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Social Media Influencers: Who They Are and How They Influence

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Abstract: This paper extends research on persuasion and social media communication by reporting the results of a content analysis of 10 leading social media influencers, an untapped empirical issue in the field. Findings, offering insights into the particular communicator attributes influencers emphasize, were based on coding 121 videos of female beauty and lifestyle influencers. Influencers deploy a variety of communication strategies to engage followers, harnessing everyday behaviors, using colloquial terms, expressing emotions, showing vulnerabilities (in socially skilled ways), and strategically promoting products. Interestingly, when influencers mentioned the coronavirus, they did so as to emphasize its relevance to their personal life, rather than suggesting broader implications, such as to public health or its racial disparities. Followers' many comments demonstrated their positive regard for, and parasocial relationships with, influencers. An appendix offers qualitative insights into influencers' appeal.

Influencer marketing, growing by leaps and bounds in recent years, is a major force in contemporary persuasion. For every dollar businesses spend on influencer marketing they recoup more than $5 in profits, and 63 percent of marketers said they intended to increase their influencer budget next year (see 80 influencer marketing statistics, 2020). And why not? Influencers are popular with teenagers and young people, their key target audiences, and call on time-honored persuasion principles. There is wide variety in how much money influencers rake in, with nano-influencers boasting 1000 followers making $315 per video, and a power influencer with tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of influencers coming away with close to $800 a video. Prominent influencers can make between $30,000 and $100,000 a year (Conklin, 2020)

Influence marketing is viewed as a promotional communication strategy that employs marketing-savvy young adults, who affectively connect with an audience, to promote products, services and brands. It differs from celebrity appeals in that influencers are not celebrities (although a handful do become celebrities in their own right; see Bromwich, 2019). A core aspect of contemporary online persuasive communication, influencer marketing harnesses classic strategies that date back to Aristotle, such as credibility, liking, and similarity. Yet while research has examined audience perceptions of influencers, it has not identified the persuasive attributes and strategies influencers call on when trying to influence followers. This paper reports a detailed exploration of the qualities that online influencers display in their persuasion attempts, advancing the literature by seeking to spell out the particular strategies they employ,

The first portion of the paper reviews the literature and presents research questions. Methodology, results, and discussion follow.

Review of Literature and Research Questions

Theory suggests that social media influencers should have an impact on attitudes. Influencers are likely to be perceived as credible, likable, and similar to

their audience, attributes that research shows facilitates persuasion. Credibility leads to internalization of source attributes; likability can produce a halo effect; and similarity elicits social comparisons, such as the inference that if a communicator similar to the receiver likes a product, it is reasonable to assume the product will be good for the receiver him or herself (O'Keefe, 2016; Perloff, 2020). To the extent that influencers are physically attractive, they benefit from the identification and association that attractiveness usually confers (Chaiken, 1979). Persuasion theory and research leave little doubt that, via mediators such as identification, perceived similarity, and the halo effect, influencers should affect users' attitudes toward brands.

Research in this area has also examined audience perceptions of social media influencers (Freberg et al., 2011), as well as influencer effects on credibility judgments and purchasing decisions (De Jans et al., 2020). Consistent with persuasion research, there is evidence that trustworthiness and information involvement, akin to dynamism, influence perceived influencer credibility on YouTube (Xiao, Wang, & Chan-Olmsted, 2019).

In an interesting study derived from concepts in psychology and marketing communication, Ki and Kim (2019) found that influencers draw on classic communicator attributes, such as attractiveness, prestige, and expertise, and these affect respondents' desire to mimic what they see influencers do (Ki & Kim, 2019). Building on these ideas, Chae (2019) found that young adult women in their twenties became vicariously involved with influencers, comparing themselves to influencers, even becoming envious of them. Intriguingly, the effects were stronger for those low in self-esteem and high in public consciousness.

Yet, despite the plethora of research on perceptions of influencers, no research of which we are aware has examined the logically antecedent question: Just how do influencers communicate attributes that generate credibility and social attractiveness perceptions in others? These perceptions are important because they can generate brand endorsements and a large number of online followers. The present study focuses in depth on popular influencers to determine the content that critically engenders perceptions of persuasiveness. A purpose of

this study is to understand what makes influencers so appealing to younger viewers.

The studies reviewed above, along with persuasive communication theories (O'Keefe, 2016), generate a number of questions for research. Existing studies indicate influencers can engender positive perceptions, and persuasion concepts suggest the importance of influencer likability and identification in recruiting followers to influencers' sites. We proposed seven research questions.

RQ1: What types of activities will influencers be engaged in during social media videos?

RQ2: Which verbal techniques will they employ to induce potential positive perceptions on the part of receivers?

RQ3: What personal vulnerabilities that may promote followers' identification will they disclose and how will they broadly discuss them?

RQ4: How will influencers promote products and brands?

Recent scholarship suggests other directions. In an imaginative article, based on Lowenthal's (1944) classic view of mass entertainers as "idols of consumption," rooted in the nature of mid-century American capitalism, Duffy and Pooley (2019) argued that today's influencers tell stories of self-branding that appeal to consumers' economic anxieties situated in the gig economic moment. These contemporary idols of social media promotion can be expected to harness their carefully-crafted displays of personalized authenticity (Bromwich, 2019), even during a pandemic. Although the coronavirus outbreak cried out for placing the needs of the collective ahead of the personalized branded self, influencers should minimize this, foregoing broader societal issues, such as how to keep safe, public health concerns, importance of testing, and racial disparities. They should similarly prioritize promotion over raising awareness on other issues spanning climate change, gender and racial equality, and bullying. This suggested these two research questions:

RQ5: Will influencers discuss the coronavirus, and when they do, will they bring up broader societal concerns?

RQ6: Will influencers use their platforms to mention larger social issues?

Finally, the multitude of comments influencers elicit from followers spawned this question:

RQ7: Will influencers, in fact, generate comments from followers, and what types of comments will followers offer?

Methodology

This content analysis of influencers had several phases. During the first piloting and exploratory phase, the research team nominated prominent influencers, watched their videos, and, with scholarly research in mind, developed hypotheses and a code guide. Given that influencers are popular with female social media users, (Chae, 2019), researchers focused on female influencers, selecting influencers who were listed as the first 10 on a list of the top 100 Lifestyle YouTube Channels for Fashion, Beauty and Lifestyle Videos. Since a focus was on how influencers discussed the coronavirus, their videos for this period had to be available for viewing, and they had to be current influencers.

After eliminating two of influencers, 10 leading female beauty and lifestyle influencers were chosen. These consisted of DulceCandy, Samantha Maria, Amber Scholl, Danielle Mansutti, Niomi Smart, Ingrid Nilsen, Tess Christine, Nicole Guerriero, Fancy Vlogs by Gab, and Patricia Bright. Some had millions of followers.

A total of 121 YouTube videos were viewed. To keep matters manageable, only the first 6 minutes of each were coded, after determining this provided an adequate cross-section of the influencers' messages. Coder agreement among four coders was 91%, with minor discrepancies resolved before the formal coding began.

Content Categories

A basic categorization focused on the products influencers promote, a key part of the business communication model. It is more beneficial for a brand to deal with a well-known influencer, like the ones we selected. With this in mind, researchers coded the videos to see if influencers mentioned a product and, if so, if they showed product by a technological insert or other device on the screen, mentioned a benefit of the product, told followers where they could get it or gave a link, and bestowed credibility on the product by saying she used it herself.

Other categories were selected to tap into the particular communicator attributes influencers used to induce likability and credibility in followers. First, activities influencers performed in the video were counted. These consisted of; putting on makeup, changing clothes, driving, biking, going to class, cooking, cleaning house, drawing, traveling, going to a store, sharing gifts, and playing with pets.

Because referring to or touching a body part can communicate emotion to followers, we looked to see if influencers made reference to a part of her body and touched it, and the particular body part they touched. In a similar fashion, nonverbal expressions of emotions were coded to determine if influencers smiled, laughed, cried, got angry, or expressed guilt. We also coded other ways influencers could establish a sense of relatedness with follower, such as using the colloquial "you" or "you guys," disclosing a personal problem (anxiety, depression, stress, body image, romantic breakup, family issue, unhappy isolation during the coronavirus, guilt), or, instead, discussing a pleasant event. Coders examined whether influencers elided the specifics and talked in general terms about their problem to present a socially skilled front, or if they delved into the particulars. They also tallied whether influencers adopted a downbeat, or upbeat optimistic note. More behaviorally, they noted if influencers referred to others (e.g., sibling, parent, romantic partner, child), and if these individuals actually appeared in the video.

Influences' attractiveness, a salient persuasion attribute (coded as attractive or unattractive) and race were coded. Researchers also evaluated each influencer's genuineness, relatability, likeability, and showing vulnerability on 1-7 scales, as well as jotting down their open-ended evaluations of the influencer (see Appendix).

We also coded whether influencers discussed the coronravirus, if they related this to their personal life or broader social problems, and if they mentioned any political or social problems facing the world, like climate change, prejudice, or poverty.

The final categories focused on followers' comments. Coders computed an average of the number of comments provided, and, examining the first five comments only to necessarily limit the scope of the task, they classified

comments as to whether they: (a) mentioned the influencer positively ("Amber, I love your new apartment' "Nicole, I've never seen your hair look sooooo beautiful"); (b) brought the self in ("Just watching you makes me feel so good about starting my day"); (c) offered general or informative comments on a recommended product or something else.; and (d) listed a criticism of the influencer of any sort. Comments could fall into more than one category.

Results and Discussion

A total of 121 videos, approximately 10 per influencer, were viewed. Seven of the 10 influencers were White, two were African American and one was Hispanic. Results are presented in percentages and tables rather than statistically, given the exploratory nature of this study and the fact that the sample of influencers was not randomly selected from the larger population.

Not surprisingly, product mentions play an important role in videos .Sixty-nine percent of videos mention a product and a whopping 96 percent of these note a benefit of the product, with 98 percent volunteering the persuasive information that they use it themselves. In the videos where a product is mentioned, 87 percent of them give information on where one can buy it or show a link. Forty-four percent harness technology as a promotional device, showing the product by an insert on the screen or a technological technique.

Influencers don't just sit passively in videos and emote. Instead, they are active. As Table 1 shows, the most frequent activities are putting on makeup (21% of videos), changing clothes (15%), playing with a pet (10%), cleaning the house (9%), and assorted other activities. When they discuss other people, they are most likely to mention children (40% of video mentions), followed by boyfriends, husbands or fiancées (31%). Other people don't appear in most of the videos. When individuals appear in addition to the influencer, it is most likely to be boyfriends, husbands and men they are engaged to. These male relational interests appeared in 57 percent of the videos where others appeared.

TABLE 1: MAIN ACTIVITIES INFLUENCERS DO IN VIDEOS
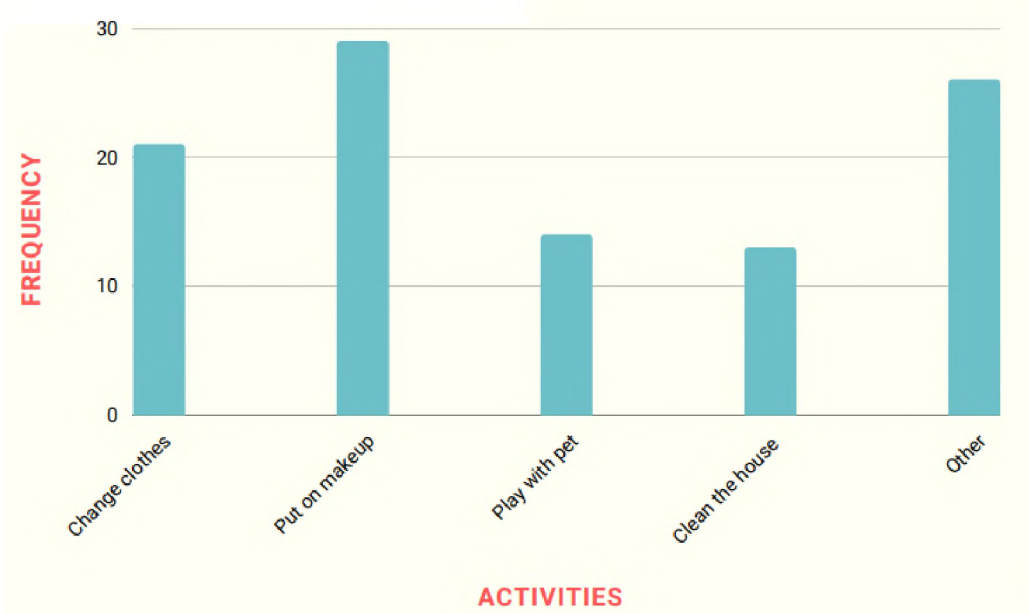
Influencers deploy a variety of communicative strategies to engage followers, probably helping to increase rapport, build a following, and promote brands. Forty-five percent refer to a body part and 78 percent touch a part of their body, frequently their hair.

When it comes to relatability, influencers are pros. They use the inviting, oh-so-popular colloquial term "you guys" (or "you") in 89 percent of the videos. Seventy-five percent humanize themselves by disclosing a problem or experience they have, typically in more general than specific terms, allowing them to appeal to followers' personal travails without losing their general appeal or betraying angst. As Table 2 shows, the top problems influencers call attention to are garden-variety stress, anxiety, body image, and unhappy COVID-19 isolation, with just 10 percent describing a pleasant event. But they are consistently upbeat, offering an optimistic take on their problems 97 percent of the time, a quality that probably increases their social appeal to followers. Bolstering this social attractiveness, influencers are physically appealing; all were rated as attractive by coders.

# TABLE 2: PERSONAL PROBLEMS INFLUENCERS DISCUSSED IN VIDEOS

Did influencers bring up the coronavirus, and, if so, how did they frame it? Interestingly, 31 percent of our videos mentioned the virus outbreak, but only in rather ordinary ways. Considering those videos that mentioned the pandemic, 90 percent of the mentions focused on influencers' personal life, 58 percent related it to their followers, and a tiny 6 percent discussed it in terms of broader social problems. In a similar fashion, just 1 percent of the videos mentioned any broader political or social issue occurring in America or the world.

Finally, we examined the comment that followers list. Their devotion to influencers, indicative of the uses and gratifications followers derive, is illustrated by the finding that, the average video has no less than 310 comments. Looking at the average number of comments, about 3 in 4 of these are positive, complimenting the influencer, approximately the same proportion bring followers themselves in, relating the influencer's video to themselves, while nearly 6 in 10

percent are general and descriptive, while less than 1 percent offer a criticism (see Tables 3 and 4).

TABLE 3: SUBSCRIBERS' COMMENTS ON INFLUENCERS' VIDEOS

*Entries were computed by finding the average number of comments per category for each influencer
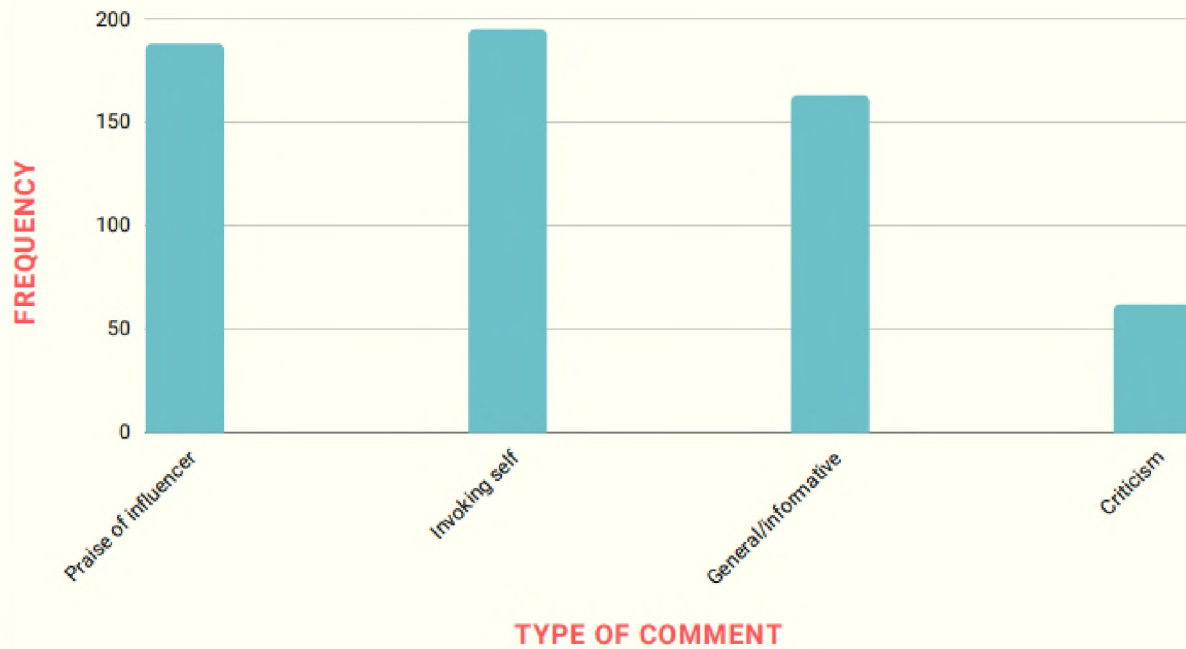
*Data is based on the first 5 comments of each video only

TABLE 4: ILLUSTRATIVE COMMENTS

PRAISE OF INFLUENCER

- "Niomi is the type of person that anywhere in the world you put her, she will only see the positive and have fun and this is who I want to be in life."

- "SIS these braids are it. Looks absolutely beautiful on you. You're so versatile with your styles and I love it!"

- "Idk how to explain but there is something about you that makes me feel good. You have such a good vibe... I've been following you for years and I'll never get tired of your content ✨(btw loved all the ootd)"

- "When Gabi thinks she needs a crown to be a Princess but in reality doesn't need one to be a Queen xxx"

INVOKING SELF

- "I am really enjoying these vlogs. I'm completely fascinated."

- "I was in a weird place last year, many things didn't go the way I had hoped, so towards the end of the year I did a lot of reflecting & implementing many of these. It truly makes a difference."

- "My husband walked in and heard me watching and told me to please keep it under $100□□□! He already knew😁😊 😸😸"

- "I've always had bigger upper arms even when I was pretty skinny and wanted arms like Patricia and here she's saying she wants fat put in her arms 😊"

GENERAL/INFORMATIVE

- "Everythings cancelled except the audacity."

- "Raggedytiff is AMAZING! I've purchased sweaters, stickers, wraps, earrings (I try to buy at least one piece from every collection) and it's all so beautifully made!"

- "Still here years later waiting for the story where she got fired from her bartending job 😂□□♀"

- "Nose jobs are a bit tricky as the nose is in the centre of your face. Once you alter it everything else seems to not fit in and you may feel you need to tweak things that you didn't even think about touching. This applies with most cosmetic procedures but more so with the nose."

CRITICISM

- "Is that Mickey Mouse talking?"

- "Hi, I want to preface this by saying that I mean well and just want to educate anyone who is watching this. First, just because it's natural does not mean it's actually good for you, poison ivy is natural. I highly recommend that you do your research on skincare and ingredients especially since you have a platform."

- "I have a feeling my opinion is unpopular, but Thred Up is too expensive and I think they overestimate retail prices to make it seem like a good deal. I still think it's good to support thrifting companies over new fast fashion, but I'll just stick to my local, cheap thrift stores."

- "There's always drama on this Channel"

Clearly, there are limitations in our findings. We looked at only a handful of influencers in one domain, could have offered more concrete examples of their personal attributes, and ideally could have more specifically documented their status as influencers.

Yet our results help extend knowledge of the role influencers play in social media communication. They help us appreciate the reasons why influencers have so many young women following them and their role in marketing brands. Influencers project key attributes of persuasion. They show they are likable by engaging in everyday activities, like changing clothes and playing with a pet, as well as by using personalizing euphemisms like "you guys," and humanizing

themselves by talking about problems. They come off as genuine by talking about problems like stress and anxiety, but not in such personal ways that they seem worrisome or suggest they have trouble coping. Influencers are delightfully upbeat, project similarity by talking informally about stressors, like the coronavirus, and showing vulnerability, but not weaknesses.

Our researchers rated influencers, on a 7-point scale, highly likable (M=6.0), relatable (M=5.9), genuine (M=6.5) and somewhat vulnerable (M=5.25). These traits help them develop a loyal following of young women, who comment effusively on their positive qualities, as well as to promote brands. Influencers are almost charismatic on the YouTube screen, projecting likable and endearing qualities (see Appendix).

If there is a down side to all this, it is that influencers have a vast platform to raise pressing problems in American society, but they seem to squander this, preferring to discuss only self-focused and commercial concerns with their audience. However, this is what their followers like and perhaps framing difficult personal issues in an upbeat way has its virtues. It also congeals with both the self-interest of influencers and the anxieties of their audience in a foreboding economic time. And yet branding is an elastic term (Newman & Newman, 2017), and there are multiple, altruistic opportunities for influencers to use their platforms to "brand" publicly-spirited activities, such as masking, social distancing, and an array of other urgent needs. In this way, influencers could morph from idols of consumption to idols of consideration.

Researchers' Open-Ended Evaluations of Influencers

Assessment by Aurora Harris: Something I found likeable about one of Gabi's videos was her 50 girly things to do when you're bored at home. She listed and showcased so many different things you can do at home that I would never have thought about doing until watching the video. I like how she showcased these ideas and that she listed things that fits every girl's personality it wasn't just stereotypical towards girly girls even though the video header is "girly". It was fun to watch and it made me want to do some of these things when I'm bored at home.

A video of Patricia's that I really enjoyed was a video that explained pregnancy. She time lapses her stomach from the beginning of her pregnancy all the way until months after having her baby and showed her viewers what her body looked like and what to expect when being pregnant. I like this because I don't think a lot of women or younger women understand how your body changes when being pregnant and she was very informative and open about all the ins and outs of pregnancy. She inserted clips of herself throughout her journey and talked about her workouts and diets she did after having her baby to lose weight.

Assessment by Skye Palladina: I think Amber Scholl is likable and persuasive because of her ability to relate to her audience by being honest about not having a lot of money and hand-making items to make them look expensive when in reality they are cheap. She is also very enthusiastic when she speaks which helps her seem more entertaining.

I think Danielle is likable and persuasive because of her ability to be vulnerable about herself and her life. She relates to her audience by talking about her mental health and issues she has which makes her seem as more of a friend figure than just a Youtuber.

I think Niomi is likable and persuasive because she really cares for the great good of humanity and sustainability, which makes her unique from the majority of the other Youtubers. She also comes off as very sweet and inviting, like she is talking to her friends. Any ad deals she does seems very genuine and flows with her brand.

Assessment by Taylor Stockmaster: Dulce Candy has an appealing personality because she is much more serious about mental health, expressing yourself in different ways and shows off a lot of adorable DIY ideas. Those who follow Dulce seem to envy her lifestyle and, though she may seem slightly vein, people want to be like her. With a lot of great "Do It Yourself" ideas and a wonderful attitude about life, many of Dulce's followers express envy and almost romanticize the idea of her.

Samantha Maria is appealing to her followers because of her funny, quirky vibes. Someone who is always laughing, Sam tells stories of makeup and beauty, her young daughter, traveling and purchasing decisions that she has made. People may seek her videos out because she seems to be a very humble, down-to-earth YouTuber and people value her opinion because of it.

Assessment by Samra Karamustafic: Tess: Although she's not the most genuine/relatable YouTuber that I've ever watched, I do enjoy the fact that she still seems relatively relatable! She laughs at her own small mistakes a lot in her videos, she includes funny moments with her husband and friends, and she doesn't seem to make videos based on just what everybody else is doing. Despite the trend where more and more YouTubers have been incredibly open about their problems, she hasn't been like that in the videos I've watched. She's been very quiet about the more serious problems in her life and doesn't dwell or talk too much about the ones she does end up mentioning.

Nicole: Nicole is a very carefree, easygoing influencer (at least from what I can tell from her videos). She doesn't disclose many of her personal problems and is very jokey throughout a majority of her videos and doesn't seem to take herself too seriously. I think she's a great YouTuber for those who are heading to YouTube for a comedic escape, unlike Nilsen.

Ingrid: Out of the other 2 influencers I've watched, Ingrid definitely seems to be on the more serious/vulnerable side. A lot of her recent videos are centered around wellness, and in many of her intros, she openly discloses how she's feeling, what she may be going through, and how the topic of the video she's filming at the moment relates to that. In terms of likability, I feel as though her seriousness may be a bit off-putting for a few viewers, especially those who are looking for more of an escape when going on YouTube.

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