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Instagram Influencers, Para-social Relations and Influencers

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Instagram Influencers, Para-social Relations and Influencers' recommendations

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Introduction

Influencer marketing is currently the most popular marketing technique with a great ability to engage a relevant audience and create authentic content. It has been found that influential marketing can generate a return on investment (ROI) eleven times higher than any other form of digital marketing (TapInfluence and Nielsen, 2016)

Since it is a new type of marketing, there is a lot to learn and explore about this strategy. A better understanding of influencer marketing could provide both brands and content creators an understanding of how to build trust online, and eventually convert followers to clients.

The main research question is: To what extent does creating a Para-social relationship help motivate followers to make a purchase?

A para-social relationship describes a one-sided social relationship, developed by a person who knows many things about another person, while the other does not know him at all. Over time, viewers may feel that they are experiencing events and interactions with the character, it becomes predictable for them, and they feel that they know and understand her as they know friends (Horton & Richard, 1956).

A para-social relationship is what I believe contributes to the ability of influencers to sell to their audience: this one-sided relationship might make the sale seem as a word of mouth between friends.

Another question that will be examined in this research in order to be able to explore different explanations to the effectiveness of influencer marketing is: What are the factors that make instagram influencers marketing effective?

Literature Review

Endorsements and Persuasion

In this dissertation we will examine a new type of Endorsers in Marketing: Instagram Influencers. In order to be able to learn about their effectiveness, we should start with three theories that examine endorsers effectiveness: (1) Source Credibility Model; (2) Source Attractiveness Model; (3) The Match-Up Hypothesis.

Source Credibility Model

Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) identified expertise and trustworthiness as two essential qualities for source credibility. The researchers defined expertise as “the extent to which the communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions” and trustworthiness as “the degree of confidence in the communicator’s intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid” (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21).

Therefore, the level of expertise refers to the extent in which the endorser is believed to be a valid source of information; and trustworthiness indicates the perceived sincerity, reliability, and integrity of the supporter. According to them, the two qualities are equally important in receiving the messages as factual or valid. Even a communicator who has enough perceived experience in a particular subject to convey valid claims may cause a rejection of their message if they seem to have something to gain by persuading listeners in a particular direction (Hovland et al., 1953).

Sources with high credibility are supposed to have a positive effect on consumers' attitudes and behavior, and therefore are desirable brand endorsers (Erdogan, 1999).

Source Attractiveness Model

McGuire (1985) identifies physical attractiveness, similarity, familiarity, and likability as the most important factors in persuading a recipient who is motivated by social needs or self-satisfaction.

Similarity is when the source sender and the source receiver of the idea show resemblance, such as: demographic background, interests, attitudes, social status and lifestyle. This similarity has an impact on the context of the message and the effectiveness of the communication. Furthermore, McGuire (1985) argues that, in addition to the need to develop valid attitudes, another underlying motive for recipients' acceptance of a message is their need to improve their self-image by identifying with a source that is considered popular or attractive.

Likability refers to the recipient's affection for the source's physical appearance, personal characteristics, and personality (ibid).

Attractiveness is based not only on physical attraction but also on various aspects such as creativity, personality traits, lifestyle and skills (Erdogan, 1999).

The Match-Up Hypothesis

The degree of fit between the endorser and the customer affects positively on the effectiveness of communication. This assumption is argued by the match-up hypothesis. (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990; Till and Busler, 1998).

To ensure that the communication is at a high level of efficiency and credibility, there should be a match between an image of the celebrity appearing in the endorsement with a product or brand. (Kamins and Gupta, 1994; Misra and Beatty, 1990). Another factor that should be taken into consideration in endorsement's effectiveness is a fit between the celebrity and the customer's ideal self (Choi and Rifon, 2012). According to Friedman and Friedman (1979) the products have an important role on endorsement's effectiveness. Product type and endorser type should correspond. For instance, glamorous items, such as diamonds should be endorsed by celebrities while Medical products should be endorsed by somebody perceived as an expert.

Effects of endorsers in advertising on consumers

Endorsers are commonly used in advertisements to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the message. According to Friedman et.al., (1976) there are four types of endorsers that can be used in an advertisement. The types are: Celebrity, Common

people (ordinary people), Expert and Company president (CEO). Each type has its own characteristics and its ability to influence consumer behavior.

In a research conducted by Friedman et.al., (1976), the researchers presented four groups of students with identical advertisements for sangria wine, attributed to one of four types of endorsers. A fifth group serving as a control was presented with the same advertisement, but it was not attributed to an endorser.

The research found that while endorsers did not significantly affect the expected selling price or believability, they influenced probable taste and intent-to-purchase. They concluded that it is probably worthwhile for an advertiser to use an endorsement for his product, rather than utilize a similar advertisement without an endorsement (ibid).

Types of Endorsers

Celebrity Endorsements in Advertising

Celebrities have been used as endorsers in advertising for decades. Celebrities typically have positive effects on consumer behavior (Friedman, Termini, & Washington, 1976); and they are highly effective in grabbing the attention of consumers and increasing brand awareness.

Celebrities' ability to persuade is largely based on their attractiveness. One study compared the effects of attractive or unattractive celebrities (Kamins, 1990). An attractive celebrity who advertised an attractiveness-related product, such as a luxury car, was perceived as more credible, compared to a less attractive celebrity who gave the same product.

Celebrity endorsements, however, tend to be expensive and are sometimes perceived as lacking credibility (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997). For example, it can seem not too convincing that a millionaire celebrity would shop in certain stores. Therefore, it can be easy to assume that the endorsement is mainly motivated by money and not by sharing honest opinions and experiences.

Mukherjee (2009) widely examined celebrity endorsements and the impact of celebrity endorsement on consumer's buying behavior. In his opinion, celebrity endorsement is always a two-edged sword and it has a number of positives—if properly matched it can be extremely beneficial for a company, and if not it may produce very negative consequences for the brand. In General, the image of the celebrity endorser is of great importance to the effectiveness of an advertising (Amos et al., 2008).

An example of this two-edged sword can be shown very clearly in the case of Tiger Woods' endorsement of Nike in 2000. When Tiger Woods switched his endorsed ball from the Titleist brand to Nike, Nike's market share went from 0.9% to 4% in 6 months. However, following the 2009 scandal, (over a dozen women reported extramarital affairs with Tiger Woods while he was married) Nike began to see shifts in their sales. According to Chung et al (2013), "the scandal cost Nike \$1.7 million in sales and lost the company nearly 105,000 customers.

To summarize, celebrities can do miracles for brands – if done right. They grab consumer's attention, and they have a positive effect on buying decisions. Yet, this type of endorsements is very pricey, it can be found untrustworthy, and a negative change in the celebrity's image can harm the brand's image.

Peer Endorsements in Advertising

Peer endorsements are endorsements in advertisements from ordinary consumers who potential customers can relate to. The use of ordinary people as endorsers has gained popularity in consumer advertising as a tactic to improve advertising credibility (Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016). This trend can be seen in a variety of campaigns, such as: Dove "Real Beauty" campaign that celebrated their 60 years of activity by casting 32 women from different backgrounds; As well as, "Like a Girl" campaign by Always that showed young people of different ages and backgrounds describing what they thought it meant to 'be a girl'; and so on.

Peers are being perceived as more trustworthy and similar to consumers. A peer endorser is usually a satisfied customer and is highly effective when the purpose of the ad is for the consumer to relate to the supporter. (Ohanian, 1990).

This tactic is far more accessible to brands with tight budgets, yet peer endorsers are lacking the ability to catch our eye the way celebrities do and therefore are easily forgotten (Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016).

The Rise of Instagram Influencers

Instagram Influencers might be a new type of endorser, that combines the two types discussed before: They have the attractiveness of a celebrity, and the credibility of a peer. In this following chapter we will examine the rise of influencers marketing as part of social media marketing; and we will learn more about influencers relationships with their followers.

Instagram

Instagram is a free American application and an independent social network for sharing photos and videos. The app was created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and originally launched on iOS in October 2010. Since 2012 Instagram has been developed by Facebook Ltd. In December 2011, the application was named "Application of the Year" as part of Apple's Application Competition (Perez, 2011).

As of 2020, Instagram has over 1 billion monthly active users, more than 500 million daily users, and more than 25 million active businesses. Annual Instagram advertising revenues will be 13.86 billion in 2020.

With over than 1 billion monthly active users, and more than 500 million daily users, it is no wonder why Instagram attracted more than 25 million active businesses to their platform. Instagram became one of the most popular platforms for businesses to connect with their customers. In fact, more than 200 million Instagram users visit at least one business profile daily, and 70% of shopping enthusiasts turn to Instagram for product discovery (Aslam, 2020).

Regarding Instagram use in Israel, there were 3.637 million Instagram users in Israel in October 2020, which accounted for 41.2% of its entire population. The majority of Instagram users in Israel were women - 52.8%. People aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group (1.270 million) (NapoleonCat, 2020).

With the rise of social media, people no longer needed traditional media like television, radio and print media in order to communicate with the masses. Nowadays, anyone who has a smartphone and internet access is always one click away from reaching their audience. These new capabilities have developed a new form of marketing, combining all the forms discussed above: Influencers marketing.

Instagram is considered the most important social network for influencer marketing, followed by Facebook (Linqia, 2018).

Influencers vs. Celebrities

Social media influencers are defined as "An influencer can be defined as (1) an opinion leader in digital social media, who (2) communicates to an unknown mass audience. Most importantly, (3) this audience is acquired directly without any institutional mediation like the entertainment or sports industry" (Gräve, 2017, p 1).

"The term "Instafamous" is often used to describe these otherwise everyday people who, despite having thousands or sometimes millions of followers on Instagram, do not command the same level of attention offline as traditional celebrities. These Instagram influencers straddle the line between megastars and the average Joe, making them a new kind of micro-celebrity that has only been made possible by Web 2.0." (Neal, 2017, p. 7)

Instagram influencers are a type of public figure who bridges the gap between celebrities and peers. Their popularity and influence in the social media sphere is similar to that of traditional celebrities, but also appear more relatable to consumers because they typically live normal lives offline.

Influencers possess traits of both celebrities and peers - They have the attractiveness of celebrities, and credibility of peers. Therefore, they have the potential to be even

more influential to consumer behavior than either of the previously discussed endorser types.

In recent years, brands have started to use a new form of endorsers who possess traits of both celebrities and peers: the social media celebrity (Booth & Matic, 2011). The use of social media influencers to promote brands has gained traction, with 86 percent of the marketers surveyed using influencer marketing in 2017 (Linqia, 2018).

Unlike celebrity endorsers, such as actors or musicians, influencers can only rely on their social-media channels to reach their audience (Gräve, 2017). They cannot generate a positive image through PR work or successful movies or songs. Their actions on social media are crucial for growing their following base and maintaining it engaged.

Schouten et al (2020) conducted a research to examine the impact of celebrity vs. influencer endorsements on advertising effectiveness. They found that influencers are believed to be more trustworthy than celebrities, and that people feel more like influencers and identify more with them than celebrities. Therefore, the researchers concluded that influencers may be more effective product endorsers than traditional celebrities.

Nevertheless, in another research conducted by Gräve (2017), celebrities were found overall more effective than influencers – with one exception that is related to familiarity: for a high level of familiarity, influencers are perceived to be significantly more trustworthy and similar to oneself than celebrities.

The researchers concluded that influencers are likely to be more effective when the audience is familiar with the endorser. This is especially the case on Instagram, where people deliberately choose to follow a certain influencer (ibid).

Word of Mouth

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) refers to the informal communication between consumers regarding experiences and information about goods or a service. Word of mouth can be either positive, neutral and negative. (Anderson 1998). Customers are accustomed

to exchanging their opinions and experiences in and outside their personal social network. This marketing technique uses the consumer networks to increase brand awareness, through self-replication and distribution of messages (Kiss and Bichler, 2008).

Several studies have identified the power of interpersonal influence through word of mouth communication. Therefore, word of mouth is considered to be the most important, influential and compelling form of marketing, both in business and academic communities. Nielsen's global trust in the 2015 advertising report showed that 83% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family on all forms of advertising, proving that word of mouth is the most effective marketing model (Nielsen, 2015). Furthermore, it was found that Sponsored word-of-mouth is most effective when the communications come from a friend instead of a stranger (Abendroth & Heyman, 2013).

Instagram Influencers Marketing

Influencer marketing has been described as a form of local advertising, branded entertainment, or a reliable electronic word of mouth. The advertisements are usually mentioned naturally as part of the everyday content that the influencers are sharing with their followers. (DeVeirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017).

Influencers Marketing is when brands utilize influencers to promote their products and services. Brands can give influencers products or services, and in return the influencer shares their experience with the brand on their Instagram stories or Feed. The advertisement can be in return for the products and services only, for money or commission, or all the three – depending on the following size of the influencer, the fit of the influencer to the brand; or the influencer's interest in working with a certain brand. Nowadays influencers are legally required to provide an adequate indication that the advertisement is paid.

The power influencers have is their audience' trust in them. With a wrong decision or a few "inauthentic" activities online – their followers can leave; But when done smartly and authentically, the power is huge:

"It is a two-way street—a symbiotic relationship between brand and influencer, as they help each other grow and refine their branding. But all of it ultimately hinges on the relationship between the influencer and the consumer: "Influencer marketing is based on the economy of trust. What that means is, as a follower, I can just as easily unfollow an influencer as I can follow them. So I could say, 'I'm not going to follow this influencer anymore because I feel like she's advertising too much or she's not authentic or she's not working with brands that are really high quality.' On the positive side, that means the brands that do get to work with influencers create much higher purchase intent with their customers," (Weinswig, 2016).

This authenticity has also made influencers a new source that replaces some traditional ones such as the fashion editorials and high-end magazines. These magazines used to dominate and drive consumer opinion; nowadays, "the new voice of truth comes from digital influencers" (Chang, n.d).

Not only that, influencers are sought more authentic than celebrity endorsers, as discussed before; a study shows that 92% of consumers trust an influencer's opinion more than an advertisement. Furthermore, technology has kept up with consumer preferences and with the development of ad locking technologies – consumers no longer need to come across any unwanted advertisements (ibid).

The trust in influencers and the changes in consumers stands about traditional channels and advertisement – it's not surprising the influencer industry is an industry that is rapidly growing. In 2016, according to Bloomberg, \$255 million was spent on influencer marketing every month. (Weinswig, 2016). As for 2019, the industry is worth 8\$ billion, and is on track to be worth up to \$15 billion by 2022. Every social platform attracts influencers to some degree, but Instagram is the gold standard for the group (Schomer, 2019).

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The Business Insider Intelligence Influencer Marketing premium research report found that there are two primary ways of categorizing influencers: reach and niche. Reach refers to influencers with a large following; While niche is an influencer with a more intentionally target audience (ibid).

In the past years there has been a shift to focus on quality rather than quantity. More followers does not necessarily indicate that the influencer can give a brand better results. Already in 2016, Weinswig reported how “More and more, brands are turning to people with far less numbers of followers—sometimes even as low as 8,000—to help share their messages. In return, a brand receives intangible benefits like authenticity, a unique point of view, deeper storytelling and the potential of reaching a more tailored audience,” (Weinswig, 2016).

Parasocial-Interaction

A para-social (as-social) connection is a concept in television research and media psychology, which was developed and published by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in a 1956 journal of psychiatry.

A para-social relationship describes a one-sided social relationship, developed by a person who knows many things about another person, while the other does not know him at all. Most often it refers to a relationship that viewers and fans develop towards celebrities or personalities who appear in the media and media. Over time, viewers may feel that they are experiencing events and interactions with the character, it becomes predictable for them, and they feel that they know and understand her as they know friends (Horton & Richard, 1956). Researchers state that these illusions can in some cases be life changing and personality molding, but definitely life impacting for the individual (Altman & Taylor ,1973).

Para-social relationships are born after an ongoing parasitic interaction, which often occurs with media figures and celebrities with an extensive fan base. Fans have a desire to connect, but the relationship is almost exclusively one-sided. Because there are thousands of comments to all celebrity's posts, it is impossible for a celebrity to see and respond to every person. Studies have shown that even with the lack of personal response from celebrities, the audience can still respond emotionally. When looking at celebrities' personal lives, fans think they are part of the celebrity's network (de Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, & McAndrew, 2007).

According to Altman and Taylor (1973) the more time an individual spends watching and involving himself the more he becomes more intimate with the media figure. Thus, media consumers who spend more hours on consistently watching a media figure over time may perceive a sense of intimacy evolving from their expectations of increased intimacy in past interpersonal experiences. (Rubin, Perse, Powell, 1985,p.156)

The manner of speech, interpersonal style and techniques used by the media all allowed the viewer to feel that they "know" these media figures in real life. . (Rubin, Perse, 1987,p.248)

Para-social relationships have already been identified as a factor that positively affects the credibility of the source, based on previous experiences with the source and prior knowledge of their expertise and credibility (Gräve, 2017).

Instagram is taking this para-social interaction a step further. For fans, a celebrity's post is providing a real look into the celebrity's life, and the stories are showing what they are doing now – which is strengthening the feeling of connection.

Influencers and Parasocial-Interactions

While para-social theory was originally applied to new media, such as television, social media also helps online individuals develop one-sided relationships with their audience by using tones of conversation, sharing personal information and inviting followers to communicate with them on the social platform (Neal, 2017).

Even though social media sites are interactive and allow fans more access to the personal life of the influencer, the influencer still controls reciprocation in the relationship (Stever & Lawson, 2013).

Instagram influencers maintain close relationships with their followers by interacting with them, by responding to their comments, liking or commenting on pictures they are tagged in and so on. Some also organize live-streamed Q&As and physical meet-ups with their followers (Abidin, 2015). In fact, it is very common in Israel for influencers to refer to their fan base as "community", instead of "followers", in order to maintain a perceived closeness in social standing to other users.

As shown earlier in the review: Nielsen's global trust in the 2015 advertising report showed that consumers trust recommendations from friends and family on all forms of advertising (Nielsen, 2015). Maintaining the appearance of a friendly relationship with the followers is essential for influencers to maximize their power as an influencer.

Lee & Watkins (2016), found in their research that consumers who view youtube vloggers as similar to them will likely develop parasocial interaction with the vlogger and have the same positive brand evaluations as the vlogger. Their research is also a part of a growing area that moves PSI from the field of TV personalities to use as an actual branding tool. (Lee & Watkins, 2016).

Methodology

1. The research and sampling method.

This study is a combination of a quantitative and qualitative study which is based on research using structured questionnaires. The purpose of the questionnaires is to examine the research questions which are:

- To what extent does creating a Para-social relationship help motivate followers to make a purchase?

- What are the factors that make instagram influencers marketing effective?

The purposes of the questionnaires are to investigate the reasons for following influencers in order to find what makes the audience follow their recommendations, and to examine the correlation of Para-social relations and influence on purchase intention.

2. The study population

The study population is random people, women and men, in different ages. This study was conducted using 99 different subjects who completed 99 questionnaires. The questionnaires consist of 20 questions.

3. Research questions

The main research question is:

To what extent does creating a Para-social relationship help motivate followers to make a purchase?

As well as a descriptive question:

What are the factors that make instagram influencers marketing effective?

4. Research variables

Independent variables - existence of Para-social relationships.

Dependent variables - Trust in recommendations, Purchase consideration, Comitting a Purchase.

5. Research hypotheses

- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships to Trust in recommendations.

- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships and Purchase consideration.
- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships to Committing a Purchase.

6. The research process.

The study was conducted in a way that an online questionnaire form was distributed on Instagram. The choice of subjects was random and independent of other factors except usage of Instagram. After filling out the questionnaires, they were handed over to a professional statistician in order to perform a reliable and accurate data analysis.

7. Research tools

The research tool is questionnaires that were constructed and based on questionnaires to examine para-social relations¹.

8. Reliability of the study

In order to maintain the reliability of the study, the subjects filled out the questionnaires anonymously so that they could answer honest answers that would give as reliable research results as possible.

Results

Instagram usage and following influencers

99 participants answered the questionnaire: 73.7% women, 25.3% men. The biggest age group was 19-25 (49.5%), then 26-30 (26.3%). 9.1% were between the ages 13-18, 8.1% between the ages 31-40. The rest were above the age of 41.

As for the usage of instagram, the participants were asked to assess how many hours a week they spend on the app. 37.4% assessed they use the app up to 7 hours a week;

¹ Based on this questionnaire: <http://people.wcsu.edu/mccarneyh/acad/Camella.html>

34.3% use instagram between 8 to 21 hours a week (up to 3 hours a day). the rest (28.3%) were using instagram more than 21 hours a week, and up to 65 hours.

69.7% of the participants said they follow Instagram Influencers. 27.3% said they didn't follow influencers, and 3% weren't familiar with the term 'Instagram Influencers'.

As for the frequency of consuming influencers content on instagram, 50.6% of participants stated that they usually do it once a day (28.3%) or several times a day (30.3%). 12.1% consume influencers content several times a week; 4% only once a week, and the rest (25.3%) consume less than once a week.

Reasons for following influencers

As for the reasons to follow instagram influencers, 23.9% of the reasons included "For inspiration". Some participants were more specific with the inspiration they get from influencers and were referring to their style and aesthetics: "More aesthetic content than private individuals for the most part". One participant explained the inspiration she gets from influencers: "I only follow people who positively impact my life / my consciousness / my creativity. I strive to consume quality content from people who understand their field."

A similar explanation was found in 5.7% of the answers who explained they follow influencers for motivation: "[Influencers] give motivation to move forward in life", another participant wrote "they bring insane motivation to engage in what I love".

Besides inspiration and motivation, the participants found influencers to provide some interest and entertainment. 20.5% of participants who follow influencers included that they found influencers interesting: "I follow whoever is interesting and inspiring"; or that their content was interesting ("The content interests me"). Some also explained they were curious to watch the influencers content: "Fun to watch content about the lives of others".

5.7% of the reasons mentioned explanations that can be classified as entertainment: “Because it interests me and makes the app less boring”; “Gives extra time to watch Stories² in leisure time”.

Except for inspiration and entertainment, one participant added that “The content is interesting, inspiring and exposing to other brands or designers” - which shows that there is also an interest in getting familiar with new brands through influencers. In fact, 12.5% of the reasons mentioned in the research were classified as “Consumption purposes”. Participants were especially referring to “shopping recommendations” as a reason to follow influencers: “Helping me focus on consuming items that are more relevant to me”. Another participant mentioned the fact that influencers often get a unique discount code from brands as a reason to follow them.

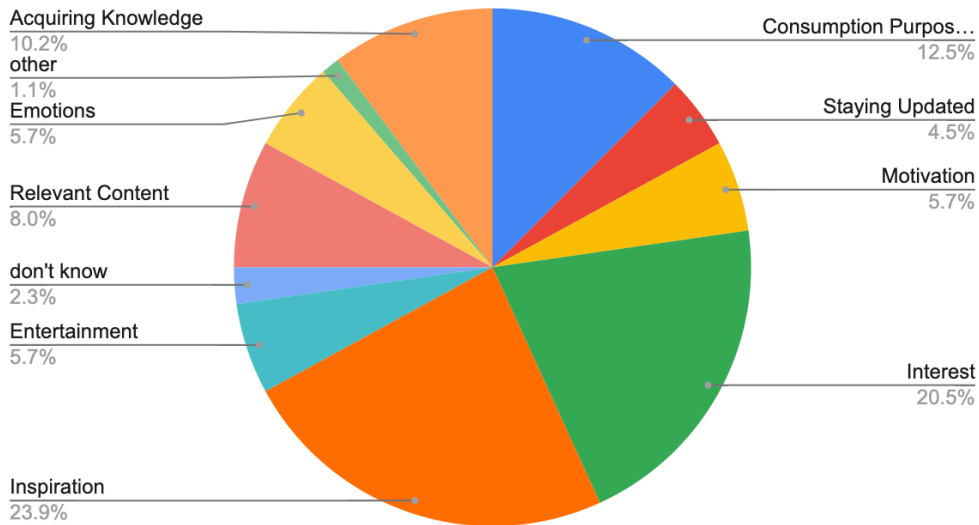
5.7% of the reasons were related to emotions the participants had for the influencers: “they are perfect”, “[they] make me feel good” and other explanations that mentioned words such as “love” and “admire”.

10.2% of the answers were referring to acquiring knowledge from the influencers. The participants listed tips, “learn new things” and “knowledge” as reasons for following influencers. Two participants were also explaining that they follow influencers in order to learn how to do the same thing themselves. One was following influencers in order to learn how to utilize instagram for their business: “For my business, to see how things work”; Another participant wrote “trying to learn how it works to promote myself”.

More reasons that were brought up in the research are: relevant content (8%), following influencers in order to stay updated (4.5%), 2.3% stated they “don’t know” why they follow influencers and the rest (1.1%) had other reasons for following influencers.

² ‘Stories’ are a feature on Instagram where users post their daily activities.

Reasons for following instagram influencers



Favorite influencer

The participants had to mention one influencer who they consider to be their favorite, and explain what makes that influencer their favorite. The two most common explanations were “authenticity” and interest in the content.

21.9% of explanations were mentioning keywords such as: honest, authentic, real. One participant explained that she likes her favorite influencer because “She is authentic and does not embellish reality - making it easy to connect with”.

21.9% of the explanations were referring to something they like about the content: “Because of the content that includes music playing etc.”; “He teaches how to be successful in life”; “Because she talks about topics that are interesting”.

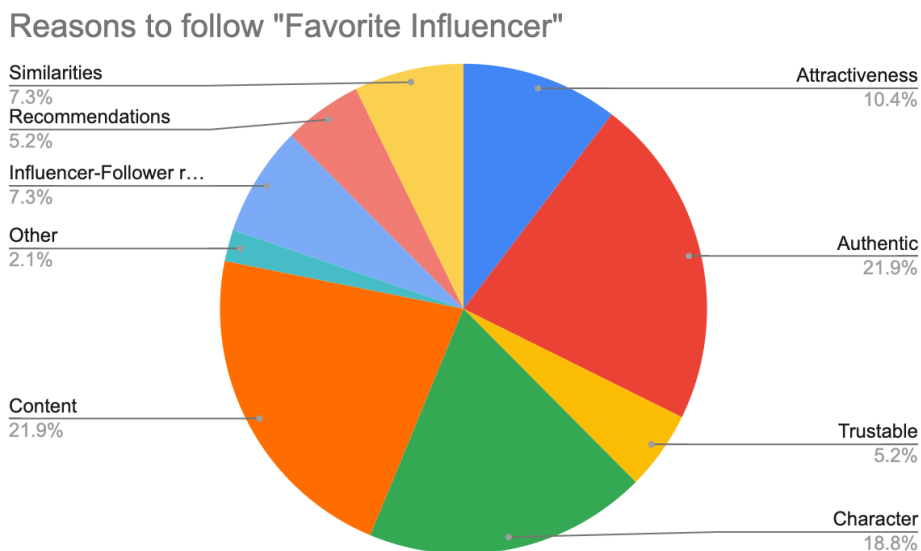
18.8% of explanations were describing the influencer’s character in a good light, and were arguing that something about the character made them follow that specific influencer: “Very authentic, mature, sociable, does not forget who she is for a moment and is truly a role model. Trust her completely !!”; “Real, kind, amusing, cool with style and humane.”

10.4% were referring to the influencer's style or looks as the reason for following - explanations like this were categorized as "Attractiveness": "[she has] good aesthetics on the page and [she is] a leader in the field of fashion".

7.3% were mentioning similarities they have with the influencer: "Because she's at the same stage in life as I am and I learn things from her"; "Delivers content that I love and in a really good and correct way, plus some things we have in common like art and design plus grooming."

7.3% were explaining that the way the influencer treats their followers is what makes them their favorite influencer. For example, one participant wrote: "[She] invests in her followers [...] answers her followers individually and in her story (without exposing the questioner), also answers questions in private [in private messages] ...". Another participant referred to the fact that the influencer responds to the messages she sends her: "She is inspiring and she always responds to every message I send her".

5.2% explained that they like that influencer because of their recommendations; 5.2% were mentioning that they found the influencer to be trustable. 2.1% of the explanations mentioned other reasons.



Para-Social Relations

On a scale of 1-5, the minimum of signs of Para-Social relations was 2.38, and the maximum was 5; with an average of 3.6576. The std. deviation is 0.63072.

table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Para-Social relations found in the research.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Para-Social relation	69	2.38	5.00	3.6576	.63073
Valid N (listwise)	69				

table 2: Correlation between frequency of content consumption and Para-social relationship.

		How often do you consume influencers' content	Para-Social relation
How often do you consume influencers' content	Pearson Correlation	1	.330**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	99	69
Para-Social relation	Pearson Correlation	.330**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	69	69

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Spearman test was conducted to examine the relationship between the frequency of the consumption of influencers' content and the degree of para-social relation with the influencer. The test results show that there is a significant positive relationship between the variables. That is, the follower's feeling of relationship with the influencer is affected by the frequency of content consumption.

table 3: Correlation between Para-social relationships and trust in the influencer's recommendations.

Correlations

		Para-Social relation	Trust in recommendati ons
Para-Social relation	Pearson Correlation	1	.422 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	69	69
Trust in recommendations	Pearson Correlation	.422 **	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	69	93

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Spearman test was conducted to examine the relationship between the para-social relations and the degree of trust in the influencer’s recommendations. The test results show that there is a significant positive relationship between the variables. The closer the follower feels to the influencer, the more they will trust the recommendations by the influencer.

table 4: Correlation between Para-social relationships and considering purchasing the recommendations.

Correlations

		Para-Social relation	Consider purchasing
Para-Social relation	Pearson Correlation	1	.419 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	69	69
Consider purchasing	Pearson Correlation	.419 **	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	69	93

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Spearman test was conducted to examine the relationship between the para-social relations and the degree of considering purchasing of the influencer’s recommendations. The test results show that there is a significant positive relationship between the variables. The closer the follower feels to the influencer, the more they will consider purchasing the recommendations by the influencer.

As for past purchases, only 21.7% never bought any recommendation they saw on their favorite influencer’s instagram. 53.6% made a purchase 1-3 times after a recommendation by their favorite influencer. 18.8% made between 4-10 purchases, and 5.8 made a purchase more than 10 times.

table 5: Correlation between Para-social relationships and amount of past purchases.

		Past purchases			Cumulative Percent
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Valid	1	15	1.5	21.7	21.7
	2	37	3.7	53.6	75.4
	3	13	1.3	18.8	94.2
	4	4	.4	5.8	100.0
	Total	69	6.9	100.0	
Missing	System	925	93.1		
Total		994	100.0		

table 6: Correlation between Para-social relationships and amount of past purchases.

		Correlations	
		Para-Social relation	Past purchases
Para-Social relation	Pearson Correlation	1	.351**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
	N	69	69
Past purchases	Pearson Correlation	.351**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	
	N	69	69

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Spearman test was conducted to examine the relationship between the para-social relations and the amount of purchases made by the recommendations. The test results show that there is a significant positive relationship between the variables. The closer the follower feels to the influencer, the more purchases they made after recommendations by the influencer.

Discussion

In this research it was found that on a scale of 1-5, the minimum of signs of Para-Social relations was 2.38, and the maximum was 5; with an average of 3.6576.

All three hypothesis were approved:

- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships to Trust in recommendations.
- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships and Purchase consideration.
- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships to Committing a Purchase.

This research proves that Influencers have a huge ability to endorse products and lead to sales. And as we already saw in the literature review, with their great ability to engage a relevant audience and create authentic content, they can generate a return on investment (ROI) eleven times higher than any other form of digital marketing (TapInfluence and Nielsen, 2016).

This is exactly why it was important to me to also get a better understanding of why people follow influencers and what are the keys that make influencer marketing so effective. Becoming an influencer is a huge opportunity nowadays for many people around the world. with very little investment of money, and by utilizing a free app - anyone can build a community online and promote brands or even start their own brands. This ability can play a huge part in social mobility, and it's important to get a better understanding of it.

This new marketing method combines the qualities of many methods that were used and researched in the past:

1. Valuable Content

Part of the power of influencers and their ability to sell on instagram, is that they build relationships with their followers based on the valuable content they provide their

followers with regularly. The advertisements are usually mentioned naturally as part of the everyday content that the influencers are sharing with their followers. (DeVeirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017).

Valuable content is any content that serves the audience: whether it makes them laugh, inspires them or teaches them something new.

When asked why the participants consume influencers content, the answers described influencers as a source of Interest and Entertainment (26.2%), a source with relevant content (8%), for example: “Because of the content that includes music playing etc”. 10.2% explain they follow influencers in order to acquire knowledge: “He teaches how to be successful in life”. These answers reveal that the followers treat the influencers both as an entertainment channel; as well as an information source they can learn from.

With the rise of instagram influencers and the awareness of the negative impact the content we consume can have on our mental health, we see participants referring to being conscious to who they follow and how they make them feel: “I only follow people who positively impact my life / my consciousness / my creativity. I strive to consume quality content from people who understand their field.” (Apple et al., 2020).

This awareness made influencers work harder on providing valuable content. And we do see reasons such as a source of Inspiration (23.9%), and a source of motivation (5.7%): “[Influencers] give motivation to move forward in life”, another participant wrote “they bring insane motivation to engage in what I love”.

Besides the reasons that are mainly focusing on the content, 12.5% of participants follow with the intention to purchase! This is not a statement you will hear from consumers on other entertainment channels. While consumers don’t watch television in order to watch the commercials, they do declare they consume the influencers’ content in order to get recommendations for shopping: “The content is interesting,

inspiring and exposing to other brands or designers”; “[Influencers are] Helping me focus on consuming items that are more relevant to me” and so on.

2. Influencers and Source Attractiveness Model:

McGuire (1985) identifies physical attractiveness, similarity, familiarity, and likability as the most important factors in persuading a recipient who is motivated by social needs or self-satisfaction. Attractiveness is based not only on physical attraction but also on various aspects such as creativity, personality traits, lifestyle and skills (Erdogan, 1999).

Indeed, 18.8% of explanations were describing the influencer’s character in a good light, and were arguing that something about the character made them follow that specific influencer: “Very authentic, mature, sociable, does not forget who she is for a moment and is truly a role model. Trust her completely !!”; “Real, kind, amusing, cool with style and humane.” 10.4% were referring to the influencer’s style or physical attraction as the reason for following.

From this we can learn that showing up online as authentic; as well as sharing content that not only entertains or educates, but reveals more of personality - is extremely important in order to gain followers on instagram.

Similarity was also a common answer: demographic background, interests, attitudes, social status and lifestyle. 7.3% were mentioning similarities they have with the influencer: “Because she's at the same stage in life as I am...” ; “some things we have in common like art and design plus grooming.” ; “We share the same style” ; “We’re the same age”.

We can learn that as well as providing valuable content; it is beneficial to share with the audience personal life, as part of the reasons to follow are about the similarities the audience might find with the content creator.

3. Influencers and Source Credibility

Source Credibility is determined by two qualities: expertise and trustworthiness. The level of expertise refers to the extent in which the endorser is believed to be a valid source of information; and trustworthiness indicates the perceived sincerity, reliability, and integrity of the endorser (Hovland et al., 1953). Sources with high credibility are supposed to have a positive effect on consumers' attitudes and behavior, and therefore are desirable brand endorsers (Erdogan, 1999).

As we learnt in the literature review, influencers are sought more authentic than celebrity endorsers, as discussed before; a study shows that 92% of consumers trust an influencer's opinion more than an advertisement (Chang, n.d). Indeed, in this research 21.9% of the reasons for following influencers were mentioning keywords such as: honest, authentic, real. One participant explained that she likes her favorite influencer because "She is authentic and does not embellish reality...".

Some of the answers that were brought up in the research showed that people follow influencers in order to acquire knowledge. These answers reveal that the followers treat the influencers as a credible source they can learn from.

4. A digital Word of Mouth

Influencer marketing has been described as a reliable electronic word of mouth (DeVeirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). Studies have shown that Word of Mouth is still the most important, influential and compelling form of marketing - as 83% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family on all forms of advertising, proving that word of mouth is the most effective marketing model (Nielsen, 2015).

As shown earlier in the review: Nielsen's global trust in the 2015 advertising report showed that consumers trust recommendations from friends and family on all forms of advertising (Nielsen, 2015). Maintaining the appearance of a friendly relationship with the followers is essential for influencers to maximize their power as an influencer.

Para-social relationships are the key that makes an influencer endorsement seem like a “digital word of mouth”. The audience feels like they’re friends and influencers are working to maintain that feeling:

1. Frequency of content consumption: as we learnt in the literature review, according to Altman and Taylor (1973) the more time an individual spends watching and involving himself the more he becomes more intimate with the media figure.. (Rubin, Perse, Powell, 1985,p.156) In this research we found that 58.6% of participants usually consume instagram influencer’s content once a day (28.3%) or several times a day (30.3%).
2. Instagram influencers maintain close relationships with their followers by interacting with them, by responding to their comments, liking or commenting on pictures they are tagged in and so on. 7.3% of the participants in this research found the maintenance of a close relationship to be one of the main reasons they like their favorite influencer. One participant wrote: “[She] invests in her followers [...] answers her followers individually and in her story (without exposing the questioner), also answers questions in private [in private messages] ...”. Another participant referred to the fact that the influencer responds to the messages she sends her: “She is inspiring and she always responds to every message I send her”.

Para-social relationships have already been identified as a factor that positively affects the credibility of the source, based on previous experiences with the source and prior knowledge of their expertise and credibility (Gräve, 2017).

Conclusions

This research proves that Influencers have a huge ability to convert followers to customers. All three hypothesis were approved:

- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships to Trust in recommendations.

- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships and Purchase consideration.
- There is a positive relationship between the existence of para-social relationships to Committing a Purchase.

Influencers perform as celebrity endorsers since they are “internet famous” and have this “famous halo” and attractiveness; yet, unlike celebrities they don’t bring the downside of being perceived as lacking credibility (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997). In fact, just like peers they are being perceived as more trustworthy and similar to consumers. (Ohanian, 1990).

The reasons that were found were:

- People follow influencers who are: attractive (creativity, personality traits, lifestyle and skills, physical attraction), or are similar to them.
- Influencers provide valuable content frequently. The advertisements are usually mentioned naturally as part of the everyday content that the influencers are sharing with their followers. In fact, the advertisements (recommendations) were brought up as a reason to follow influencers.
- The follower’s feeling of relationship with the influencer is affected by the frequency of content consumption. Since Instagram usage is high and users visit the app daily and consume influencers’ content daily, it is likely that user will build para-social relations with influencers.
- Maintaining para-social relations (by showing up regularly, answering private messages etc.) helps the credibility of the influencers.

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Questionnaire

Interviewee Background

- 1) Gender – man / woman
- 2) Age group
- 3) Weekly use of Instagram
- 4) Do you follow Instagram influencers?
- 5) If yes, why?
- 6) Weekly consumption of influencer's content
- 7) Write your definition to Instagram Influencer.

Influencers and Para-social Relationships

Based on this questionnaire: <http://people.wcsu.edu/mccarneyh/acad/Camella.html>

- 1) Please name your favorite lifestyle influencer.

- 2) Explain why you like the influencer you chose?
- 3) My favorite influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.
- a) Strongly agree
 - b) Somewhat agree
 - c) Disagree
 - d) Strongly disagree
 - e) Not at all
- 4) I see my favorite influencer as a natural down -to-earth person.
- a) Strongly agree
 - b) Somewhat agree
 - c) Disagree
 - d) Strongly disagree
 - e) Not at all
- 5) My favorite influencer seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
- a) Strongly agree
 - b) Somewhat agree
 - c) Disagree
 - d) Strongly disagree
 - e) Not at all
- 6) If I saw my favorite influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.
- a) Strongly agree
 - b) Somewhat agree
 - c) Disagree
 - d) Strongly disagree
 - e) Not at all
- 7) I would like to meet my favorite influencer in person.
- a) Strongly agree
 - b) Somewhat agree
 - c) Disagree

d) Strongly disagree

e) Not at all

8) I feel sorry for my favorite influencer when he or she makes a mistake.

a) Strongly agree

b) Somewhat agree

c) Disagree

d) Strongly disagree

e) Not at all

9) My favorite influencer keeps me company when I am lonely.

a) Strongly agree

b) Somewhat agree

c) Disagree

d) Strongly disagree

e) Not at all

10) Whenever I am unable to watch my favorite influencer, I really miss it.

a) Strongly agree

b) Somewhat agree

c) Disagree

d) Strongly disagree

e) Not at all

Influencers and Shopping Recommendations

1) When my favorite influencer recommends products, I believe the recommendation.

a) Strongly agree

b) Somewhat agree

c) Disagree

d) Strongly disagree

e) Not at all

Please explain why:

2) When my favorite influencer recommends a product, I consider purchasing that product.

- a) Strongly agree
- b) Somewhat agree
- c) Disagree
- d) Strongly disagree
- e) Not at all

Please explain why:

3) Did you ever buy a product because your favorite influencer recommended that product?

- a) never
- b) 1-3 times
- c) 4-10 times
- d) more than 10 times.