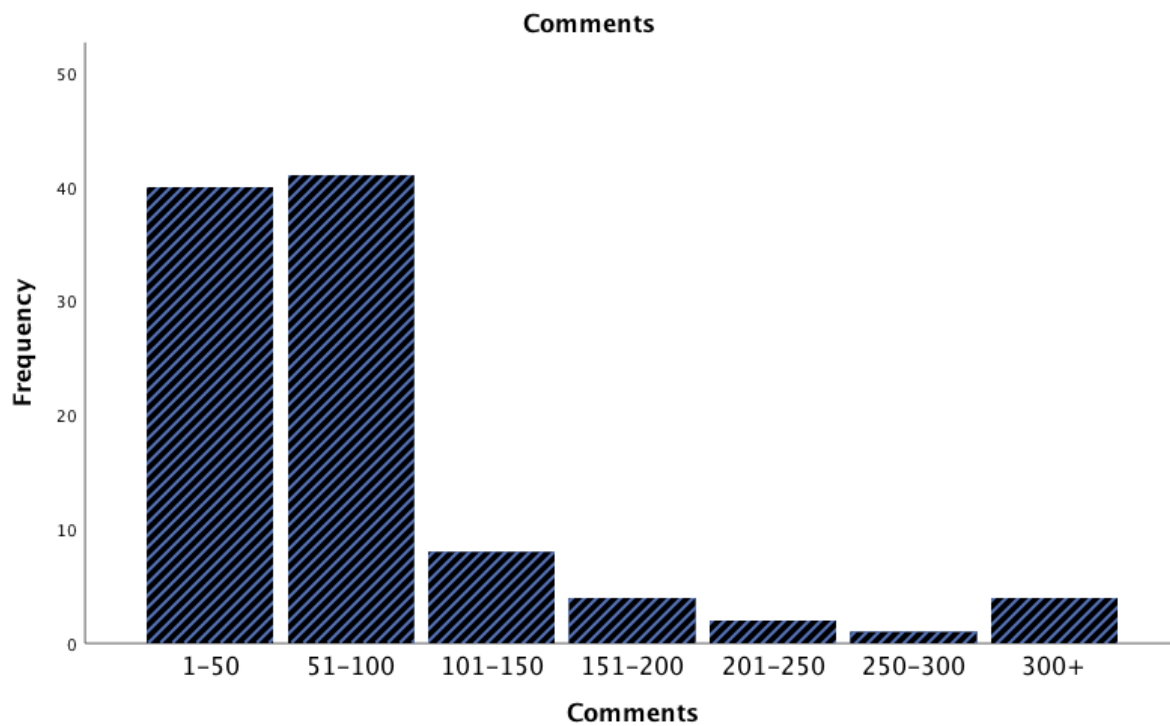
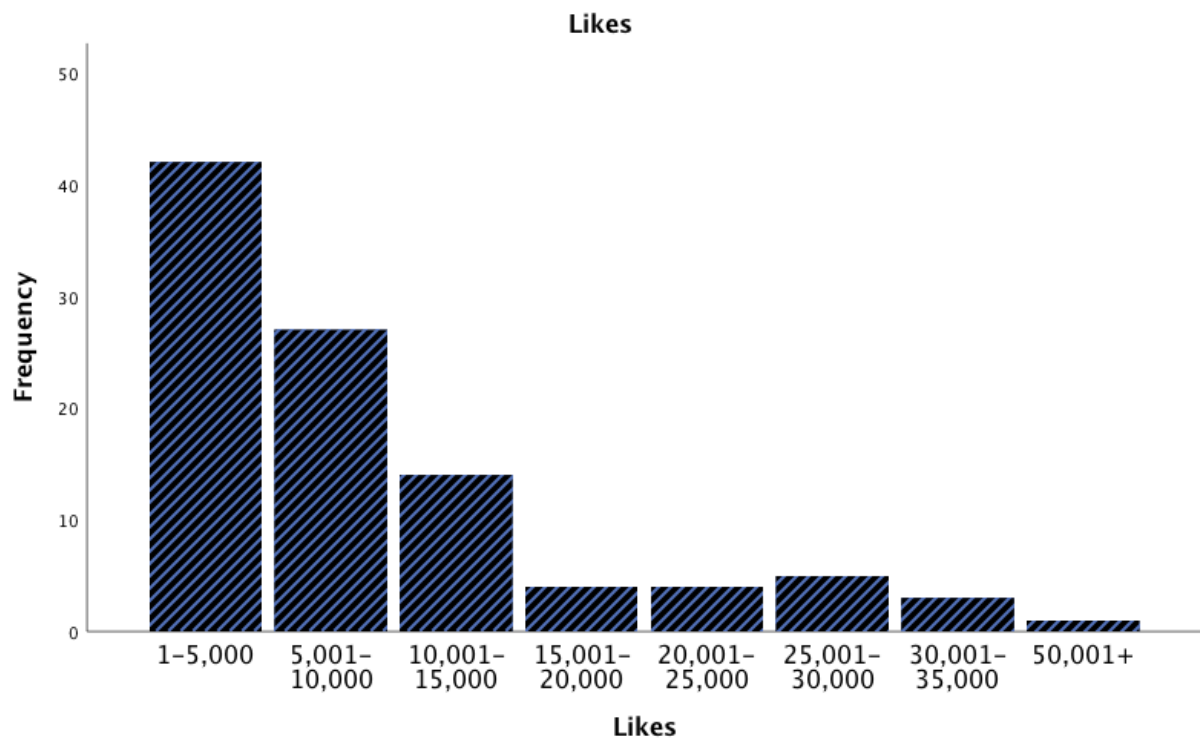
Questions for the influencer: inquiring about the influencer's life, asking for advice, requesting a shout out etc.

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."

B - Distribution of Post Likes and Comments



C – Breakdown of Influencer Sponsorship, Likes, and Comments

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

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