Influencer Marketing: Consumer Responses to Instagram Influencers

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is the promotion of services and products through individuals with a large social media following. The research contained within this thesis will discuss the topic of influencer marketing and the responses of the consumers targeted. This study observed the different types of responses and comments that followers of Instagram influencers left on their posted content.

The themes and characteristics of responses of Instagram influencer followers will be found through a qualitative content analysis. The study is supported by self-presentation theory, which suggests that individuals, in this case social media influencers, present themselves in a way that results in others' perception of them.

Keywords: influencer marketing, Instagram, presentation of self, social media

Influencer Marketing: Consumer Responses to Instagram Influencers

The impact of social media influencers (SMIs) is on the rise as the use of social media grows in the daily lives of consumers. Consumers are more likely to positively react to a message that comes from a trusted source (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2019), the trusted source being social media influencers. Due to their authenticity and large followings, social media influencers have connections with an audience that supports and trusts them (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, & Dwivedi, 2019). This authenticity is what draws their followers to them. Social media influencers are recognized as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Social media influencers have sprouted in not just entertainment, but multiple different industries as well. Because of these factors, brands are leaning towards influencer marketing to further help them navigate the realm of social media and its relationship with advertising.

Influencer marketing is the second most effective promotional strategy (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018). The recent growth of influencers has resulted in the increase in use of influencer marketing in businesses and agencies. It is an advertising strategy worth an estimated $2 billion in 2017, with projections to reach $10 billion by 2020 (Childers, et al., 2019). Influencer marketing is growing as social media influencers continue to become prevalent in the everyday life of consumers.

Brands can leverage the use of social media influencers to improve and enhance public relations by promoting their offerings for higher engagements (Arora, et al., 2019). Social media influencers are able to have a higher engagement level than brands, because there is a face and a personality that consumers are able to relate to, not just a brand trying to sell them something.

Nowadays brands need social influence in order to interact with their current and prospective customers (Arora, et al., 2019). Even some of the most popular brands like Nike or Adidas make sure to keep up with their influence on social media. Influencer marketing builds a connection between brands and consumers through social media (Childers, et al., 2019). If brands begin to use influencer marketing, they will be able to build a deeper connection with their target audience. The use of social media influencer marketing also includes the benefits of creating authentic content and brand engagement (Childers, et al., 2019). Brands are now developing their image and customer loyalty through the use of influencers acting as spokespersons for their products and brands. These individuals are able to bridge the gap between brands and consumers through social media to further develop the relationship between the two parties.

In order to further investigate the responses of consumers to social media influencers, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine the different themes and characteristics of user comments and responses posted on social media influencer Huda Kattan's Instagram. The study used qualitative coding in order to analyze the themes and characteristics of the consumer comments using presentation of self. The literature review of this study will provide further background on self-presentation, including the theory's definition and its previous use. It will also provide background information to the content analysis on the topics of social media influencers, influencer marketing, and the characteristics of social media followers. The study ends with a discussion on the dominant themes and characteristics present within social media followers' comments and responses.

Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a strategy that uses the role of social media influencers to endorse a brand or product (Ki & Kim, 2019). It is the use of "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Audrezet, et al., 2018, p. 1). This strategy is a form of product placement.

Audiences are flooded with persuasive messages on a day to day basis throughout their media selections and are often choosing to avoid these persuasive messages that advertise products and services (Childers, et al., 2019). Brands are able to use influencers to promote their products at higher engagement levels (Arora, et al., 2019). Companies can only go so far in engagement with their audiences due to the limitations of a personable relationship with their consumers; however, influencers are personable and relatable, making it easier for them to supply a higher level of engagement and interaction with their audience.

Companies can use the tool of the social influencer index (Arora, et al., 2019) to discover the right influencers to represent their brands. It is important for brands to identify what is important to them in their influencer representation so that they be able to find the right social media influencer to showcase their brand and products because of the abundance of self-proclaimed influencers in social media.

Importance

Due to the connection that influencers are able to build between brands and consumers, companies are now using influencers as a bridge to further reach their target audience. Digital communication and social media are growing in terms of usage, influence, and ad spending

(Childers, et al., 2019). Influencer marketing allows "connectivity and engagement between consumers and brands via digital and social media channels" (Childers, et al., 2019, p. 258).

By 2018, the advertising strategy has reached a worth of $4.8 billion (Borchers, 2019). That is over two times the amount that it was worth in 2017. Influencer marketing has an effectiveness rate of 92%, which has encouraged 63% of marketers to increase their influencers' marketing budgets for the next year (Ki & Kim, 2019). In 2017, 86% of companies used the tactic leading to 39% increasing its budget within their agencies in 2018 (Childers, et al., 2019).

Agencies are increasing their use of influencer marketing. Marketing and online reviews are more important than ever because consumers react positively to messages from trusted sources (Childers, et al., 2019). Building relationships with an audience through open and authentic forms of communication has been recognized as a touchstone point in public relations (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

Influencer marketing can oftentimes be considered deceptive to their target audience as it is paid advertising that is often portrayed as earned media (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). However, research has shown that the awareness of advertising on an influencer's social media page does not affect the relationship between the influencer and the consumer (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). The use of influencer marketing offers companies the benefits of the creation of authentic content and brand engagement (Childers, et al., 2019).

Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory is founded on the idea that individuals present themselves in a way that they want others to perceive them (Goffman, 1959). Goffman defined presentation of self in everyday life by the categorical topics of performances, teams, regions and region

behavior, discrepant roles, communication out of character, and the art of impression management. In the same way that individuals attempt to portray themselves to control others' perceptions of them, Instagram influencers may portray a positive feeling or emotion about a product or brand to persuade their audience to try it (Greer & Ferguson, 2017).

When presenting information to an audience, individuals have two ways of expressing, "the expression that he gives, and the expression that he gives off" (Goffman, 1959, p. 2). These forms of expression are crucial to understanding if the persona being presented to the audience is genuine or not. The second expression, what the individual gives off, can also be defined as "symptomatic of the actor," in which the individual purposely portrayed the information in that way so it would be perceived that way (Goffman, 1959, p. 2). This is often times the case in online self-presentation due to the anonymous audience that is able to view online content of individuals.

Goffman (1959) stated that when individuals are in front of an audience, they will have motives to present themselves in a certain way in order to control the impression of the receiver. This is turn leads to the actions of others to show themselves in a way that they can control the reaction of their audience to appear a certain way. Instagram influencers present themselves in the same way that actors engage in "idealization" (Goffman, 1959, p. 23), meaning that these individuals are presenting themselves in a way that is expected of their character and socially valued by their audience.

When engaging with another party, individuals will present themselves in a way and maintain that line of what they claim to be by staying in character (Goffman, 1959). This can be seen in the way that influencers present themselves on different social media platforms. Their

audience has a single perception of them that is consistent and authentic so that they can be a trusted source for their followers. This helps to define the part of self-presentation that explores the individuals desire to have control over what their audience thinks of them.

A study done in 2010, showcased the difference between the original theory of self-presentation and online self-presentation (Mehdizadeh, 2010). This supported that there is a difference between one's online and offline self-presentation. Online self-presentation aligns with the original theory of self-presentation that individuals exhibit control over the way that they portray themselves in order to control how others perceive them. However, in online self-presentation, individuals choose the certain expressions that they are giving to their audience in various methods (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), whether it may be in the content that they post, how they react to others online, or even the profile picture they use.

Some individuals may choose to only present certain aspects of their online identity to control the aspects of their personality that their audience can view (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This allows them to almost have one particular trait, when in reality humans are much more complex than what is presented online. Others may adopt a completely different persona in order to conform and fit-in to their online environment (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This may mean changing who they are online or even identifying as a completely different individual. However, individuals are more likely to recreate their offline self into their online self. Others may choose to remain anonymous within their online community to avoid negative behaviors and interactions, something that is not particularly possible in Goffman's (1959) application of self-presentation in everyday life (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). The modern use of self-

presentation theory that is seen in online communication allows individuals to exhibit much more control over the perception of their audiences than in personal life.

Previous Use

The use of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory was used as the theoretical foundation for a multitude of studies on different topics. The previous studies discussed below all focus on the use of presentation of self in online communication. This literature review also shows studies conducted on the effects of self-presentation theory. As forms of communication continue to evolve, studies are done to further understand self-presentation theory in areas other than personal life. In one way or another, each of these studies relate back to self-presentation theory.

In a media management study about TV stations promoting their corporate image via Instagram, Greer and Ferguson (2017) examined how stations desire to be known and how they create impressions. The content analysis of television affiliated Instagram pages found two predominant themes: promotion and community. The study extends self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) to an organizational level through viewing TV station Instagram posts by viewing stations as entities and by the way these posts reflect their organization.

In Audrezet et al.'s (2018) study on the authenticity of social media influencers, the researchers observed the nature of self-presentation. This study examined the collaborations between social media influencers and fashion and lifestyle domains. The researchers engaged in a three-step qualitative methodology that included "an observation of SMI-brand collaborations, a content analysis of the declared intentions in SMIs interviews about such collaborations, and a comparison of these two data sources" (Audrezet, et al., 2018, p. 2). The study resulted in

guidance for social media influencers and marketers on how the two should partner with one another in order to benefit both parties while still maintaining the authenticity of the SMI.

In a self-disclosure study navigating the role of self-disclosure within the context of online dating, the researchers use impression management to support their ideas of self-presentation success (Gibbs, et al., 2006). The researchers conducted an online survey with a national sample of members from one of the largest online dating services, Match.com. The survey examined the relationship between self-disclosure and its impact on self-presentation success. Gibbs et al. found a correlation between self-disclosure and strategic success, as well as the correlation between self-disclosure and self-presentation success. The factors of greater strateigic success are higher self-disclosure online, more intentional self-disclosure, as well as cognitive and behavioral experience. The factors of greater self-presentation success are those who were more honest in their self-disclosure, those engaging in a higher amount of self-disclosure, intentional self-disclosure, positive self-disclosure, and those with greater learning ability as well as the number of people they met online dating.

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) studied how presentation of self relates to current online interaction through the technology available during that time. The researchers presented an analysis of "online identity and interaction practices in 10 different cases of bloggers, SL inhabitants and their online spaces" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102). The information and research was compiled to derive the connection from original self-presentation theory and its application to online interaction. The key finding of the study was that compared to traditional self-presentation, online self-presentation allows the user to only take on factors of their personality and only present those instead of all factors.

In a computer in human behavior study, Marder (2018) examined the impact of audience diversity on "liking" political candidates on Facebook. The study observed how the behaviors of individuals are affected by an online audience. A survey was conducted of Facebook users that were eligible voters during the 2016 US Presidential Election. The study found that those who had not already "liked" a presidential candidate, their intention to do so before the presidential election was negatively associated with the diversity of their Facebook audience. This relationship comparison showcased that increased audience diversity hindered "liking."

Khoshsabk and Southcott (2019) explored the significance of social media in online gender identity presentation in 10 adult Iranians either living inside or outside of their native country. The analysis was conducted through online interviews and the observation of participants' Facebook activities. Through these interviews, participants were able to express their thoughts about reasons for sharing content online and the tendency to present an idealized version of themselves. The study found a relationship between the specific identity-presentation, the individuals' gender, and their level of conservatism.

In a study analyzing the actions of those untagging themselves from social media posts, Birnholtz, Burke, and Steele (2017) used self-presentation theory to support their hypothesis that the actions of untagging oneself from a photo on social media is to present oneself in the best light. Analysis was conducted on aggregated, de-identified Facebook log data and surveys to explore untagging to answer two questions:

> 1) Do users treat untagging as we would expect them to treat other impression management strategies, and 2) how do users feel about untagging as a strategy and what are their motivations in untagging? (Birnholtz, et al, 2017, p. 167)

The researchers found that the method of untagging differs from traditional self-presentation tactics. Untagging is used more by users that have a longer experience of using Facebook. Users are more likely to untag if the age gap between the tagger and the target is great. It is also used as a way to avoid the negative effects of annoying or embarrassing content.

Fan, Deng, Dong, Lin, and Wang (2019) conducted a study on telematics and informatics examined if and how self-presentation of others influences the well-being of their followers. The researchers completed a study of 120 students from a university in Shanghai, China. Participants were questioned on their responses to several different posts from social media to indicate their psychological reaction to the self-presentation of others. The study found that self-presentation of others predicted a lower subjective well-being in others. The researchers also found that self-presentation of others on social media could increase the feeling of relative deprivation of others and decrease their subjective well-being through social comparison.

Colliander, et al. (2017) tested the effect of a balanced presentation strategy on Twitter. The research focused on the distinction between backstage (private) and front-stage (professional) presentation. A longitudinal experiment was used to test the effects of a balanced presentations strategy the exhibited both front and backstage presentation. The study found that a balanced strategy of the presentation of politicians' political and private lives on social media increased interest in the politician's party and intent to vote for that party.

Djafarova and Trofimenko (2017) observed the relationship between self-presentation and self-esteem of mothers in social media in Russia. The study analyzed the impact of positive self-presentation and how it affects the feedback that they received as well as their self-esteem. The study engaged in qualitative research by conducting an analysis of mothers' Instagram

profiles and interviews to understand the reactions of mothers to other mothers on Instagram and Facebook. The study resulted in key patterns in the social media use of mothers. Mothers acknowledge that they have children but choose to focus on themselves. They showcase content related to their children, in order to show their competence in the subject. These social media users also engage in much social interaction with one another including answering questions related to motherhood and promoting children-related products.

An education study used the sociological perspective of self-presentation to investigate the process of gaining a sense of self through online learning environments. The researcher likened Facebook to theatrical-like interactions because of the role that individuals take on in their self-presentation on online media platforms (Khoshsabk, 2017). The study used qualitative methods of research by conducting interviews and analyzed the contents of Facebook profiles and activities of their participants. Khoshsabk found that users were more likely to showcase their best qualities to the public in order to gain popularity where instead for their friends they will share different types of content.

These studies showcase and highlight the modern use of self-presentation theory. It is evident the importance of self-presentation theory and therefore support the current study at hand as the presentation of social media influencers is observed in order to analyze the themes of their followers' responses.

Social Media Influencers

The internet is flooded with individuals claiming to be social media influencers (Arora, et al., 2019). Social media influencers are people whose actions include "expressing their opinions in product reviews, offering tips on product usage, and posting pictures or videos containing

products or services" (Audrezet, et al., 2018, p. 1). Social media influencers cross traditional

boundaries of influencers by balancing between intimacy and publicity, authenticity and

commercialization, ingratiation and critical distance (Borchers, 2019). Social media influencers

are people that present their lives on social media that people are able to relate to.

Social media influencers are defined differently in different sources of research. Social

media ethnographers Abidin and Ots (2015) defined social media influencers as a form of

microcelebrities who record every aspect of their daily lives. They are shapers of public opinion

who use their position in social media to persuade their audience. They use the platform of social

media to sustain their accessibility, believability, emulatability, and intimacy.

In public relations, a social media influencer can be defined as an individual who uses

personal branding to build and maintain relationships with multiple followers on social media

and is able to inform, entertain, and influence the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of their

followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

According to Childers et al. (2019), social media influencers are those who create

engagement, drive conversation, and sell/advertise products to a large audience. Social media

influencers are no longer just celebrities, they range from individuals with a high social media

following to those that impact the daily decisions of others.

Social media influencers put into practice the theory of self-presentation by establishing

their online image and using this image to attract attention and build a large number of followers

(Chae, 2018). Social media influencers can be found spread across all social media platforms,

including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

Depending on the number of followers that these individuals have, they can be defined as micro-

influencers if their following is less than 500,000. These individuals normally have a tighter

group of community and a more focused niche of interest (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

Characteristics

Though many individuals may claim to be influencers, studies have shown that there are

several characteristics that genuine social media influencers portray. Social media influencers are

able to influence their audience by using their resources that focus on different consumer values

(Ki & Kim, 2019). By knowing their audience influencers can identify what traits of theirs to

exhibit in order to control the perception of their audience. This relates back to Goffman's (1959)

self-presentation theory. Social media influencers have become more prevalent than traditional

celebrities. They are more approachable and compelling to imitate because these individuals are

perceived as real and relatable (Jin, Maquddam, & Ryu, 2019). Through their online self-

presentation, social media influencers showcase their personal tastes and choices (Audrezet, de

Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018).

Social media influencers exhibit the characteristics of having their own sense of humor,

their own perspective, and having what their followers wish they had (Chae, 2018). Companies

offer abilities to match brands with influencers that align with their values and characteristics. In

2018, Huda Kattan, the top social media influencer of that year, was described by the traits:

emotionality, artistic interests, ideal and self-expression (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). By

identifying the different personality traits of social media influencers, brands and companies are

able to choose the influencers that they believe would be a best fit to represent their business.

The most defining characteristic of social media influencers is their ability to build and foster

relationships between brands and their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). These relationships

allow them to build credibility with their audience as well as the brands that are looking to work with them.

Importance

With the heavy influx of social media influencers, these individuals are now being recognized as gatekeepers, opinion leaders, and influentials; calling for a demand in relationship building between these individuals and different companies and brands that want them to represent them (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). They are able to build a connection with their audience in a way that A-list celebrities are not.

The relationships that social media influencers establish through themselves between brands and their audiences is pivotal to their online success (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Social media influencers have been found to have a greater effect on their audiences than traditional celebrities due to their relatability (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Due to the persuasive power of social media influencers, they are able to have a great effect on their audiences to help brands market to their target (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

Huda Kattan

The social media influencer chosen for this study was Huda Kattan. Originally from the Midwest, Kattan is of Iraqi-American descent (Bellanger, 2019). She currently resides in Dubai where her company is based (IZEA, 2019). In 2010, Kattan began her career in the beauty industry by starting a makeup blog (Social Buddy, 2019). She came up with the idea while studying finance at the University of Michigan and then left her corporate life to begin a career in the beauty industry (Social Media Innovation, 2019). By 2013, Kattan released her own makeup line named Huda Beauty, now being sold in the popular beauty store, Sephora (Social

Buddy, 2019). In 2017, she was recognized by *Time* magazine as one of the 25 most influential

people on the internet (Bellanger, 2019).

Katan currently has 39 million followers on Instagram. She is selective about the brands

that she choosing to work with, so that she does not sacrifice her credibility to her followers

(Osman, 2018). She has represented high-profile brands such as Dior and Chanel (Porteous,

2019). Kattan's company, Huda Beauty, has made her the top beauty influencer in terms of

earnings (Porteous, 2019).

Kattan interacts with her audience using multiple methods. She employs the use of

YouTube and social media to market the products from her beauty line (GRIN, 2019). With four

different Instagram profiles, Kattan uses Instagram to showcase other beauty influencers using

her products (Porteous, 2019). Kattan is well-known for her make-up tutorials and beauty

industry insight (GRIN, 2019).

Followers

Chae (2018) investigated the feeling of envy that female followers have towards the

social media influencers they follow. This survey measured the different traits and characteristics

that social media followers of influencers exhibit including interest in specific content, public

self-consciousness, self-esteem, comparison of life with influencers, and envy (Chae, 2018). The

consumer's desire to mimic social media influencers is what compels them to purchase products,

services, or brands supported by the influencer (Ki & Kim, 2019).

Many consumers go after what is popular and what is trendy. Thanks to social media

influencers, consumers are able to find new products and brands to follow because of their

impact. In an experimental study Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) found that followers of social

media influencers are trusting towards their sources and have a positive attitude towards the

brands that are endorsed to them but are envious of SMIs.

Method

Drawing on work from Greer and Ferguson's (2017) methodology, this study was

conducted using a qualitative method to examine social media influencer. The goal was to collect

and analyze artifacts that consisted of individual Instagram posts on the top social media

influencer of the beauty and makeup industry.

Acquiring the Instagram comments took place in two steps. First, research was conducted

in order to determine the top social media influencer on Instagram in the beauty and makeup

industry. This was done through a Google search of "top Instagram beauty influencers 2019." A

total of 11 websites appeared on the first page of the Google search, 10 of which had relevant

titles to the search. Each of the websites with relevance to the study were then clicked on and

read. Eight different websites on the first page of the Google search recognized Huda Kattan as

one of the top social media influencers on Instagram in the beauty and make up industry.

Second, a search was conducted through Instagram's search bar using the influencer's

first name, "Huda." Four different verified Instagram pages were found in connection to Huda

Kattan, the first being, "huda", her personal Instagram page with 1.5 million followers. The

second, "hudabeautyshop," her business Instagram to highlight her makeup line with 5.9M

followers. The third, "hudabeauty," her beauty Instagram highlighting other makeup and beauty

influencers using her products with 39 million followers. Lastly, "hudaboss," the Instagram page

of her show following the life of her and her sister building their brand with 114,000 followers.

Her Instagram handle, "hudabeauty," was chosen for this study due to its relevance of her work

in the beauty community and it being the account with the largest number of followers.

The method of analysis was Strauss and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative method,

also known as analytic induction. The content that was analyzed from Kattan's Instagram page

were the comments in response to her posts. The comments were analyzed of the posts from the

month of August 2019. A number was then randomly generated to determine the comment that

would begin the analysis.

For each post, the number of comments was recorded, added together, and then divided

by 300 to determine how many comments were analyzed from each post. The total number of

posts for the month of August 2019 added up to 75. The total number of comments totaled

208,673 responses. This total was then divided by 300 which equaled to approximately 695.

From this number, every 695th response out of all posts and comments was analyzed. This

method of selection process allowed representation among all replies.

The comments were recorded and tracked by date. The responses were then organized

into categories based on theme and characteristics. Any comment containing only emojis was

counted into the total of responses recorded, but not categorized. Categories and subcategories

were created until topics were exhausted. Subcategories were then placed into categories and

then the dominant themes were decided.

Results

Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis: association, affinity, and sharing.

Association

Consumers are leaving responses to gain the attention of the influencer in order to draw themselves closer to the individual. Due to the high amount of social currency that these individuals have it draws others to them. By having a large number of followers, these influencer's Instagram followers are looking to gain their own social currency by being associated and recognized by someone with higher social status than them.

Subcategories of this theme include spam and outreach. Individuals will choose to comment mass amounts of words and/or emojis in order to gain the attention of the influencer. Others will comment the same context over and over again hoping for it to get noticed. Some are statements asking the influencer to view their page. Since the influencer's Instagram page highlights other makeup artists using her products, it is logical to see comments asking her to view their page in hopes that they may get featured. Through this type of community that the influencer has fostered, she is not only growing her brand but also the brand of other beauty influencers.

Affinity

There is a desire in these consumers to express their affection for social media influencers. Influencers are able to have a more genuine relationship with their followers than traditional celebrities. This creates a more open environment for followers to express their gratitude and admiration for the influencer on the platform. Social media influencers are more likely to interact with their followers to keep up with the engagement that social media followers desire. Therefore, users who are leaving responses to social media influencers are more likely to receive a response from said social media influencer to their comment.

Subcategories of this theme include long paragraphs of text similar to letters and short messages of affirmation. One comment in particular contained 78 words expressing their deep admiration for Kattan. The context of the comment would be all the same. A response left in order to express their affection for the Instagram influencer. Individuals would also leave the same comment over and over again in order to be recognized by the influencer, the context was affinity but also reflected the theme of association.

Sharing

Followers of social media influencers share the content shared with them with the people within their social circles. Individuals are more likely to tag their associates in content that they find relatable and/or entertaining. It was less likely for individuals to tag their friends in just beauty tutorials than in funny or relatable content.

Subcategories of this theme include: a simple tagging of their friend or mutual follower and comments referencing to life events associated with other individuals. Social media followers of social media influencers are looking to share the content of the influencers that they follow. Social media is a platform that allows these individuals to share experiences with one another. Followers are commenting on posts to share with their friends the content that is being shared with them. This could include just leaving a response with their associates Instagram handle or leaving an anecdotal comment that is relevant to the life of the follower and the context of the post.

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Discussion

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Influencer marketing began when social media became a predominant source for information to the public. Instagram influencers are posting content for their audiences to see and

interact with leaving a widespread theme amongst their responses. Using a qualitative

methodology, based on self-presentation, this study found three predominant themes in the

responses of Instagram influencer followers: association, affinity, and sharing.

     Social media is all about sharing experiences. The use of this can be seen in the recurring

theme of social media followers that tag their friends in posts. This emulates the use of word-of-

mouth marketing that Childers, Lemon, and Hoy (2019) claim is more important than ever. The

way that individuals are now sharing content with one another is through the use of different

social media platforms. Social media platforms are used more than any other network to share

information (Osatuyi, 2013). Taking into account that sharing is a common theme throughout the

comments of this social media influencer's post, it supports the use of influencer marketing to

further a business' reach to their audience. By sharing posts of influencers, individuals will be

drawn to the page to further understand who the person is behind the post that was shared with

them. This will grow the following of the influencer and in turn grow their sales.

     Many of the responses of these social media followers reflected the theme of affinity.

Users would often times express their love and admiration for the influencer by commenting on

their post that may or may not have any relation to the topic at hand. These individuals are

choosing to openly express their admiration for these Instagram influencers. Though the motive

behind the comment cannot be known, it is available for both the influencer, followers of the

influencers, and any users that choose to view her page to see.

     By using different cues to indicate credibility between them and their audience, social

media influencers can improve their targeted engagement with their customers (Osatuyi, 2013)

and also increase the amount of affinity comments that they receive on their posts. Whether these

individuals are looking to gain the attention of the influencer or just looking to leave a positive

response, is it evident that affinity is a present theme. A sub-theme of affinity is trust. The trust

that social media influencers are able to establish with their followers (Arora, et al., 2019) allows

them to build that affinity through the content that they choose to post. If they are posting content

that is relatable, trustworthy, and accurate, then they are able to improve the affinity response of

their followers.

The theme of association was found in the comments of users that want to be noticed by

the influencer. Individuals desire to be associated with someone with a recognized social status

in order for that to positively reflect on themselves. The individuals leaving responses on

influencer pages are looking to fill the desire to say that they were acknowledged by someone of

a highly recognized social status. Ki and Kim (2019) found that users desire to mimic the actions

of social media influencer which relates to the theme of association. The more that the follower

feels that they connect or relate to influencers will grow their desire to associate with them.

The commonality between these themes is that they are not related to the products that

are being showcased to them. A majority of the responses left on Kattan's Instagram posts were

related to the SMI herself or just to what the video was about, not what was being used.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to enhance the understanding of the responses of social

media influencer followers. Previous work that analyzes the motivations and behaviors of social

media influencers were not discredited.

Limitations found during the process of the data collection were comments containing

emojis and comments not in English. Due to the fact that emojis are merely images there was a

limitation in this study to qualitatively analyze the comments that only contained emojis. For future studies, an index could be developed to provide meaning to the different emojis, allowing the researchers to analyze this type of comment.

The comments in languages other than English posed could not be analyzed because of the limitation of resources to provide accurate translation. Though Google Translate is a readily available computerized translator, professional translation resources are always the better source (McGuire, 2019). For future studies, resources should be used to provide accurate translation of comments outside of the researcher's knowledge so that the study is not limited to comments in English, since Instagram is a global platform.

Future research might be able to further explore the responses of consumers to the posts of social media influencers and their effect on purchasing decisions. Due to the limitation of data for this study, all that was able to be observed were the responses of the individuals following social media influencers. Through future research, studies may be able to show the effect of social media influencers through the use of influencer marketing and further understand its effect on target audiences. Additional studies could also be conducted to observe the amount of interaction that influencers receive from post to post. It was found during the study that each of the posts had a different amount of comments and depending on the content that was posted. It would be useful to those that specialize in influencer marketing to know what kind of content with provide social media influencer with the most amount of engagement to further promote brands and products for different companies.

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