Social Media Influencers

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Social media influencers are a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors. To earn income, they hype branded goods and services to their communities of followers; such promotional communication takes the form of information, advice, and inspiration. Because influencers' brand endorsements are integrated into their existing arsenals of visual, textual, and/or narrative content, their persuasive communication is widely understood as more "authentic" or "organic" than traditional paid advertising. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that influencer marketing has witnessed an astonishing uptick in recent years.

Despite the overall growth of influencers, it isportant to acknowledge that their communities and practices vary widely across platforms and sectors; some, moreover, contest the term "influencer" given its unabashed marketing focus (i.e., the *influence* they purportedly wield is over consumer decisions) (for a discussion of the terminology see Abidin, 2016). Further, while influencers are called on to project their branded personae across the wider social media ecology, most establish themselves on a particular social networking site—such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitch, or Weibo. The visually oriented platform Instagram lends itself particularly well to influencer marketing; by one projection, companies were expected to invest more than US$1 billion in Instagram influencers in 2018 (Mediakix, 2017).

The subgenres and niches in which influencers have found entrepreneurial success are similarly kaleidoscopic. *Forbes'* 2017 ranking of the "Top Influencers," for instance, catalogued leader-tastemakers across such areas as fashion, beauty, fitness, parenting, travel, pets, entertainment, tech + business, home, food, kids, and gaming (*Forbes*, 2017). With few exceptions, these categories adhere to normative gender scripts: while female content creators dominate fashion, beauty, and parenting, the genres of comedy, technology, and gaming are populated by male creators. This marked division attests to the extent to which stereotypical gender roles inherited from traditional media—such as women's magazines and comedic entertainment—become translated into new cultural contexts (Bishop, 2017).

While social media influencers are undoubtedly a product of the digital zeitgeist, their practices harken back to one of the earliest forms of marketing: word of mouth promotion. By the early 20th century, community-based marketing practices had taken on a recognizable form, with retailers seeking to harness the presumed trustworthiness of ordinary citizen-consumers—most especially women (Serazio & Duffy, 2018). More contemporary promotional practices, including multilevel marketing and off-line brand advocacy, often deploy a predominantly female sales force to meld sociality

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with consumerism. Campbell's (2011) notion of the "labor of devotion" provides a useful framework for understanding the gendered nature of these persuasive tactics: brand executives operate under the assumption that "men loyally *consume* their favorite brands, whereas women actively *promote* their favorite brands to other women" (Campbell, 2011, p. 494; emphasis added). Industry discourses about the value of online product recommendations for female shoppers also reify beliefs about the gendering of consumerism while providing a foundation for understanding the staggering ascent of influencer marketing.

Influencers are also considered more sincere or trustworthy sources of information and advice; thus, their communicative practices tap into the wider cultural appeal of authenticity. Indeed, today's influencers are often cast as individuals "just like us"; as such, they temper their promotional messages with expressions of realness and ordinariness (Duffy, 2017). Despite—or perhaps because of—this emphasis on relatability, the influencer economy also draws on the conventions of traditional celebrity (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). It is in this vein that scholars like Senft (2013), Marwick (2015), and Abidin (2016), and others, suggest that contemporary influencer strategies can be understood through the framework of microcelebrity, or "the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status" (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017, p. 196). Both careful impression-management and deliberate acts of self-branding are central practices among influencers.

Presumably, the comingling of authenticity and brand promotion raises critical questions about the ethics of influencer marketing. To reconcile these seemingly conflicting imperatives, influencers supply a common refrain: they only promote products or services that they *really* love; such affective statements serve as a buffer against critiques of crass commercialism. Yet it is precisely such imprecision that makes the influencer marketing industry difficult to patrol—especially given regulatory guidelines across many Western nations mandating that influencers must disclose product sponsorships.

In recent years, social media influencing has undergone a process of industrialization, as evidenced by the emergence of social media talent agencies along with management companies offering to broker deals between brands and influencers. Affiliate advertisers, in particular, are billed as resources to help content creators "monetize" their promotional efforts. Through apps like LIKEtoKNOW.it, social media users express interest in products worn or showcased by their favorite influencer; revenue earnings are based on the percentage of these recommendations that are converted to sales.

Influencers operate in a currency of exchange exclusive to the so-called attention economy: social media metrics. To monetize their following, content creators must demonstrate their ability to wield sway with verifiable evidence: YouTube subscribers, Instagram/Twitter followers, Facebook Likes, and Weibo comments—along with more elusive symbols of "engagement" or "impact." Marketers have also developed a new industry vernacular to describe those social media personalities with smaller, but ostensibly more engaged, audiences: "micro-influencers," "mid-tier influencers," "mega-influencers," and "macro-influencers."

In an age when entrepreneurship is a much-hyped career goal, it is perhaps not surprising that "YouTuber" and social media star rank among young people's top career choices (Weiss, 2017). Our cultural celebration of careers born of digital media, however, glosses over a less auspicious reality about social media influencers. For one, this career requires considerable labor behind the screens, as individuals are expected to dedicate time and energy to creating, editing, and promoting their content. Young women, who have long been expected to provide "soft skills" in both personal and professional pursuits, face these demands accurately.

Moreover, despite considerable attention lavished on influencers who have achieved staggering fame success, social media sites are also brimming with *aspiring* influencers. Instead of free trips, those lacking the requisite digital sway are expected to pay their own way to events, an investment that they hope will "pay off" through social and economic capital. Instead of free swag, lower and middle tier bloggers are compelled to invest their own capital in the latest fashions and accessories. Their expressions of brand devotion are undercompensated, leaving participants to shill brand merchandise in exchange for free products or the mere promise of exposure (Duffy, 2017).

Not only do few content creators make a living as a full-time influencer, but those who do tend to conform to existing cultural codes. Indeed, marketers' definition of social media influence is a narrow one that unfolds within what Banet-Weiser describes as "preexisting gendered and racial scripts and their attendant grammars of exclusion" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 89). The influencer economy, in other words, remains marked by the same imbalances that have long defined the media and culture industries.

SEE ALSO: Celebrity Bloggers and Vloggers; Vloggers

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