

The Rise of Social Media Influencers:

How Effective Are They?

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## **Introduction**

Did you know nearly 75% of marketers today are using influencers to spread the word of mouth about their products and brands on social media? (Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, 2019, pg.7). This event is mainly due to the increase of customers relying on peer-to-peer communication, and the role social media influencers have on persuading consumers to adopt certain brands. Influencer marketing, which is a process in which engaging and supportive individuals create conversations with a brand's customers, has increased tremendously in the last couple of years and continues to be on the rise. With its rise, social media influencers have fundamentally transformed the way public relation professionals reach their desired target audience. Forbes suggests, "The voice of the customer has always been one of the most powerful concepts in marketing, and today's social media platforms act as one giant megaphone for that voice" (Forbes, 2016). By straying away from traditional public relations methods to a more collaborative integration of social media efforts, one can break the wall between the brand and consumer, and effectively change the way in which the two interact. In this paper, I will examine different influencer communication theories, the role of social media lifestyle influencers across multiple platforms, mechanisms used by social media influencers to promote a product, importance of authenticity, implication of real-life endorsements, and their impact/effectiveness on the brand, all found from numerous scholars worldwide.

## **Who Are Social Media Influencers?**

Social media influencers, not to be confused with celebrity endorsers, are independent individuals who "accumulate a following through textual and visual narration of their personal,

everyday life, upon which paid advertorials- advertisements written in the form of editorial opinions- for products and services are premised” (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, pg. 3). They are known as third-party endorsers who shape audience's attitudes through their participation on numerous networking channels, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, etc. They represent a new form of advertising that is potentially more effective in purchasing decisions because of their influential power as a function of integrity, sincerity, and authentic presentation of the self. Unlike traditional advertisements, SMI's are seen as “more real” and therefore, more relatable to their audiences because they live normal everyday lives (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, pg. 3). In one particular study performed by Cristel Antonia Russell (a professor of marketing at the Kogod School of Business and leading researcher on the influence of entertainment media), and Dina Rasolofoarison (assistant professor in the Southampton Business School and researcher in the areas of visual communication), indicated that product placement that appeared more genuine was key to success when it came to willingness for consumers to pay and try a new drink, because it was introduced in the normal world (Russell & Rasolofoarison, 2017, pg. 771). Average consumers feel more connected to a brand because these social media influencers introduce a product in a natural, non-commercial setting, which leads to positive brand responses.

One unique strength social media influencers have is the ability to entice target audiences which used to be seen as unreachable, compared to traditional marketing strategies that target mass audiences. Mass marketing narrows its focus on numbers rather than target marketing that offers a more streamlined platform, which is cheaper and more effective. Partnerships with these influencers are becoming increasingly important for public relations agencies and marketing

promotions for various reasons; it makes brands more relevant, communication for large audiences becomes easier through collaborations, and allows both consumers and brands to conjoin on a more personal level. They are valuable messengers for consumers who seek recommendations on certain products that attend to their everyday needs.

Yet, having an influencer remain an ‘authentic’ persona with a loyal audience, can face its challenges. It is rather difficult to continue the ‘organic content’ as soon as they are perceived writing only for the money and not for the community. That is why it is critical for any organization that is looking for an SMI to perform research and build mutual trustworthy relationships with them, so the content can easily cut through the noise on social media. Brands do not have to narrow their influencer choice based on whether or not that influencer posts content similar to the industry. Influencers who like what the industry is selling, can be just as effective in selling a product as influencers who are specifically posting content related to that industry.

Additionally, research proves that individuals can tell the difference between an effective approach or a non effective approach when it comes to influencer-created content versus brand-created content, which is why credibility is a key component to success in any collaboration. Driel & Dumitrica, state that to please consumer audiences, influencers must “balance professional looking content with less crafted images of everyday life. This form of calibrated amateurism gives the impression of spontaneity and unfilteredness despite the contrary reality” (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, pg. 4).

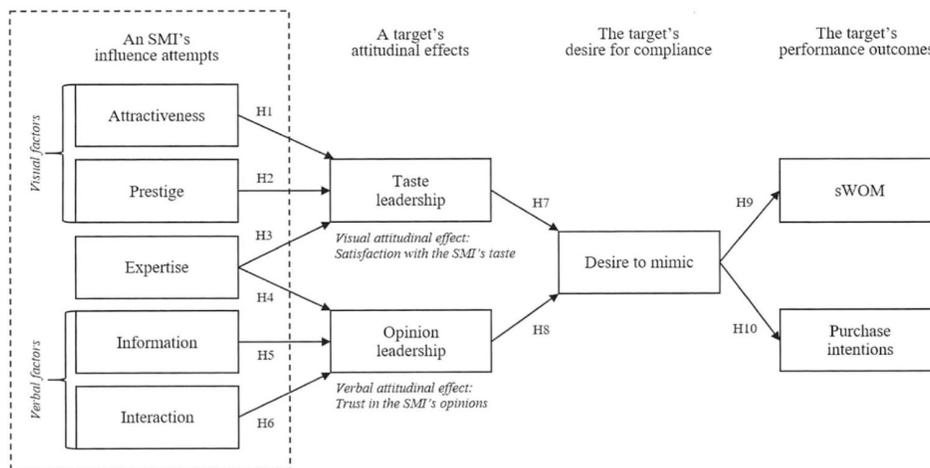
## **Influencer Communication Theories**

The Social Learning Theory helps us further understand the reasons as to why influencers can be so compelling because it accentuates the significance of observing and modeling certain behaviors, emotional responses, and attitudes of others. Albert Bandura, a social cognitive psychologist and professor at Stanford University, wrote, “In the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behaviors of others” (Bandura, 1971, pg. 3). This could easily help us to understand why individuals, particularly influencers, can be so influential at times. He also mentions, “On the basis of informative feedback, they develop thoughts or hypotheses about the types of behavior most likely to succeed. These hypotheses then serve as guides for future actions” (Bandura, 1971, pg. 3). Individuals watch behaviors from consumers when they like a particular product, and because people’s behaviors are deliberately learned through example, they are more likely to adopt identical behaviors. From influencers reinforcing or recommending products, brand marketers often use this strategy in hopes that the “monkey see monkey do affect” will take place.

Additionally, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), which is a type of buzz marketing, can further explain the strategies behind successful influencers. WOM is proven to be one of the most influential elements regarding consumers communicating about a service or product because individuals, when faced with new content, are more likely to share with others if they have either a positive or negative reaction about it. Based on the research performed by Chloe & Young, the consumer’s doppelganger effect is proven to influence eWOM immensely because it “highlights the importance of the desire to comply-more precisely, the significant role of the desire to mimic- in influencing consumers’ product decisions. It describes the phenomenon in

which individuals mimic others’ consumption behavior intentionally in response to a desire to look or behave like those they are modeling” (Chloe & Kim, 2019, pg. 6). Hence, “consumer’s positive attitudes affect their desire to mimic SMI’s and influence their behavioral outcomes of eWOM and purchase intentions” (Chloe & Kim, 2019, pg. 23).

The graph below, taken from the same research study, *The Mechanism by which Social Media Influencers Persuade Consumers: The Role of Consumers’ Desire to Mimi*, illustrates Chloe & Kim’s expected conceptual model that the desire for consumer’s to mimic a social media influencer, will lead to positive behavior outcomes whether socially (eWOM) or non socially (purchase intentions).



### Influencer Marketing Across Various Platforms

A concern an organization or brand must keep in mind when choosing an influencer for their product, is the channel in which it is represented. Social media is changing everyday, especially with which platforms individuals receive their information from. This has a huge impact on whether or not the advertisement is effective, well received, and actually persuades

consumers to purchase the product/brand. One key difference across social media platforms is the motivation or reason for individuals to actually engage with the platform. Some individuals use platforms to primarily connect with family members, friends, colleagues, etc, and only focus on implying relationship maintenance. Others, on the other hand, actually seek out platforms/content, causing a higher level of motivation to interact.

One social media platform, Facebook, is an example of a secondary environment because many other influencer marketing campaigns co-occur across it. For instance, sponsored bloggers can easily link their blog pages in a post and those who encounter it may or may not even follow the blogger. This means that the content the influencer posts can show up on the timeline because a friend has shared the post or interacted with the post. A study performed by the University of Pittsburgh, found that timing of the posts (weekends vs. weekdays) positively affects awareness from Facebook influencer content. They also found out that “hedonic value exerts a greater impact in trial campaigns, which supports the explanation that hedonic content may provide a reason for Facebook users to share information or like a blog post with an overtly commercial intent” (Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, 2019, pg. 89). In other words, posts/campaigns that are subjective and playful receive higher engagement from consumers, thus, influencers who use this strategy can easily be effective. It also proves that depending on how or where the content is presented, consumers can always interpret the source and message differently.

Another huge platform that has swept the nation over the past couple years is Instagram. The platform currently has over 500 million active users in counting, making it one of the most popular social networking sites (Vierman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017, pg. 799). If brands or

markets were to look for effective influencers, they should search for a likeable, credible influencer, who is a high opinion leader, because then the message will have a greater impact. Moreover, Instagram provides users with both photo and video sharing possibilities, which makes it easy for products/brands to be visually imaged and named in the captions. All of this makes Instagram a master of eWOM because it focuses on the connection between people, thereby strengthening the relationship with followers.

These tables excerpted from *Can Social Media Influencers Shape Corporate Brand Reputation? Online Followers' Trust, Value Creation, and Purchase Intentions*, by Sofia Bratu, a professor at Spiru Haret University, can help put into better perspective the advantages of using influencers, especially on an Instagram platform (Bratu, 2019, pgs.156-158).

**Table 1** The most important social media channels for influencer marketing (% , select multiple)

Instagram	87
YouTube	67
Facebook	42
Blogs	39
Twitter	29
LinkedIn	17
Pinterest	12
Twitch	5
Snapchat	3
Other	1

Sources: Mediakix; my survey among 4,800 individuals conducted January 2019.

**Table 6** Effective content formats for influencer marketing (% , select multiple)

Instagram Post	74
Instagram Stories	69
YouTube Video	52
Instagram Video	49
Blog Post	33
Facebook Post	19
Facebook Video	18
Tweet	14
Facebook Live	11
YouTube Live	7
Other	4
Twitch Livestream	3

Sources: Mediakix; my survey among 4,200 individuals conducted January 2019.

**Table 4** Primary social media platform used by social influencers worldwide for brand collaborations (%)

Instagram	74
Blog	15
YouTube	7
Facebook	3
Pinterest	1

Sources: Zine; eMarketer; my survey among 4,800 individuals conducted January 2019.

**Table 7** How do you determine which influencers to work with? (% , select multiple)

Quality of content	78
Target audience	74
Engagement rate	68
On-brand messaging or aesthetic	51
Budget	46
Location	39
Follower count	38
Previous sponsorship performance	27
Buzzworthy or trending	20
Referral	11
Other	2

Sources: Mediakix; my survey among 4,800 individuals conducted January 2019.

## **Influencer Strategies**

To get a better idea on why or how social media influencer marketing has changed the way brands continue to interact with consumers, one must first understand the strategies SMI's appear to use while posting content. Three characteristics that are exceptionally important in each influencer are: interactivity, authenticity, and confidence. Interactivity relates to how influencers promote feedback with viewers. Authenticity means that they remain cordial and sincere with their followers, while confidence means that they trust their abilities and believe that viewers will do the same.

For research purposes, I decided to examine one dominant social media influencer on Instagram that often appears on my timeline. Danielle Yeager, known as @happilyeverdanielle, is a lifestyle influencer, heavily influenced by Disney, who collaborates with numerous companies, such as Vera Bradley, MVMT, Homegrown Designs, and more. Her social media posts have led to increased brand recognition, engagement, and sales for those companies, as well as an increase of following on other social media accounts. Figure 1, shows one post of her taking a daily "casual" photo of herself in the mirror. Danielle's job is to create awareness for Vera Bradley's target market, who are young women. She successfully weaves in a Vera Bradley product by displaying how she uses one of their bags to hold her makeup. In numerous studies, it is proven that the more a product is positioned in the normal world, the more striking the effects will be.



Figure 1

One may also notice the specific brand tags, such as #VeraBradley and @verabradley in the post. This gives her followers or any other individual that may come across the photo, opportunities to connect to the brand directly through a simple link. By simply clicking on the tags, viewers will be directed to Vera Bradley's own site that displays all their products.

Even more than that, Danielle's interactivity between commenting back about someone purchasing the product, and allowing followers to interact with her, adds a new dimension that did not exist before social media influencers. It is a two-way conversation that not only promotes positive branding, customer engagement, and awareness, but is also useful for any public relation tactic. This influencer strategy sets a good example for anyone in the public relations field because the goal of both fields is to keep customers happy through communication. Communication is key for public relations to successfully build mutual relationships, and the same goes for the world of influencing.

The picture also appeared natural, and when influencer's "share snippets of everyday life to create a persona that the audience can relate to, it develops a connection with the audience" (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, pg. 10). Moreover, being seen as a nice person with a genuine personality, is an important aspect to the value of an influencer, and the positive connection with a brand. Making the post look and seem honest, also allows viewers to feel as if they know the influencer behind the feed. With Danielle's feed mainly focused on lifestyle, authenticity is key. Authenticity allows influencers to feel comfortable sharing their own personal opinions or thoughts about a certain product, hoping that followers will take their lead. The feeling of authenticity and community, however, may be affected when influencers start collaborating with brands. Many influencers take different routes of maintaining authenticity while selling brands by either not having the sponsored content stand out, or being transparent about their work with brands. Whichever they choose, as long as they "maintain consistency in their presentation of self, they can also maintain their authenticity" (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, pg. 11).

Furthermore, confidence is also a key factor in effective SMI's because when an influencer is confident, it promotes confidence in the brand. Danielle exhibits confidence through her body language and word choice throughout her post. By using words such as "love," "everything" and "excited," it shows assurance that she has no problem sharing her trusted brand with thousands of other individuals. It provides a lasting impression on followers and further influences them to become consumers of the product.

## **Conclusions**

With the rise of Web 2.0 and the fast-paced tech world, the integration of social media into campaigns is vital for its success. Since social media influencers hold a lot of credibility, engaging them in a public relations strategy can make it easier to reach a large target audience. They can also be the organizations most effective brand ambassador because they allow influencer recommendations to help build brand loyalty. Influencer marketing is the most cost-effective PR tool, and when “considering an influencer marketing strategy to promote divergent products, partnering with an influencer with a high number of followers might not be the best option, as this may lower the brand’s perceived uniqueness and consequently brand attitudes” (Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017, pg. 816). Since public relations rely heavily on mutual relationships, social media influencers largely reflect that as they maintain positive relationships with followers. Consumers see them as relatable characters over social media, and that is important to organizations because consumers are the heart of the brand. Lastly, “SMI partnerships have been found to have tangible effects and recent studies show that SMI-generated content is 6.9 times more effective than studio-shot content. Moreover, Influencer Marketing Hub (2019) reported that businesses are receiving \$5.20 on average for each \$1 spent on influencer marketing, and 92% of marketers judge influencer marketing to be effective, while 63% of marketers intend to increase their influencer marketing budgets in the coming year” (Chloe & Kim, 2019, pg. 2). Between the newness of influencer marketing, and the continued advancement of social media, there is still lots of room for future studies. I believe the effectiveness of influencers will also continue to increase within the next couple of years especially because of everything being moved to online, and the heightened screen time percentage of many individuals.

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