The Role of Influencers in Digital Marketing

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INFLUENCERS IN DIGITAL MARKETING

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Abstract

As digital marketing continues to dominate the advertising sphere, new methods and techniques

to best gain customers and increase sales have emerged. Social media influencers have grown

more common and become an imperative part of digital marketing and a beneficial tool for

companies to use to market their business. The purpose of this paper was to evaluate the general

impact influencer marketing has on consumers and how both parties can benefit from their use.

The questions of what an influencer is, how they work, and how they are advantageous to a

company/firm have been investigated. The results have documented that influencers improved

the return on investment for businesses and could create a positive increase in revenue. There

were many factors and methods of sourcing that go into finding and securing the correct

influencer deal.

Keywords: influencer, marketing, social media, advertising, content

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Introduction

How did University of Miami student Alix Earle go from college student to one of Forbes' Top 50 social media earners? From attending classes to taking private jets across the world to attend brand trips and promotions, it was all made possible by social media's creation of influencer marketing. As technology has grown, it has completely revolutionized the way life is lived and how people proceed about completing tasks, receiving information, and communicating. Businesses have particularly adopted and implemented the technological revolution as it has created the roadmap of what a company needs to be successful to succeed in this generation. Communication tools like a website, social media, and digital ads are now necessary for a brand to be taken seriously and thrive in this media age. Newer additions to the digital marketing field, however, are influencers and the implementation of influencer marketing strategies in digital marketing.

The purpose of this paper is to cover and investigate how influencer marketing has influenced the marketing world, its effectiveness, and what is to come. To do so, I will outline the history of influencer marketing, how it has expanded, and how influencer marketing works. I will examine what leads it to be effective, the economics of it, and how it brings in revenue. I will then go into how digital marketing generally operates to give a solid framework for influencer marketing, its benefits and drawbacks, and the future of where it is headed. I will then conclude with my final findings and thoughts and summarize the most important takeaways.

This topic is important because technology only has room to grow and we will have to continue to adapt to it in order to keep up with life and the conventions of technology. In the United States' capitalistic society, life revolves around money, and businesses are always trying

to increase revenue and keep up with the latest trends in order to stay relevant and visible. By being aware of how influencers are impacting marketing and how a business can utilize them, consumers can understand how a TikTok video may be an advertisement and be more mindful of what is and is not authentic content. Gaining literacy in internet popularity also allows professionals to learn to keep up with the current digital age and how new tactics like influencers can benefit them. The concept of a social media influencer is something that, a decade ago, no one would have had an idea of what that truly was. People would be shocked to know how much money they were able to make through their creation. In today's world, social media influencers have become a staple of any competent marketing strategy. Social media platforms have allowed the bridge between celebrities and average creators to begin to close, and the opportunity for anyone to become a followed creator on social media is growing. This notion is what makes creators more trustworthy due to their fans knowing that they are not far apart.

Description of the Topic

History of Influencer Marketing

To begin to understand the impact of influencers in the marketing world, it is important to understand the evolution of influencers and how they came to be. So what is an influencer? An influencer is defined as "a person who is able to generate interest in something (such as a consumer product) by posting about it on social media" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Social media influencers can also be synonymously referred to as content creators or must creators. Social media influencers can be broken down into four categories: nano, micro, macro, and mega. A nano influencer has less than 1,000 followers. A micro-influencer has between 1,000 and 100,000 followers. A macro influencer has between 100,000 and 1,000,000. A mega influencer has over 1,000,000 followers (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). In the early stages of social media,

influencers began to emerge as those who posted frequently and began to gain a following. Social media influencers have become a subcategory of celebrities, dubbed micro-celebrity, limited to social media platforms established by their following and their name, personality, and content as their brand. Influencers have to pay special attention to their image and create a perception of authenticity and intimacy as they created their fame and did not need a gateway into it (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Early on, social media platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube, and Tumblr, began to produce the first versions of influencers who were people with high follower and engagement counts.

YouTube was the main platform in the early stages that allowed those to be viewed as influencers to monetize their content and turn their social media hobby into a job. Popular and successful YouTube creators began to get commercial offers and development deals, and were able to launch their own product lines with companies (Burns, 2022). YouTube allowed creators to monetize their channels and in 2007 launched the YouTube Partners Program which offers "preferred producers a share of the advertising revenues generated by their videos" (Burns, 2022). YouTube made it easy for users to feel like they were getting to know the creators they were watching, and video blogging, dubbed "vlogging" took off as the new popular content type. People were able to make a career out of showing their day-to-day lives without needing to have a niche talent or trait, making them seem more authentic and relatable to people, which helped grow the initial interest of the mega-popular creators.

The concept of social media influencers really began to take off with the rise of Instagram. Instagram's use of visuals and implementation of hashtags makes it easy for users to find what they are looking for. Instagram, specifically, tends to have a younger influencer and audience demographic with almost 75% being 18-34 years old and of that group, 42% being 18-

24 years old and 84% being women (Burns, 2022). As influencer ads and sponsorships grew on the platform, it caused the hashtags #ad and #sponsored to top the charts in popularity with over 3.1 million posts in 2019. The skyrocketing amount of sponsored content resulted in management brands having to keep pace with the market and develop more agencies to manage them. From 2015-2018, 740 new social media marketing/management agencies had been launched (Burns, 2022). Instagram's success in showing the popularity social media influencers had on the platforms and the impact they had on consumers caused digital marketing to become more and more prevalent. The recent rise of influencers also caused sponsored, faux posts to outweigh genuine content across platforms. Influencers began to be viewed as celebrities and, as time has gone on, have become treated more like them.

The blossoming of TikTok played a huge role in this attitude toward influencers. When TikTok increased in popularity in early 2020, it drew a lot of attention due to the ease of getting a large amount of views and likes. People were gaining popularity overnight with casual videos made from their homes. While YouTube and Instagram had the characteristics of being more polished, edited, and perfected, TikTok content was often people doing a quick, 15-second dance in their school bathroom or making jokes from the comfort of their bed. TikTok's creators were younger as well, often in high school or college, whereas other platform creators were typically older. TikTok was seen to be much more authentic, and young people were using it in place of Google for information and reviews. They were using it as a place to find new trends and to make content in hopes of getting the attention, fame, and income so many teens were getting (Harwell, 2022). Social media was becoming the new American Dream, and the popularity and authenticity of TikTok made everyone an influencer. While TikTok began to close the gap of the hierarchy in consumers and creators, the massive popularity of some creators like Charli

D'Amelio who has 151 million followers, regular people were becoming powerhouse brands just off quick videos. TikTokers and other social media influencers began to attend many of the same events that established celebrities were attending, and they were beginning to integrate themselves into the Hollywood space.

Economics of the Influencing Business

Social media influencers are different from celebrities as they typically do not have a built-up career that they have been working toward, but gain popularity for simply being attractive, entertaining, or just a regular person with skills. To go from a typical teen or adult in school with a conventional job to creating a career out of social media posting is a big jump. But how exactly are they making their money? Oftentimes they are signing contracts to become brand influencers which is a deal with a company to post a certain amount of content in the long term or just doing brand deals. A brand deal is different from a contracted partnership because they typically are just one or a couple of posts for a brand ("TikTok Creator Fund", 2023). The more followers an influencer has, the more money they are able to ask for posts. Creators often get affiliate links as well, which give buyers a discount on their purchase. Then creators receive a percentage of the revenue. Once a creator is established with a brand, they often release their own product line partnering with the brand. They then receive percentages of all sales made off their products.

Apart from making money through brands, influencers also make money from social media platforms. TikTok created the TikTok Creator Fund, which allows creators to monetize their videos through the app. Through the fund, TikTok pays members of the creator fund 2-4 cents per thousand views ("TikTok Creator Fund", 2023). A few cents may not sound like a lot, but when creators are consistently making videos with millions of views, the money adds up fast.

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To be part of the TikTok Creator Fund, a user must have at least 10,000 followers and have had 100,000 views in the past 30 days ("TikTok Creator Fund", 2023). By having a follower requirement as low as 10,000, influencers of most categories, micro, macro, and mega, can have an opportunity to make money from their content. Instagram is another platform where the influencers make money. Unlike TikTok, Instagram does not pay its users for follower counts or likes, but many brands utilize Instagram as a main platform for influencers to promote their products and produce content. Instagram's layout allows for there to be different options for pricing and posts by having stories, main feed posts, and reels. On Instagram, story posts are typically cheaper because they are only visible for 24 hours, and main feed and reel posts are more expensive because they stay on the actual feed.

Because influencers are their own brand and business, they are able to develop their own rates and choose how much they want to charge brands for different posts. Originally, it was macro and mega influencers who earned the most money, but brands are now more commonly seeking out nano-influencers and micro-influencers as they tend to have a more loyal and active audience ("How Much Do Influencers," 2023). Some creators have base prices for posts whereas others adjust, depending on the deal. Alexa Collins, who has over a million followers on Instagram, charges \$1000 for an Instagram story whereas micro influencer Tyler Chanel only charges \$100 ("How Much Do Influencers," 2023). Yet one anonymous influencer told sources that she had already signed for \$700,000 in brand deals halfway into 2021. Making a deal between an influencer and a sponsor requires the consideration of "following, engagement metrics, and niche, as well as additional considerations such as exclusivity, usage rights, and timing" ("How Much Do Influencers," 2023). After both consider the conditions, a deal can be made, and an influencer can help a brand market its product.

Effectiveness of Influencers

Clearly, influencers are able to gain something out of their deal whether it be money or internet popularity, but what exactly can a brand get out of hiring or partnering with an influencer to promote their product or image? Because of the popularity of the internet and how widespread and large the audiences are on social media, it makes it difficult for companies to specifically target and reach their target audiences. Using influencers makes it easier to reach those groups and also gain their trust in a less formal, less traditional way. With the algorithms of apps like Instagram and TikTok, users are able to view content that fits their specific interests and niches with individualized explore pages that fit what they want to see. When brands use influencers, the algorithm puts their videos on the pages of people that fit the audience. Using an influencer makes the advertising seem more sincere and allows consumers to get a real view of what the product is. Rather than just viewing an ad, consumers are able to watch a real person show and talk about the product which makes it overall more trustworthy (Matthew, 2018). Forbes continues to describe how "advertising through influencers allows brands to promote through someone that a niche community watches, engages with, and trusts on a daily basis" (Matthew, 2018). The audience reach and trustworthiness that influencers can promote gives a new angle for business to use. But just how effective are influencers really?

A study conducted by the Harvard Business Review analyzed the Chinese influencer market because China has the world's most sophisticated influencer marketing industry. They found a "1% increase in influencer marketing spend led to an increase in engagement of 0.46%, suggesting that the strategy can in fact yield positive ROI" (Leung et al., 2022). While these statistics may seem small, with the quantity of numbers being sourced, having a 0.46% return on

investment (ROI) can be a substantial increase for a company. In the study, the three factors that created the highest ROI from an influencer were the number of followers, the originality of the content, and whether or not the content included a link to access the products. Users want to see that the influencer has followers so that they can recognize that other people can trust them. In addition, the audience wants original content that is entertaining, and they want the convenience of a link being accessible to click and buy before they have too much time to think about it.

Their numbers showed that influencers with a follower count one standard deviation higher than the average had a 9.2% greater ROI. Those with originality rates one standard deviation higher than average had a 15.5% greater ROI, and those with a link included had an 11.4% greater ROI (Leung et al., 2022). The increase in ROI from these factors is positive and great enough to show a relationship between these factors and ROI. It helps to prove that influencers, more specifically influencers with strong media skills, are effective in marketing.

There are many ways to go about measuring the effectiveness of influencers. A brand might choose to look at engagements, clicks, impressions, product sales, conversions, follows, and views. When developing an influencer strategy, a brand may enter a campaign with a variety of different goals. The brand may want to increase awareness, increase sales, or increase a social media following. Depending on the goal, different measurement strategies may be used to track the progress of the campaign. If a brand is looking to increase awareness, it may pay more attention to and measure the increase in shares and follows after the influencer content is posted. It is important to track any increase in traffic to the brand's page and also watch the metrics of the influencer's content and page. Engagement metrics are often compared before and after campaigns and refer to the "way people react to online content, such as liking, commenting or reposting" (Kirschman, 2022). However, if a brand wants to increase sales, they may want to use

an affiliate link or discount code for the influencer to be able to track specifically the sales that the influencer is bringing in ("16 Smart Ways," 2023). While it can be hard to track general effectiveness, picking a specific goal and then coming up with strategies to work to achieve the goal with an influencer makes it easier to track a level of effectiveness.

Drawbacks of Using Influencers

While using influencers to help market a business has been proven to be effective, there is always the possibility of having a negative experience or coming across some disadvantages. The biggest and most obvious downside to using an influencer is the cost. The exact price of hiring an influencer depends on the campaign and the individual and can range anywhere from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands of dollars. A report done by Linqia, an influencer campaign company, found that "30% of marketers said they planned to spend \$25,000 to \$50,000 per campaign, and 24% reported that they would spend \$50,000 to \$100,000 per campaign for the year" ("The State of Influencer Marketing," 2018). For large corporations, these budgets can be easy, but for smaller companies trying to get their name out there through using influencers, these prices may be far out of their budget.

Another disadvantage is that marketers are relying on a third party to positively market your brand, and their name becomes attached to your brand image. When hiring an influencer, there is trust being put into them to positively represent your company. If they get into some sort of scandal or drama, it can negatively affect the brand's reputation if the influencer does not handle it efficiently because the names are now tied. Branching off the idea of trust, a brand has to put a lot of trust into the influencer and needs to research the influencer beforehand. Part of this research should be analyzing an influencer's followers. It is possible for creators to get fake followers and there have also been increases in bot followers, which can make someone seem a

lot more popular than they are. There are different websites that can help scan an influencer's followers to find the number of authentic followers and the engagement rate, to know if they are a good choice (Pfund, 2018). By knowing what to look out for in terms of authenticity when looking for an influencer, companies can be better equipped to spot scams or people who are not as genuine.

Besides the actual influencer that can be a problem, the growth of influencer presence is having its own problems. Because of the perks that being an influencer can have, more and more people are channeling their content to fit the frame of an influencer. The saturation of the social media influencer industry is making it more important for companies to do their research on who to pick but also is causing social media platforms to become more saturated with that type of content and advertisements in general (Pfund, 2017). As more and more influencer content dominates social media platforms, the less sincere it seems. A brand does not want to push too much influencer content because it can then seem fake or too much of a regular ad rather than sponsored social media content. An influencer who also only posts sponsored or promotional content is not seen as trustworthy because they are only booking deals and they should have a lot of their own content too. They need to still be a content creator while having the influencer role integrated into what they post. Every influencer is a content creator, while not every content creator is an influencer. The saturation of influencers makes it important, however, that influencers stay true to their brand and keep quality social media content along with their promotions and reviews.

The Future of Social Media Influencers

After getting to understand in depth what an influencer is and how they work, it is important to then analyze what the future of influencer marketing is, and whether it will continue

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to grow. Through having an understanding of how influencer marketing has worked and has been effective, it is expected that brands will shift from looking for mega influencers to focusing primarily on nano and micro-influencers, due to their patterns of being more effective in increasing sales due to having a more loyal and participatory fan base (Ormos, 2023). Brands are also expected to prioritize long-term partnerships rather than single-time sponsorships because of their ability to create a more cohesive image and relationship with a creator, rather than just a quick interaction. Brands will also need to give more freedom to the creators to do their own creative content with the product. Consumers do not want to see their favorite social media stars just reading an ad with the product, it should feel integrated into the creator's typical content and style, requiring them to have more power over how they do the brand deals (Ormos, 2023). Influencers will only continue to thrive and be effective tools if they keep their authenticity and proceed with being relatable and seen as trustworthy. Without those qualities, they are just an employee of the company putting out an ad and have no different value to the consumer.

Apart from how businesses will use influencers, with the increase of technology and predictions of what is to come in the technological world, influencers will need to merge with this technology in order to keep up with demands, and it will become necessary for businesses to utilize the technology to best approach their marketing and use of influencers. Problem-solving artificial intelligence will have the opportunity to play a crucial role in influencer marketing by being able to help companies find the perfect influencer for their product and what they are trying to achieve. As mentioned before, with the high saturation of blossoming influencers, it can be hard to find one that best fits a brand, is authentic, and can bring positive results, but problem-solving artificial intelligence could solve that by being able to find the best one ("A Look into the Future of Influencer," 2019). This is already beginning, for example, the company

"Influential" is an AI company that "helps brands to find the most suitable social media influencers" ("A Look into the Future of Influencer", 2019). Utilizing the new technologies that emerge will be vital to push and leverage influencer marketing over other methods and keep it relevant and useful. Companies are also going to continue putting money toward sponsored social media content. "Spending on sponsored social media content in the US will grow roughly 3.5 times faster in 2023 than social ad spending will—and it will remain ahead through 2025" (Enberg, 2023). Social media content for brands is only going to continue to grow as it demonstrates effectiveness for companies. Social media influencer content is not going to go away and will become increasingly prevalent in the future and become a main tactic for brands over traditional advertising.

Another aspect that will continue to develop in influencer marketing is the legal aspect. In 2017, the Federal Trade Commission began to place regulations on social media influencers and with the growth that is continuing to happen, more can be expected. As of now, influencers are required to disclose in the caption or post that it is an ad of some capacity and, therefore, they are getting paid to post it ("A Look into the Future of Influencer," 2019). Many influencers are still not abiding by this regulation. Thus, it is expected that it will become more strict to implement regulation. It is speculated that creators are not abiding by the regulations because of a lack of knowledge. They are employing themselves and typically do not have a manager or team unless they are a mega-influencer. With no guidance on the rules, laws, and best ways to go about things, it can make it difficult to know what to do. It is not clear who should be educating influencers and who should be responsible for keeping them accountable and playing the role of a boss.

Implementation of Influencers in Digital Marketing

The development of influencer marketing in the digital marketing mix relies on digital marketing's realm of being successful and effective. Digital marketing has become the forefront of marketing with the technological revolution and the way people now consume media. Digital marketing is now more effective because it is significantly easier to reach a large audience in a faster and more cost-effective way. Where before it was vital to have paper ad space, commercials, and print, companies now have to utilize social media. It is now necessary for companies to be "creating engaging and shareable content, leveraging influencer marketing, running social media advertising campaigns, and using social media analytics to track and measure performance" (Karra, 2023). Because of how key social media has become in marketing, it opens the door for influencers. Without them, however, a brand can create its own content using its own social media pages and making announcements, advertising releases, video ads, reviews, and mixing in user-generated content. With all the opportunities a brand has, it has caused an increase in jobs for companies as they now look for digital marketers, social media managers, influencer managers, and digital analysts. Because of the prominence influencer marketing holds with reputation, relationships, and mass communication, it often falls under the umbrella of public relations and communication more than marketing and sales. While the influencer is working to increase sales, if influencers do not have a good relationship with their audience or the brand there is no chance to make that happen. The influencer industry also allows for the expansion of jobs and fields in the communications industry.

Conclusion

After conducting a fully comprehensive analysis of influencer marketing and its impact on digital marketing, one can conclude that the rise of technology, social media, and influencers

has been able to change the game of marketing and allowed digital marketing to thrive and be able to take all sorts of new angles. While influencer marketing as anything, can have its drawbacks, the visibility, trust, and connection that it can bring between a company and its consumers allows it to be a great strategy for brands to take to target their audience. While in the current year of 2023, social media may not be as popular or dominating as it was in years like 2019, social media is not going to go anywhere and new platforms will continue to emerge and current platforms will continue to evolve to fit the current demands and needs. Whether someone is a consumer, influencer, or business owner, it is important to understand the trends occurring across social media that affect income, marketing, and engagements to maximize the use of social media to one's advantage. Being literate and versed in social media and digital marketing as a business owner is essential in today's technology-driven world. With the saturation of today's market in products and companies, looking for a way to attract customers, specifically, one's target audience and gain their trust, attention, and loyalty can be increasingly difficult. Utilizing social media influencers and finding the right kind and style for a company is becoming imperative to help gain the trust of customers and market to the correct people. Getting a product to be visible on social media now is one of the most useful strategies for increasing awareness and interest. Thus, making it important to understand how to utilize influencers and what they can help a brand accomplish.

In order to best understand influencers it is important to know their history in how they developed through social media and what platforms they are biggest on. Knowing how they grew into what they are makes it easier to predict where they are going and how they may continue to grow. It is then important to understand the economics of influencers and take a look into how they make their money and the different ways they can earn revenue and income through social

media. Then, arguably most importantly, the effectiveness of influencer marketing needs to be investigated to understand why anyone should care about it. Without knowing if influencers are actually effective, there is no reason to look into putting money or attention toward them. While their content can be entertaining for viewers, establishing if they can actually be effective in increasing awareness, revenue, and sales is vital for the business's knowledge. It is then important to research what drawbacks or negative impacts influencers can have or cause so that all the risks can be assessed before getting involved. The risks can be important for the influencer to be aware of as well, to understand the impacts that they can have on a company. The future of influencer marketing is then investigated, and it can be expected that it will have to continue to keep up with the latest trends, technologies, and platforms in order to stay relevant and useful.

The expansion of social media has created a whole new scope for advertising and marketing strategies. Integrating influencer marketing into a company's budget and plan, can allow for a great return on investment and increase in sales and engagements. Understanding how to best use social media and influencers is necessary in the digital age to get the best use of the technological resources, advantages, and opportunities.

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