

Conference stream - Identity and online advocacy

Instagram fashion influencers and authentic online identities

Abstract

With the rise of online marketing and electronic word of mouth Instagram fashion influencers have become a vital part of advertising campaigns for fashion brands. Using authentic and trustworthy fashion influencers to promote brands to consumers has proven effective when it comes to marketing and often leads to increased sales. Fashion influencers build communities of followers by portraying an authentic online self with the aim of attracting endorsements from brands for financial gain. Brands are active in seeking genuine influencers who fit their image and messaging. For influencers to remain attractive to brands, transparency in their image is necessary. As they build their profiles they actively participate in engagement methods to maintain their influencer status. There is evidence to suggest that they adapt a version of themselves in order to attract several endorsements. However portraying a different self can have damaging effects and in the majority of cases most influencers choose to remain authentic allowing brands to fit their identity.

Keywords

Instagram, Influencer, marketing, fashion, brands, social media, eWOM, algorithms, hashtags

Instagram has created a marketing network for consumers and an ideal space for fashion advertising (Kim & Phua, 2020). With the rise of marketing tools such as electronic word of mouth there has been an increase in individuals who are willingly expose their lives to gain followers. Fashion influencers such as Alli Schapel @blackarrowblog and Nora Chan @nhrmichelle have thousands of followers who they actively engage with user generated content combining fashion and luxury lifestyles to gain attention and engagement followers (Flaunter, 2022). With high engagement comes the power to influence consumers by sharing images and videos of products with hashtags, often resulting in financial gain from brand endorsements or sponsorships (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). As an influencer's following base grows, there is potential for more endorsements (Jin et al., 2019). When influencers advertise several fashion labels, the authenticity of the advertising can appear less transparent (Jin et al., 2019). With the increase in online marketing there is limited evidence to suggest influencers commodify themselves as they aim to benefit from brand endorsements (Haenlein et al., 2020). This paper explores how fashion influencers build authentic online identities based on their lifestyles, views, and opinions to gain followers while remaining true to their identity to stay relevant and appealing to marketers on Instagram.

Referring to itself as an online community, Instagram has over two billion monthly users who spend approximately 30 minutes per day on the site (Omnicores, 2022). Distinct from other social media sites based on blogging, the original concept of Instagram is sharing pictures while offering tools to edit images and options to apply filters to photographs for a professional look (Leaver et al., 2020). Anyone with an active public or private account can post pictures or videos and connect with other users by following each other (Leaver et al., 2020). Users can like, share or comment on other photos even if they do not follow the account, as long as the profile is public (Leaver et al., 2020). Communicating via images provides an intimate look into lives and has the power to create a trusting bond between users (Leaver et al., 2020). Influencers build relationships by constantly publishing content that engages their followers almost making them feel like they are part of the experience. The trust they gain with their followers is built up over time with a series of genuine posts based on their expertise (Jin et al., 2019). Fashion influencers leverage this trust sharing details of the products and brands they have selected and purchased, providing their genuine views (Jin et al., 2019). Posting pictures can generate engagement and conversation, making users feel like they are living the moment (Leaver et al., 2020). Influencers portray their lifestyle in a commodified way showcasing products that their followers seek to obtain (Schouten et al., 2020). Instagram provides the perfect platform for influencers allowing them to control their image and what they promote (Liu & Suh, 2017).

The growth of online communication has seen the steady rise of marketing online which has become essential to the fashion industry (Santiago et al., 2020). Online forms of advertising, such as electronic word of mouth (eWOM), have proven effective marketing tools (Santiago et al., 2020). With its large number of consumers, social media is the perfect means for delivering eWOM (Djafarova & Trofimenko 2019). Fashion brands look for reliable, appropriate sources to deliver eWOM messages to market products through endorsements (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). A successful means for delivering eWOM are fashion influencers, users who have gained a certain number of followers by sharing their views online (Jin et al., 2019). An influencer is defined as a user who generally has at least 10,000 or more followers (Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencers post pictures and videos of

products on Instagram creating conversation resulting in a network of connected consumers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Instagram is an ideal platform for fashion enthusiasts as it encourages and inspires visual connection (Jin et al., 2019). Brands carefully select influencers based on the image they have built and work with them closely to portray the message of the brand (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Fashion influencers captured the attention of consumers by posting content that is considered to be real and authentic (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). When used by the right source, eWOM is also considered authentic and trustworthy and can sway consumer decisions (Dwidienawati et al., 2020).

The role of fashion influencer is lucrative as fashion is one of the most profitable industries and a large part of the world economy (Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencers gain status by publicly sharing their lifestyle, views and opinions on a specific industry (Abidin, 2016). As Instagram has a high engagement rate for influencers, with over 37 per cent of users interacting with them it is a popular choice for promoting fashion (Omnicores, 2022). Unlike traditional advertising, where a product is featured in a marketing campaign to sell, fashion influencers intertwine products into their daily lifestyles (Cheung & Choi, 2022). Influencers have to be knowledgeable and relatable and usually have something which is attractive to other users that they admire (Leaver et al., 2020). Users follow fashion influencers for guidance on what to wear, whether that be for everyday work or a special occasion (Santiago et al., 2020). Fashion influencers aim to build their profiles in a way that is authentic to their present everyday life with a realness that is unique to them (Yang et al., 2021). Users view these posts, comment, and sometimes share them on their pages, creating brand awareness which often leads to sales (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Sharing reviews of products online is often more effective than traditional word of mouth that relies on face-to-face communication as online reviews spread quicker and can have greater reach (Casaló et al., 2020). Fashion influencers that have built an authentic, unique and notable profile become noticed and attract the attention of fashion companies looking to sell their products (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Staying relevant, maintaining and gaining followers is vital for a fashion influencer (Liu & Suh, 2017). Influencers have a strong understanding of Instagram, turning

their profiles into a professional space and aligning their views and opinions with the site and their followers (Colucci & Pedroni, 2021). Self-presentation is fundamental as they aim to engage their followers by sharing intimate details of their lives in pictures of wearable fashion like an advertisement (Schouten et al., 2020). Marketing their lifestyle so that it is portrayed true version of their reality. Posts are controlled and edited with the intention of being positive, engaging and relatable providing a comfortable space for engaging. An awareness of algorithms and how they work are a big part of how influencers successfully gain exposure (Cotter, 2018). Algorithms are codes written into all social media sites and are a way of maintaining control over users (Cotter, 2018). Algorithms determine visibility, and most influencers participate in what is referred to as 'gaming the system' by disclosing how they have overcome an algorithm (Cotter, 2018). Influencers reveal to one another when they unlock the algorithm and working together is a way to overcome the bias and remain exposed (Cotter, 2018). Strategic follow/unfollow tactics are also a way to stay favourably visible with algorithms, only retaining followers who actively engage with posts (Young et al., 2020). Influencers also ensure they are actively involved with their followers, frequently commenting on posts as algorithms reward engagement by creating exposure (Cotter, 2018). Understanding Instagram algorithms, having knowledge in the fashion and being able to maintain an authentic online identity all contribute to making a fashion influencer successful (Casaló et al., 2020).

Fashion influencers post from locations and events, tagging about the event while hash tagging the outfit with the brand and popular hashtags such as #OOTD (outfit of the day) (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). Using engagement methods to interact with their followers like symbols #hashtags and @Username to tag users in posts is a way to gain followers and engage networks while attracting brands (Jones & Seung-Eun, 2022). The power of a hashtag is exposed when referring to #GirlsLikeUs, which started as a campaign to raise awareness for transgender girls and turned into a network of support for women, with the meaning of the hashtag becoming more than its original intent (Jackson et al., 2018). Fashion influencers use hashtags such as #brands and #fashion to refer to items in their posts (Erz et al., 2018). Commonly used hashtags on Instagram, such as #photooftheday, are woven in and posted at specific times of the day to gain maximum exposure (Haenlein et al., 2020). Hashtags generate interest in the content and connect with other users (Erz et al.,

2018). For fashion influencers, hashtags spread into brand networks, leading to more followers and brand engagement (Erz et al., 2018). Other popular hashtags draw attention to user-generated content and link to topics such as #fashionista, which has been used to tag millions of posts (Venus Jin & Ryu, 2020). The @ symbol engages other users and brands in posts (Landsverk, 2014). Using @Username, for example, becomes essential when an influencer wants to engage a brand and sometimes can be more effective than using a hashtag as it connects directly to the brand's network (Landsverk, 2014). It takes time for fashion influencers to grow a large community of followers to gain exposure (Haenlein et al., 2020). It is a big commitment as it can sometimes take years to be noticed by a brand willing to advertise (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Evidence suggest that consumers are more likely to purchase products from an authentic, trusted source, making fashion influencers appealing to brands (Yang et al., 2021). Influencers who have gained credibility can be paid or sponsored to promote brands by sharing them on their page (Casaló et al.,2020). The influencer must fit the brand, and companies are willing to invest in research to search for, and identify, the most suitable talent for advertising (Santiago et al., 2020). A successful match is an influencer with values that fit within the brand and the brand messaging (Jones & Seung-Eun, 2022). If the influencer holds the same values as a consumer, they are more likely to purchase the product (Kim et al., 2017). Before purchasing a product, consumers test to see if the influencer is authentic and their values align before they trust the recommendation (Santiago et al., 2020). Consumers seeking information on brands form brand communities where they share a common interest in brand values (Jones & Seung-Eun, 2022). Instagram users have a high interaction rate with brand communities and influencers aim to tap into these to gain exposure (Phua et al., 2017). The marketing source influences a consumer's intention to purchase, and if that relationship is positive, there is a greater chance of brand loyalty (Yang et al., 2021). Influencer marketing campaigns have proven effective for brands (Ahmad, 2018). Brand credibility is associated with influencer credibility, and if the partnership is authentic, it is very successful for both parties (Santiago et al., 2020).

Marketing with the use of influencers is a billion-dollar industry, and the lure of profitability from promoting brands becomes enticing (Haenlein et al., 2020). Fashion influencers can lose sight of their public image by commodifying themselves to fit the brand (Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencers are either paid, given products or provided sponsorships to promote products (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Free holidays to exotic locations with all expenses paid are another enticement (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). These include staged photoshoots posted after the fact, making it seem like they were in the moment of their everyday life (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). To maintain a brand's image, contracts are used to control everything from the post's content including the way the item is displayed and the frequency and timing of the post (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). There are reports that only 14 per cent of influencers are compliant with the Federal Trade Commission, but to what extent this is true is unknown (Haenlein et al., 2020). When a follower assumes a lack of realness, it affects the influencer's credibility and damages the brand's reputation (Colucci & Padroni, 2021). If credibility is lost users unfollow which was true for former influencer Yovana Mendoza Ayres @rawvana gained a large following base for being vegan only to lose her followers when images surfaced of her eating fish (Haenlein et al., 2020). Brands identify influencers based on their image, follower profiles and the relevant communities they can reach so the advertising remains authentic (Haenlein et al., 2020). Online consumers research to check that recommendations are legitimate and authentic before purchasing products (Yang, 2021). Using techniques to increase the visibility of a profile but go against the Instagram community guidelines is not good practice, and influencers generally choose to remain authentic (Cotter, 2018).

In conclusion, fashion influencers on Instagram gain exposure by being knowledgeable in their field and promoting an authentic online version of themselves which generates followers and creates a community of support. Hashtags tagging brands and other engagement methods are used to promote their content creating exposure and increasing followers. Brands know that consumers respond positively to authenticity and actively seek influencers with the same values to promote their products. While influencers have enticements to fit within a brand, there is limited research into the effects of not presenting authentically. However, evidence supports that when an influencer has betrayed a different online self the consequences have

been detrimental for both the brand and influencer. For fashion influencers to gain endorsements, it is in their best interests to maintain authenticity by not diverting from their public persona. As influencer marketing is a new concept, there needs to be more research into the extent of which an influencer will change to fit within a brand while still actively maintaining authenticity.

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