THE IMPACT INFLUENCERS HAVE ON THE BUYING HABITS OF INDIVIDUALS

By

Isabella D. Deatherage

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By

Isabella Deatherage

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Brittany Thompson

School of Communication, College of Fine Arts and Communication

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Abstract

Social media has given rise to a new type of celebrity, commonly known as an "influencer." An influencer, in theory, influences the opinions of others, but how much of an influence do they actually have? This study analyzes the true power over people's opinions these micro-celebrities possess. Through a survey of 278 individuals, comments on posts, and looking at purchase trends it was determined the impact. The study found that people want to trust who they are buying from, and they feel a higher level of trust from these individuals. The findings reflect that people will change their opinions, purchase products, and listen to influencers.

Introduction

"This is the best product ever; you should go by it now." Quotes like this one are what many individuals think of when they think of a person on social media "influencing" them. However, contrary to popular belief this is not the case. Instead, it takes much more than just a simple Instagram caption to grab the attention of a future buyer. An influencer does not outright say "go buy this," rather they know exactly what to say and how to target specific individuals. Brands have chosen these people because of the qualities they possess and the impact they are able to have on the everyday public.

Over the past ten years, social media has seen unprecedented growth, mostly through millennials and Generation Z (Park et al., 2021). With the rise of social media, came the rise to a new type of celebrity. Traditional celebrities, like Kim Kardashian, have been around for as long as anyone can remember, but they are not seen as connectable or authentic. When someone looks at a post on Instagram from Khloe Kardashian, they tend to believe she is being paid to say certain things or act a certain way because of the reputation she has been given by television and traditional media. A desire for a celebrity who felt more attainable and personable gave way to influencers.

An influencer can be defined as "one who has cultivated a large number of followers on social media through generating valuable content on the domain of interest" (Yang et al., 2021). There are two types of influencers, a micro influencer and a macro influencer. A micro influencer has 10,000-50,000 followers and macro influencers have 500,000-one million followers (Ehlers, 2021). While these categories may seem very different, an influencer in either category must possess the same qualities. To be an influencer, one must have some level of physical attractiveness, have an area of expertise, be trustworthy, and be persuasive (Shan et al.,

2020). The biggest trait that an influencer possesses is that they are viewed as authentic (Park et al., 2021). If an influencer loses their authenticity, then people will stop buying into them and thus they will lose their status.

Traditional celebrities have been given a reputation that their words are bought, but influencers get the chance to choose carefully what they want to endorse. An influencer is given the opportunity to say no or ask to test a product prior to endorsing it. Many times, brands will choose influencers based off of their similarities and if they feel like they fit the message of the company. It is essential the brand feels like the influencer they are choosing to work with can shape brand awareness, change brand attitude, and influence the purchase intentions of a future buyer (Yang et al., 2021). Once a brand has chosen to work with the prospective influencer, it is now the responsibility of the influencers to incorporate the product or service into their lives and show their following that they need that product or service. This raises the hypothesis, are influencers actually influencing people to buy products or services or are they just another form of a celebrity?

There have been many studies completed that analyze influencers, but not many have looked at the effects they are having on potential buyers. This study will analyze if influencers are causing individuals to buy products and services like they are assumed to be doing. It will also assess in depth at the wording that draws individuals in and how buyers are persuaded into using specific products.

Methods

While most of the literature around influencers focuses on who influencers are and the qualities they possess, few studies look at how much of an impact they are having on individuals. This study will look at influencers from a different perspective and analyze whether or not their

authenticity, attractiveness, and likeness can be used to influence people to buy a product or service. Therefore, the hypothesis is:

Influencers are using their authenticity and likeness to influence purchasers to buy a certain product or service.

In order to test this hypothesis a survey was distributed over a period of one week. The survey consisted of 17 questions, including both quantitative and qualitative questions (see Appendix A). The survey asked general questions about influencers as well as mentioning influencers by name. The questions were designed to identify which influencers were well-known enough to have their comment sections analyzed. The survey was made through google docs and distributed via text, email, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat platforms. These methods of distribution were chosen because of the type of survey. It was essential that a survey based off the impact of social media influencers be distributed on various social media platforms. It was also emailed and texted to various college students at East Carolina University. College age students were the main demographic being analyzed; therefore, it was necessary that the survey be directly sent to them. Those who were either directly sent the survey or found it via social media had one week to take the completely anonymous questionnaire.

The exact amount of those who received the survey is unknown given the nature of how it was distributed. However, 278 responses were received. All 278 were analyzed and none were discarded or proved to be outliers. The target demographic of the survey was college age students, 18-25 years old, however anyone 18 years or older could take the survey. Of those who responded, 88.5% of the responses were 18–25-year old's and 80.2% were female. The ethnicity of the surveyed was not obtained.

In order to analyze the results of the survey, the answer averages were used for the quantitative data. The most frequent answers were then used as a guideline for who to analyze in the next step. For the qualitative answers, each one was read carefully and considered when advancing to the next step. If the answers were repeated by multiple individuals, then they held more of an impact than answers only given once. Some qualitative answers were thrown out and not all 278 people responded to those questions.

After analyzing the quantitative data and determining which influencers, the next step was to investigate the comments sections on the three platforms assessed: YouTube, Instagram, and Tik Tok. Using the feedback from the qualitative answers as well as the answers most commonly selected on the "select multiple" questions, specific influencers were chosen to have their comments monitored. On Instagram, Emma Chamberlin and Danielle Carolan were analyzed. Anna X Sitar and Maia Knight's comments were reviewed on Tik Tok. Lastly, on YouTube Mr. Beast and Alisha Marie were chosen based off of the survey answers to have their comments monitored. These six influencers had their perspective comment sections monitored for one week looking for comments on specific products or services that were being mentioned by the influencer whether via a sponsored post or just a product they use.

Results

Sample demographics

According to a study completed by Pew Research, as of February 8, 2021, approximately 71% of women use some form of social media, while only 66% of men use social media. This same study showed that the top three platforms used were YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. It also pointed out that the most popular social media platforms for those under 30 were Instagram, Snapchat, and Tik Tok (Auxier, Anderson, 2021).

For the purpose of this study, a total of 278 responses were recorded between January 24 and January 31 of 2022 via an online survey. The survey found 88.5% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25 (Figure 1). Of the 278 respondents, 80.2% of them were female and 18% were male (Figure 2).

Figure 1.

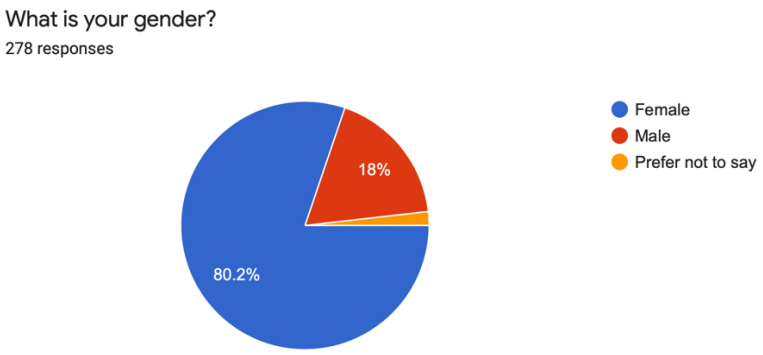
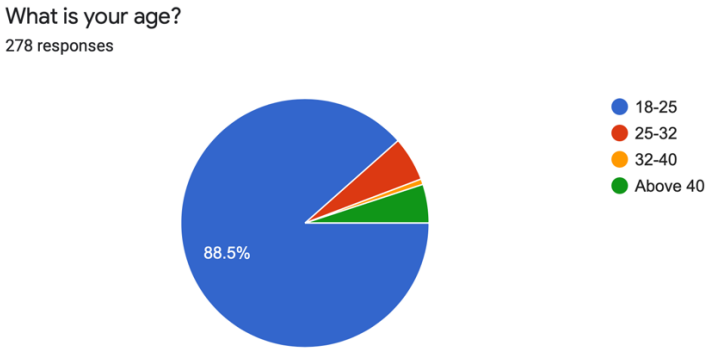


Figure 2.



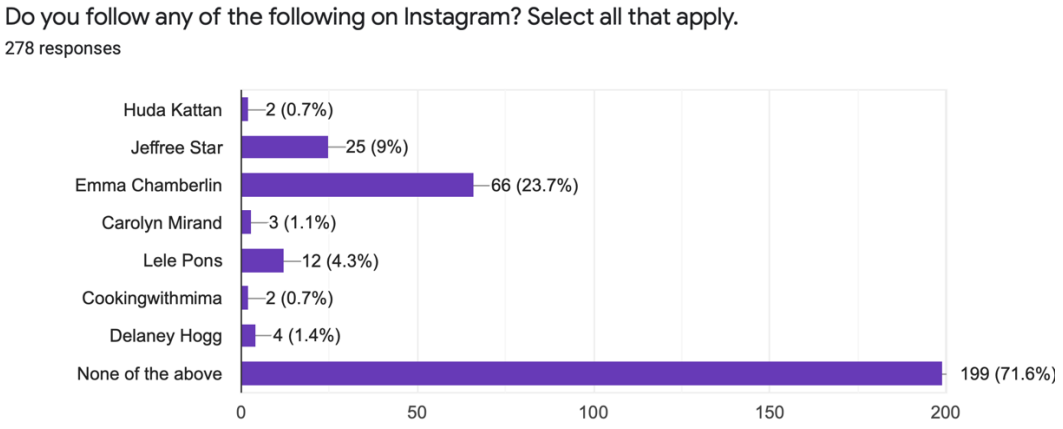
The survey results mirror the results found by Pew Research, therefore validating the sample size and demographics. Using the responses of the 278 individuals, the survey answers were then used to gather the information necessary to complete the rest of the research.

Influencer impact

Respondents were asked to indicate their top influencers on Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube (Figures 3-5). Using these answers, the top two choices were chosen from each category to have their comments monitored for approximately one week.

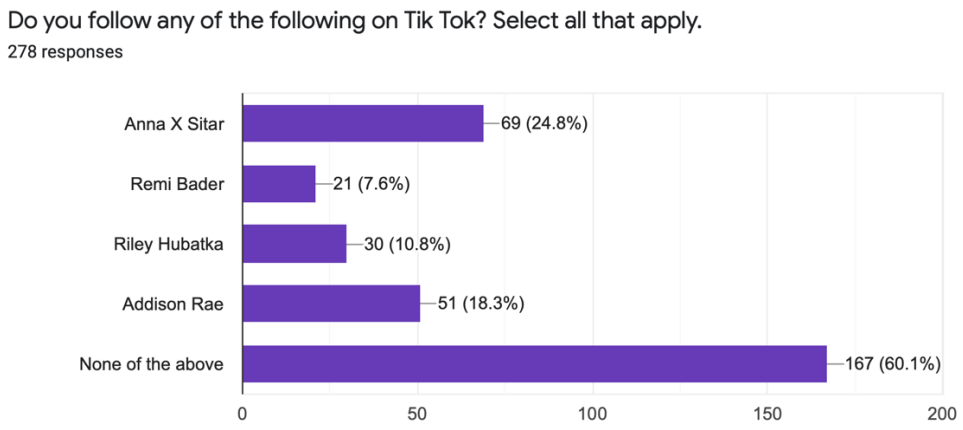
For Instagram, the majority of the respondents shared that Emma Chamberlin was their most followed influencer (Figure 3). Following this question, was an open-ended question that asked if there was anyone else on Instagram not listed that they followed. One of the most popular answers was Danielle Carolan, with 25 people mentioning her name.

Figure 3.



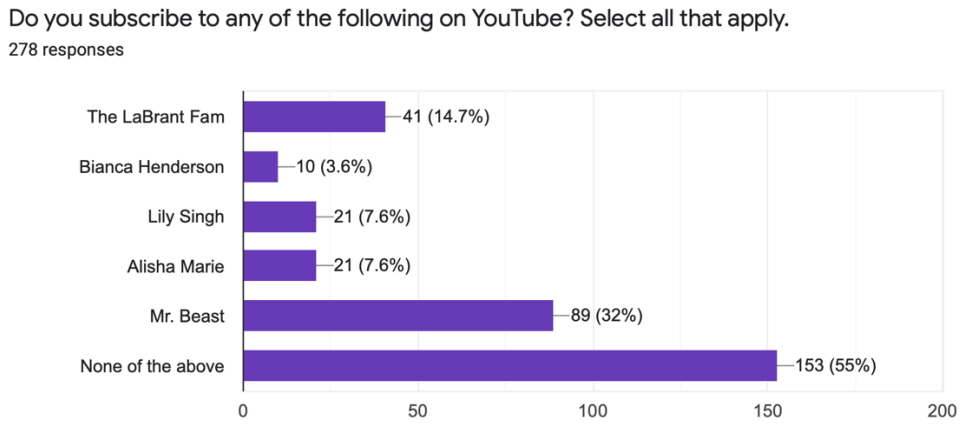
Tik Tok had a similar question to the Instagram one above, however the results were much closer in the percentage of people who followed the mentioned Tik Tok influencers. Anna X Sitar was the most followed on this platform (see Figure 4). There was also a question following that asked if there were influencers not mentioned. One of the most common responses was Maia Knight, with over 100 people mentioning her Tik Toks.

Figure 4.



Lastly, the respondents were asked to select influencers they subscribe to on YouTube. Mr. Beast had the most answers, followed by The LaBrant Fam. However, due to the comment section of The LaBrant Fam's videos being turned off, Alisha Marie was chosen to have her comments analyzed (Figure 5).

Figure 5.



Testing the hypothesis

In order to test the hypothesis, the comment sections of Anna X Sitar and Maia Knight (Tik Tok), Danielle Carolan and Emma Chamberlin (Instagram), and Mr. Beast and Alisha Marie

(YouTube) were analyzed over the course of one week. There were approximately 100,000 comments read and the most relevant ones were selected. Comments were analyzed looking for specific examples of when individuals said they were going to buy something due to the influencer mentioning it. Words such as “I use,” “bought,” and “I need” were considered the trigger word that someone was going to buy the product or service.

The phrases “I need,” or “where is x product from” were commonly found in the comment sections on both Instagram and Tik Tok (see figures 6 through 9).

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

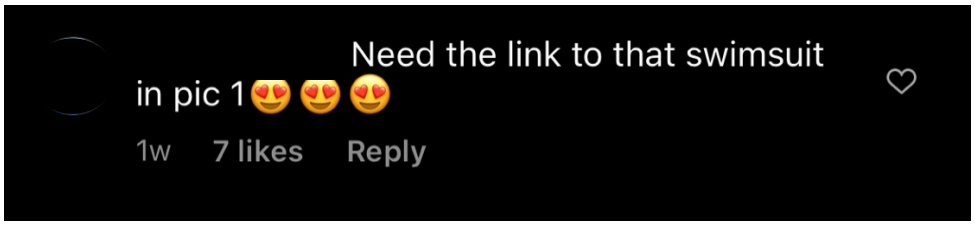


Figure 8.

Figure 9.

Words like “buy” or “buying” were also common (Figures 10 and 11).

Figure 10.

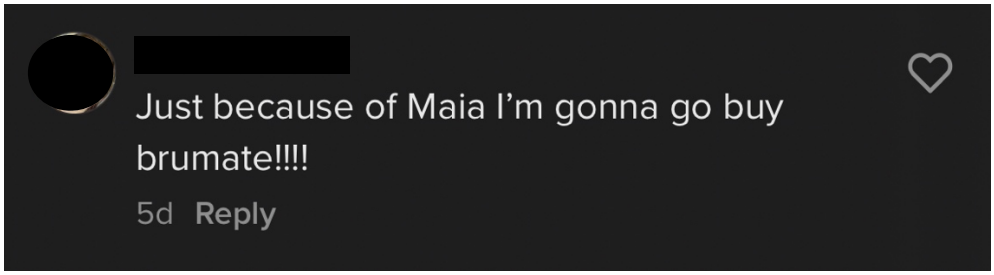
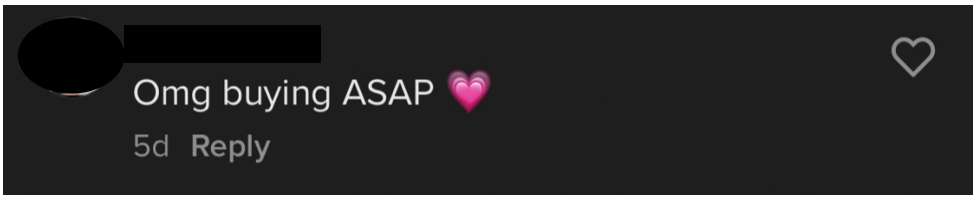


Figure 11.



The last section of the comments indicate that the influencer had something the indivual desired and that because that specific influencer was using it, they also wanted it (Figures 12-15).

Figure 12.

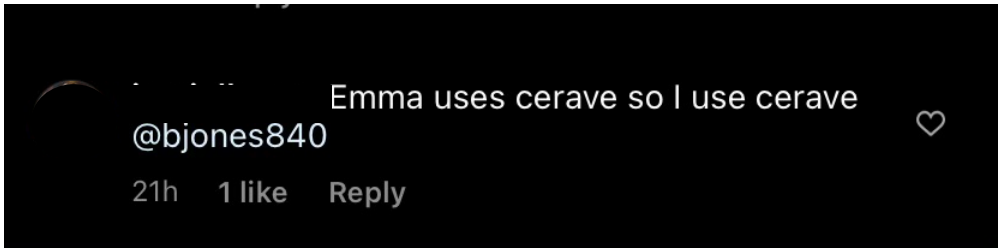


Figure 13.

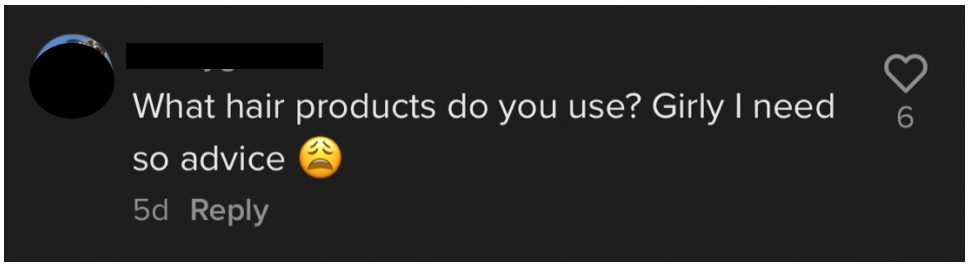


Figure 14.

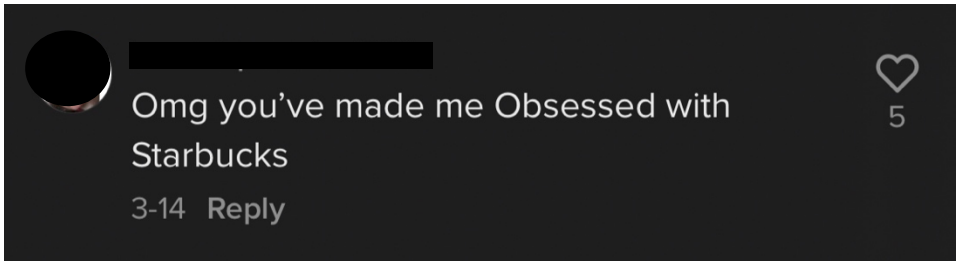
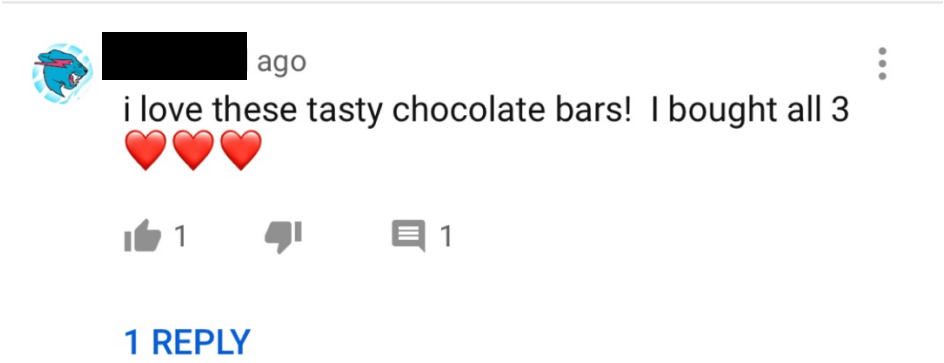


Figure 15.



Discussion

According to an article posted by the Digital Marketing Institute, as of October 2021, 49 percent of consumers rely on influencer recommendations and 40 percent actually purchase something after seeing it on Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. The findings in this study also suggest that influencers do have an impact on the spending habits of individuals and are able to channel their authenticity and likeness to influence what individuals buy. After analyzing the comment sections of Danielle Carolan, Emma Chamberlin, Mr. Beast, Alisha Marie, Maia Knight, and Anna X Sitar for one week, it was noted that the impact these influencers have is large and can be affected by multiple things.

While analyzing the comment sections on each influencer's perspective platforms, specific words and phrases like "buy," "I need," etc. were sought out because they imply that the individual intended to buy the product or service. There were individuals that specifically said they were going to buy a product because that influencer was using it or recommending it. This shows that the individual modeled their spending habits after that specific individual. This finding was congruent with the finding that 42 percent of consumers admit to buying a product

solely based off of an influencer mentioning it which was found in a report by YPulse (Yang et al., 2021).

A study conducted by the Digital Marketing Institute (2021) found that 86 percent of women use social media for purchasing advice. Influencers have a unique opportunity to persuade the buying decisions of people from all walks of life and they have this because they are viewed as someone relatable. Another study found that 70 percent of teens trust influencers more than traditional celebrities (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). Given that the target audience for influencers tends to be teens and young adults, as well as women, this aligns with the findings found through the online survey and through the research conducted. The majority of the comments analyzed were from women, of which the majority were also young adults. This relates back to the trust factor. In order to create trust, one must be authentic, likeable, and up-front; all qualities that an influencer must possess in order to truly have an effect on someone.

While it may seem like influencers are all the same, they can be grouped in to eight different niches: gaming, sports and fitness, bloggers/vloggers, photography, travel, beauty, fashion, and parenting (Santora, 2021). The influencers that were chosen based off of the survey come from a variety of different niches. This was done on purpose to give insight into the different types of influencers and how they have to possess different skills for their perspective niche. For example, Maia is a mother, Alisha Marie films about beauty and lifestyle, and Mr. Beast does extreme challenges just to give away money. However, even though they come from all walks of life, they all still have an impact on their audiences. Their following is interested in the niche they specialize in, but that alone is not why they follow them. They follow them because they like them, find them attractive, or because they idealize them and what they are doing for a living as indicated through previous knowledge and the survey.

Individuals want someone who is genuine and that they feel they can connect with (Chae, 2018). Many influencers are able to give people a genuine and sincere opinion, while using that connection to influence what they buy. For example, Alisha Marie can simply post a video talking about life as an influencer and people flood her comment section with comments about how genuine she is and why they love her. One individual comment stated, "I love how I can connect with you and your videos."

Mr. Beast can create insane challenges and people will line up to participate because they know they will get paid and have a fun time doing it. Then when the video is posted, he will get thousands of comments that say how he is the only one who can do this type of thing because he has created a daredevil reputation. Maia Knight can post a Tik Tok of her holding her children with a specific baby wrap and receive endless comments asking where she got it because they want it simply because she has it and they want to be like her. Emma Chamberlin can post about a moisturizer and cause people to run to the store and buy it. All of these influencers were average people at some point in their life and now they are able to simply post on Instagram or Tik Tok or YouTube and influence millions of people to go out and buy or do something just because they are (Shan et al., 2020).

The findings were support the hypothesis and indicate that influencers do play a major role in consumer purchasing habits. It was found that influencers will not influence everyone, rather they will only make an impact on those who share a common interest with them. This aligned with findings from previous research that stated the influence is dependent on the contextual conditions of the influencer and the brand they are working with (Shan et al., 2020). Someone who does not care about skin care may not be influenced to buy a skin care product, but someone who is interested in skin care will be. The study also showed that it is necessary to

have a niche and know your audience in order to influence their buying habits. This study also revealed that is necessary for influencers to be transparent about when they are being paid or doing a brand deal. This creates trust which keeps people coming back.

While the study supported the hypothesis, there were some things that could have been done different. The influencers selected were chosen based off of a survey, but there could have been many more influencers that could have been studied. The study used a combination of both micro and macro influencers but could been narrowed to one specific category or niche of influencers. It could also be focused on one specific niche instead of having a variety.

The most significant finding from this study was that influencers do impact the buying opinions and habits of individuals. It was also found that a specific niche is needed in order to maximize the impact the influencer has on their target audience. This allows for the influencer to have reviews that are authentic and relatable and thus making the follower want to buy the product (Yang et al., 2021). Having a general idea of how to market themselves is essential for the influencer to have, as well. Studies conducted prior to this one showed that authenticity and likeness were necessary to influence people and this study proved that to be true (Yang et al., 2021). An influencer must be genuine, likeable, and show they are trustworthy, or they will not effectively influence their following to change their habits.

Conclusion

Recent studies have indicated that there are expected to be close to four billion social media users worldwide in 2022 (Santora, 2021). With that growth, “influencers” have become a pivotal part of the everyday lives, the term influencer has become one known by many as someone who has been able to use a social media platform as a way of convincing others to buy products or services. Brands have caught on and started partnering or paying influencers to talk

about their product or service. However, it can be argued whether or not influencers are making as much of an impact on peoples spending habits as individuals believe.

In this study, an online survey was distributed through several social media channels for one week with 278 respondents indicating who they followed on Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube. Six influencers were selected based on the survey responses to have their comment sections monitored for one week to look for words that would indicate the individual was going to purchase the product or service simply because the influencer was using it. The results confirmed the thesis that influencers are able to use their authenticity and likeness to influence the spending habits of people.

The research found that it was vital for the influencer to use their knowledge, authenticity, truthfulness, etc. in order to persuade buyers that they need the product. As social media use continues to rise and influencers become more and more popular, brands are going to continue to partner with them. It is important for brands and marketers to know who to partner with and that they use influencers who are in their niche as well. Influencers are not leaving any time soon and it is time to thoroughly understand how they are able to make such a lasting impact on the general public.

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Appendix A

1. What is your gender?
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Prefer not to say
2. What is your age?
    a. 18-25
    b. 25-32
    c. 32-40
    d. Above 40
3. What platform do you follow the most influencers on?
    a. Instagram
    b. Tik Tok
    c. YouTube
    d. Other
4. Do you follow any of the following on Instagram? Select all that apply.
    a. Huda Kattan
    b. Jeffree Star
    c. Emma Chamberlin
    d. Carolyn Mirand
    e. Lele Pons
    f. Cookingwithmima
    g. Delaney Hogg

   h. None of the above

5. Do you follow any influencers on Instagram not mentioned?

6. Do you follow any of the following on Tik Tok? Select all that apply.

   a. Anna X Sitar

   b. Remi Bader

   c. Riley Hubatka

   d. Addison Rae

   e. None of the above

7. Do you follow any influencers on Instagram not mentioned?

8. Do you subscribe to any of the following on YouTube? Select all that apply.

   a. The LaBrant Fam

   b. Bianca Henderson

   c. Lily Singh

   d. Alisha Marie

   e. Mr. Beast

   f. None of the above

9. Do you follow any influencers on Instagram not mentioned?

10. Have you ever been influenced by a product because an influencer told you they used it?

    a. Yes

    b. No

11. If you answered yes to the last question, what category would that product fall under?

    a. Make-up

    b. Video games

c. Cleaning or other household items

d. Clothes, shoes, or jewelry

e. Other

12. Would you say you are more influenced to buy something if an influencer liked it?

a. Yes

b. No

c. Maybe

13. In the past year, how many times have you bought something that was recommended by an influencer?

a. 0 times

b. 1-5 times

c. 5-10 times

d. More than 10 times

14. Are you more likely to buy something if an influencer has partnered with that brand?

a. Yes

b. No

15. Have you ever used an influencers discount code or affiliate link?

a. Yes

b. No

c. Cannot remember

16. If you answered yes to the last question, how many times in the past year?

a. 1-5 times

b. 5-10 times

c. More than 10 times

17. Before buying a product, how often do you check to see if an influencer has reviewed it?

a. Scale of 1-10; 1 being never, 10 being always

18. On a scale of 1-10, do influencers affect your spending habits?

a. Scale of 1-10; 1 being no, 10 being yes

19. Any additional feedback on influencers is greatly appreciated!