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# Seeking Sales in New Channels: The Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing

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"A Huckster is Born Every Minute."  This twist on PT Barnum's famous saying has never

been more true than it is today when anyone with an internet connection and an imagination can

gain the attention of millions of followers on social media.  By simply picking up a cellphone

and opening an application, one person can communicate with millions of people.  The digital

age has allowed for this ability to communicate and has had a profound impact on how people

interact with one another.  While new technology has presented endless opportunities in the

world of communication, it has also presented challenges for many.  From a business and

marketing perspective, marketers must learn how to adapt to these new forms of communication

in order to take advantage of all they offer.   Similarly, from a communication standpoint,

individuals are given the unique opportunity to connect with millions of people and potentially

influence others.  The world of social media presents many opportunities to reach new customers

in both simple and entertaining ways.

By grasping the attention of millions of followers, these specific individuals can have a

large impact on society.  Additionally, as a result of the recent surge in social media use, the

industry of influencer marketing has rapidly grown.  In today's society, social media platforms

such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have been the most popular applications among the

young adult population.  Through these platforms, a small group of individuals has gained a

large following among people who are interested in the content they post.  These individuals are

known as "influencers."   Influencers seek to use any means at their disposal, including wearing

specific items of clothing, patronizing particular hotels and restaurants, driving certain vehicles, and listening to selected individuals and bands, all with the aim of encouraging their followers to do the same.  By promoting products and services through their social media posts, influencers then receive compensation from marketers; this type of marketing strategy is known as influencer marketing.

In this article, I will argue that influencer marketing is a more effective form of advertising than typical brand promotions as social media influencers have a more profound impact on target audiences.  People follow influencers because they enjoy their content and are interested in the products that they promote; these followers oftentimes have a desire to mimic influencers.  Therefore, brands target influencers with products they believe both the influencer and his/her audience would purchase.  However, in order to be successful in attracting consumers, marketers must be strategic in their approach and choose influencers that align with their products and that have a good reputation in the public eye.  If done appropriately and strategically, marketers have a higher chance of selling their products through influencers than they would through traditional internet advertising.  As seen through recent research and studies, promoting brands or products through influencers is more attractive to consumers rather than the conventional, and oftentimes intrusive, advertisements on the internet.

As of 2020, approximately 3.6 billion people use social media and this number is increasing each day (Clement, 2020).  Prior to the development of social media apps and the ubiquity of the internet, marketers used celebrity endorsers to help promote their products.  As

attention has turned to the internet, marketers have had to develop new channels to reach their

audience of potential customers.  Today, popular social media platforms among the young adult

population in North America and Europe include Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok,

Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter.   While this is just a short list of frequented apps that are used

daily, through these platforms, individuals are able to communicate with one another, post

videos, photos, and messages, access the news, and stay up to date on the latest trends and topics

on the internet.  Today, "the question is no longer whether to use social media, but how to best

use social media to market brands, products, and services more effectively" (Lin & Bruning &

Swarna, 2018, p. 432).  Social media is the most critical starting point for individuals to become

influencers.  Certain individuals gain a large following as a result of the content they post,

ranging from beauty trends, fitness videos, video game critics, and much more.  As these

individuals' following increases, they begin to establish more credibility from their expertise on

specific trends and topics and can be viewed as opinion leaders.  Therefore, marketers target

these individuals with hopes of promoting certain products that align with the content they

produce.

There are several kinds of influencers that result in a different number of followers,

engagement rates, types of content and followers, and skill.  Influencers have varying knowledge

and expertise on specific topics, causing them to fall into five distinct categories: celebrity

influencers, mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers

(Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 471).  Celebrity influencers typically have a minimum of one

million followers and achieve their fame and success outside of the use of social media.

Well-known celebrity influencers include individuals such as Selena Gomez, Cristiano Ronaldo,

Kylie Jenner, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and Taylor Swift, all of whom gained a following

and fanbase through either professional athletics, acting, or singing.  After gaining their fame

elsewhere, these celebrity influencers have used their social media platforms to keep their fans

updated by posting content about their lives.  High-end brands have since targeted these celebrity

influencers to promote their products to their millions of followers through both social media and

television in general.  Similarly, mega-influencers also have a large following on social media,

typically over one million, yet gained fame and celebrity-like status through social media use.

Mega-influencers are extremely popular on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, and began to post

content on these platforms just like any other user on the social media app.  In particular,

"Instagram has 400 million active monthly users who share more than 60 million photos every

day," allowing for many people to become influencers (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017, p.

474).   Popular mega-influencers on these social media platforms include James Charles, a

beauty guru on YouTube with 21.5 million subscribers (James Charles, n.d), Charli D'Amelio, a

dancer on TikTok with 84.2 million followers (D'Amelio, n.d), and Zach King with 23.7 million

followers on Instagram (King, n.d) known for his comedic and entertaining visual effects

content.  Macro-influencers have between 100,000 and one million followers.  Despite having

fewer followers than mega-influencers, they also gained this fame through social media.  One

example of a macro-influencer is YouTuber Margot Lee, with approximately 442,000

subscribers, who posts college-related video blogs, also known as "vlogs" (Margot Lee, n.d).

Micro-influencers, with a follower count between 10,000 and 100,000, also can be valuable

influencers for marketers.  While these influencers still can make a career out of this lifestyle, a

majority of them use social media as a side job.   Lastly, with less than 10,000 followers,

nano-influencers are the most eager influencers as they are very proactive when it comes to

marketing and strive to gain as many followers as they can.

Every kind of influencer can have an extremely large impact on their target population.

Whether this is through the clothes they wear, the products they use, or simply the stories they

tell, influencers communicate with a large number of people and can play a huge role in their

everyday lives.  As a result of this profound impact influencers can have, marketers must

strategically target which influencers they collaborate with in order to best attract consumers to

their products.  There are several components involved in choosing the best influencer to

promote products and the strategies used by marketers ultimately affect how successful their

business is.

An influencer's audience is the most crucial aspect of successful influencer marketing.

According to professors Colin Campbell and Justine Rapp Farrell, an influencer's audience

increases the attraction for marketers and brands by "offering organic reach, specific targeting,

and increased attention" (2020, p. 473).  Influencers have expertise in creating and sharing

content that is appealing to their followers; this organic reach allows them to be more attractive

to certain brands which ultimately enables them to charge more for brand deals.  Pleasing the

audience, which is also the consumer in influencer marketing, is critical for successful business

sales.

Another essential part of the influencer marketing industry is influencer-brand fit, which

refers to the idea that influencers should promote products that are similar to their typical content

or style.   In their article, "Influencers and the Endorsed Brand: How Influencer-Brand Fit

Affects Source Credibility and Persuasive Effectiveness," Priska Linda Breves and Nicole

Liebers investigate the role that influencer-brand fit plays in this industry.  Through their

research, they were able to confirm their hypotheses that "the fit between the influencer and the

brand has a positive impact on perceived trustworthiness and expertise but does not affect the

assessment of physical attractiveness significantly" (2019, p. 444) and "the level of influencer

credibility positively affects the evaluation of the endorsed brand" (2019, p. 445).  By ensuring

that the influencer appropriately aligns with a brand's products, the influencer's credibility

increases, thus encouraging consumers to purchase the product and further validating their

relationship with the influencer.

One example of a successful influencer-brand fit partnership is between YouTuber Emma

Chamberlain and the skincare company Bliss.  Emma Chamberlain began her YouTube career in

2017 and has since gained 9.35 million subscribers (Emma Chamberlain, n.d).  Her content

ranges from daily vlogs to cooking videos to shopping hauls and other everyday activities.

Throughout her YouTube journey,  Chamberlain has been very open about her struggle with

acne, initially expressing how it affected her self-confidence and made her feel isolated and

anxious when she was younger.  In today's society, there are several beauty standards that many

young women are expected to reach, and one of which is having clear skin.  However, Emma

Chamberlain has used her platform in a positive way as she has been transparent with her skin

struggles and does not try to cover up any of her blemishes in her videos.  Through her authentic

videos, Chamberlain portrays her honest and open personality in order to connect with her

followers that might be experiencing similar struggles.  In her recent video titled, "WHAT MY

LIFE IS REALLY LIKE," Chamberlain takes her subscribers along for a standard and authentic

day in her life.  At the beginning of the video, she starts her day with her skincare routine where

she mentions, "this video is sponsored by Bliss" (Chamberlain, 2020).  She then explains how

Bliss's products have helped her maintain her clear skin after going on Accutane, a severe

medication used to treat acne.  Bliss was very strategic in partnering with Emma Chamberlain as

they had clearly done their research and targeted a genuine and likeable influencer who would

use their products.

Promoting a brand that is completely different from the influencer's style can be harmful

to both the brand and the influencer in the long run.  This was evident in 2015 when Instagram

influencer, Chriselle Lim, known for her fashion, beauty, and motherhood content, posted

multiple photos with a Volvo car (Lim, 2015).  Lim ended up receiving major criticism as she

had never previously shown interest in cars and Volvo was exposed for their poor marketing

strategy (Breves & Liebers & Abt & Kunze, 2019, p. 441).  Since consumers respond more

favorably to influencer content as a less intrusive form of advertising, marketers must ensure that

they target the correct influencers for their products.  By placing advertisements similar to the influencer's content, this is "more likely to boost consumers' motivation to process the ad and facilitate their comprehension of its message" (Breves & Liebers & Abt & Kunze, 2019, p. 441). Influencer-brand fit is crucial in marketing and brands must be conscious of who they are targeting in order to maximize positive feedback from consumers.

It is critical that marketers are very strategic and careful in choosing influencers in order to receive a positive response from their audiences.  As with most forms of advertising, there are risks involved in influencer marketing that can result in negative consequences for the brand.  In particular, "brands run the risk of close and negative associations with individuals prone to personal indiscretions or scandal" (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 477).  Since influencers are constantly in the spotlight, they have to be very careful not to post or do something that can get them "canceled."  Cancel culture, the idea in which public figures lose support after committing an offensive or inappropriate act, is a rising practice (Greenspan, 2020).  For example, YouTuber Olivia Jade, with over one million subscribers, had several contracts and brand deals with popular companies such as Sephora and Tresemme (Olivia Jade, n.d)  In the beginning of 2019, news emerged that Olivia Jade was among the students involved in the bribery scandal that influenced their admission into top universities in the United States.  Following this college admissions scandal, Olivia Jade was immediately dropped from all her brand deals and partnerships due to her diminishing reputation and negative impacts on the brands she was associated with.  Similarly, as reported in the article "Celebrity endorsements, firm value, and

reputation risk: Evidence from the Tiger Woods Scandal," "shareholders of Tiger Woods's sponsors lost between $5 and $12 million following revelations of his infidelity and his arrest for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs" (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 477). Both Olivia Jade and Tiger Woods are prime examples of prominent individuals that left a poor reputation and association with their sponsorships.

In today's society, influencers can be "cancelled" for so many things including saying an offensive word, dancing to an offensive song, or posting inappropriate or harmful content. In addition to these actions, there are many other individuals who seek out influencers in order to catch them slipping up in any way so they can "cancel" them. Gaining back one's original reputation prior to getting canceled is extremely difficult in the world of social media. Oftentimes, these despicable actions committed by the influencer are caught on camera and are floating around the internet, constantly reminding people of what the influencer did. Even after apologizing and trying to learn from one's mistakes, an influencer still struggles with earning back credibility and trust with his/her followers. From an influencer's perspective, it is unfortunate in the long run as brands often do not pick these canceled influencers for sponsorships. Additionally, from a marketing perspective, the brand's reputation can be ruined if associated with an influencer who was canceled. The risk of cancel culture is extremely important to consider for marketers when targeting influencers as it is such a popular practice in the social media world today.

If implemented strategically, there are several advantages to influencer marketing that make it a more effective and attractive form of advertisement. Influencers are endorsers and use their status, knowledge, expertise, and experience as consumers in order to connect with their followers. In addition, as individuals follow influencers for a long period of time, they become invested in their lives and constantly look for updates on what is going on in the influencer's life. A unique aspect of influencers that are not celebrities is their connection with their fans. Brands seek out influencers that have "more active and authentic communication with their target audience leading to a higher degree of engagement" (Vangelov, 2019, p. 79). There is a very strong sense of community between an influencer and his/her followers as influencers usually try to engage with their followers as much as they can. Follower-to-following ratio plays a large role in influencers gaining credibility as opinion leaders. This ratio refers to the number of followers an influencer has compared to the number of people he/she is following (Follower Ratio, 2020). Oftentimes, influencers respond to fan comments on their posts, shoutout specific followers in their videos, or follow back fan accounts in order to increase their strong connection with their followers. When a popular influencer, usually a celebrity, follows back very few accounts, there is a more negative relationship between the number of followers and likeability (DeVeirman & Veroline Cauberghe & Liselot Hudders, 2017, p. 807). Ultimately, influencers have a stronger and more authentic relationship with their followers and fans, making them more attractive to marketers.

Many influencers also share similar interests with their audiences and develop strong bonds with them, which ultimately increases the influencer's credibility and trust among their viewers.   Influencers can be referred to as online opinion leaders as a result of their expertise on specific topics.  They "tend to be more socially connected with higher status, education, and social prestige, giving them the capability to influence others" (Lin & Bruning & Swarna, 2018, p. 432).  Online opinion leaders provide informal consumption-related advice to their audiences, making their brand promotions more authentic (Lin & Bruning & Swarna, 2018, p. 432).  In addition, "consumers view [social media influencers] as more accessible and credible than mainstream celebrities and thus, a message an [influencer] communicates is considered more authentic and trustworthy than a similar message a celebrity communicates" (Ki & Kim, 2019, p. 906).  With this increase in credibility, consumers are more likely to respond positively to an advertisement that an influencer posts.  Furthermore, consumers tend to aspire to be like the influencer(s) they follow and "mimic others' consumption behavior intentionally in response to a desire to look or behave like those they are modeling" (Ki & Kim, 2019, p. 907).  By taking advantage of the consumer's aspiration to be like an influencer, marketers have a higher chance of promoting their products through influencers.

This use of influencer marketing helps make the advertisement more effective since traditional internet ads are often avoided and disliked by individuals.  Traditional advertisements often pop up during inconvenient times and can be seen as annoying and intrusive.  In a study conducted by Chang-Hoan Cho and Hongsik John Cheon, it was discovered that individuals

avoid advertisements on the internet as a result of three variables: "perceived goal impediment, perceived ad clutter, and prior negative experience" (2004, p. 89). When individuals use the internet, they often have a goal in mind and a specific thing they want to accomplish. During a person's internet search, "when ads interrupt a consumer's goal, it may result in undesirable outcomes, such as aggravation, negative attitudes, and ad avoidance" (2004, p. 90). In addition to this annoyance caused by ad pop-ups, the number of advertisements can also result in a negative perception of advertisements in general. The more advertisements that interfere with an individual's goal on the internet, the more annoyed the individual is, causing him/her to avoid advertisements at all costs in the future. These prior negative experiences with advertisements ultimately cause consumers to ignore and avoid them as much as they can.

Unlike conventional internet advertisements, influencer brand promotions bring about a much more positive response from consumers and are better business for the companies themselves. Listening to one's favorite influencer promote a product is much more attractive to the consumer as opposed to seeing a video advertisement pop up that interferes with an individual's goal on the internet. Consumers look up to influencers and are so invested in their lives that it is even more enjoyable to watch their sponsored advertisements than a standard internet ad.

There are limited arguments about the disadvantages of influencer marketing. Influencers are required by contract to inform their audiences when their content is sponsored by a brand. Many people argue that when influencers explicitly express "this content is sponsored,"

consumers respond more negatively as they believe the influencer is being biased as they are

receiving compensation for this post.  However, in contrast, "when there is no mention about

sponsorship in social media influencer posts containing information about brands and products,

consumer's suspicion regarding sponsorship is raised" (Stubb & Colliander, 2019, p. 212).  In

order to avoid the obvious bias that most influencers have when it comes to promoting products,

many influencers tend to stress that "this is a sponsored post, but all opinions are my own"

(Hwang & Jeong, 2016, p. 528).  By ensuring honest opinions, this increases the influencer's

credibility and generates a more positive response from the consumer.

     In addition to expressing honest opinions, there are other methods that influencers can

use to promote products that increase their credibility and decrease bias assumptions.  One of the

ways influencers show their audiences that they truly enjoy certain products is by showing them

off in less obvious ways.  A prime example of this method is evident through the partnership

between sisters Charli and Dixie D'Amelio and the clothing brand Hollister.  The D'Amelio

sisters are both influencers on TikTok; Charli is known for her dancing skills and Dixie first

became famous for simply being Charli's sister, and has since released music and posted

relatable and entertaining content.  Both of these sisters are viewed as unproblematic influencers

in the world of TikTok as they truly emphasize their dislike for drama and are constantly positive

in all their videos.  Charli is the most followed influencer on TikTok, with 84.2 million followers

(D'Amelio, C, n.d), and Dixie has 36.8 million followers (D'Amelio, D, n.d).  In a study

conducted by Marijke DeVeirman, Veroline Cauberghe, and Liselot Hudders, it was discovered

that the more followers an influencer has, the more positive the attitudes towards the influencer

are (2017, p. 807).   With this large of a follower count and their unproblematic reputation,

Charli and Dixie are perceived as opinion leaders and have a large impact on a wide range of

people.

In July of 2020, Charli and Dixie both collaborated with Hollister as "jeanealogists in

their first-ever Hollister jean lab" (Charli D'Amelio, 2020).  In multiple posts about their

collaboration on both Instagram and TikTok, Charli and Dixie are both genuinely passionate

about helping make comfortable jeans for all sizes.  While both sisters are required to show that

these posts with Hollister are sponsored, Charli and Dixie are seen wearing their Hollister jeans

in their everyday TikTok videos that are often non-sponsored.  This further increases their

credibility about this product since they clearly show they are enjoying the jeans by wearing

them frequently.  Furthermore, the way in which they promote their jeans is through their launch

of the #MoreHappyDenimDance, a TikTok dance challenge that allows their followers to engage

in this partnership (D'Amelio, C, 2020).  This dance challenge, choreographed by Charli, gives

fans the opportunity to be selected to meet both Charli and Dixie, giving their fans even more of

a reason to purchase the Hollister jeans.  By both emphasizing honest opinions and genuinely

showing interest in the products they promote and the people they promote them to, influencers,

in general, have a higher chance of reaching and connecting with their audiences.  Furthermore,

through these strategic methods, marketers have a better chance of selling their products since

the consumers are potentially receiving more than they asked for by meeting an influencer as a

bonus.  This collaboration between Hollister and the D'Amelio sisters portrays the many

advantages and opportunities that the advertising strategy of influencer marketing has if used

correctly.

Social media influencers ultimately have a profound impact on many realms of society.

With their platforms, these influencers are able to connect with their followers and post content

that is enjoyable and similar to what the consumers want.  By creating a sense of community

among their followers, influencers gain credibility and trust.  This strong and authentic bond

influencers have with their fans attracts marketers to target influencers in order to promote

certain products or brands to their respective audiences.  As seen through the positive responses

to an influencer's content by consumers, influencer marketing is an extremely effective form of

advertising.  An influencer's viewers are more likely to purchase an item posted by an influencer

as they believe having this specific product will allow them to become more similar to the

influencer; the desire to mimic an influencer is the driving force in influencer marketing.  This

marketing strategy allows for brands to target more specific audiences and ultimately receive

positive feedback on their products.

By investigating the advantages of influencer marketing, we can then understand how

much social media influencers can impact the general population and how brands can be

successful in selling their products.  Social media has undoubtedly presented various

opportunities and challenges for the general population and many people are unaware of the

impact that social media can have on them.  Examining the specific components of influencer

marketing allows for us to truly understand the power influencers hold.  Through the research and studies conducted, consumers are more attracted to advertisements, and content in general, posted by social media influencers.  In addition, as consumers ourselves, it is important for us to realize that we are falling subject to this industry of influencer marketing.  Through their strategic and intentional methods with social media influencers, marketers are able to convince consumers to purchase their products less intrusively.   Influencer marketing is a rapidly growing industry and one that marketers should take advantage of in order to increase business sales and reputation among their target audiences.

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