Buying Happiness: How Influencer Marketing Affects the Identity and Purchasing Patterns of Teens

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ABSTRACT

For the first time in human history, children are growing up watching the lives of strangers as a form of entertainment. Parasocial relationships—one-sided relationships where the child views the influencer as a friend and role model while the influencer is not aware of their existence—have become an integral aspect of an individual's emotional development. While these relationships on their own are not necessarily exploitative, businesses often take the opportunity to capitalize on the trust and admiration fans have for influencers through deceptive advertisements. In just five years, influencer marketing has become a 10-billion-dollar industry. Sponsored posts are imbued into social media feeds, with a content analysis revealing 26.5% of Instagram posts and 11.4% of TikTok videos to be sponsored. When teenagers, the main demographic on social media, consume these advertisements, they associate the influencer and their success with the brand's products. Consequently, an identity is linked to a material good, which directly fuels materialistic and consumerist ideals among the youth. Furthermore, the integration of e-commerce and social media allows individuals to easily purchase goods without leaving the app, facilitating impulsive purchases and shopping addictions. Given the prevalence and effectiveness of influencer marketing, it is extremely crucial to investigate the effect of sponsorship posts on teenage identity and purchasing patterns.

Introduction

There is little doubt of the copious benefits of an increasingly accessible global web and booming social media platforms—the internet allows people to access a bottomless pool of knowledge, while social media enables them to make meaningful connections across different geographic locations and cultures. At the same time, many of us are also aware of the harms resulting from the digitalization of society, such as social media addictions and information overload. While these claims are all valid, most focus on social media as a communication platform existing in an isolated vacuum. In reality, however, the most important benefits and harms of media platforms are often interconnected with other aspects of society, such as politics and economics.

In economics specifically, the rise of social media has revolutionized marketing strategies and increased the effectiveness of e-commerce. Rather than competing for slots on the radio or creating commercials for television, marketers now offer influencers lucrative business deals in exchange for promoting their products. With this method, they are able to reach their targeted audience and, by connecting their web page directly with the sponsored post, make it more convenient for consumers to purchase their products.

Because social media is exceptionally powerful at swaying behavior and norms, it is important to assess the potential harms of influencer marketing to consumers. This research paper will examine the impact of influencer marketing on the identity of teenagers aged 14 to 18. Specifically, the social media platforms Instagram and TikTok will be analyzed and compared. For the purposes of this paper, influencer marketing is defined as businesses paying social media creators to promote products or represent the brand as a whole. Influencers are defined as any individual who has an active personal account on social media with more than a thousand followers. By this definition, corporate

social media accounts are not considered influencers and promotion posts on corporate accounts are not considered influencer marketing. Identity is defined as one's self-perception of their current and future selves (Hill, 2001).

This topic is sociologically significant because social media has the power to permanently affect our psychology, and adolescence is a crucial period of development. The power social media holds over our psychology and mindset is revealed in a report by the Pew Research Center, where they conclude that social platforms have led to a state of hyperconnectivity in our society. As these platforms offer easy access to instant gratification, people develop an expectation for quick and short-term satisfaction, which dramatically decreases their attention span and their capacity for critical thinking (Anderson & Rainie, 2019). It is therefore evident that social media is capable of shaping our fundamental psychology, which makes the issue of influencer marketing especially significant.

Additionally, teenagers are a special stakeholder in this issue because they are especially susceptible to the harms of social media and influencer marketing. As they experience new emotions, hormonal imbalances, and an increased sense of responsibility, teenagers become increasingly self-conscious about their actions and often feel as though everyone is watching them (Watson, 2019). Therefore, they are extremely sensitive to external pressure, such as social trends or expectations. Furthermore, the harms teenagers are exposed to often have long-lasting consequences because adolescence is a crucial period for identity development. During adolescence, many people explore different identities or roles in order to smoothly transition from childhood into adulthood. If an individual is unable to develop a strong sense of self during adolescence, they are prone to experience low self-esteem, a lack of sense of belonging and difficulty forming relationships throughout life. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, role confusion can also interfere with later stages of development ("Adolescence: Developing Independence and Identity," n.d.). By examining the impact of external factors on teenage identity development, a better understanding and prevention of identity crises, especially among teenagers, can be achieved.

Currently, research is limited to the prevalence of social media, the effectiveness of influencer marketing and the psychological harms of beauty standards. However, there is a gap surrounding the prevalence of influencer marketing on various social media platforms as well as the specific psychological impact of influencers on the identity formation of adolescence. In this research paper, those gaps will be addressed through a content analysis of Instagram and TikTok, a survey of Canadian teenagers, and a review of existing information. By combining primary and secondary sources, a comprehensive analysis of what influencer marketing currently looks like as well as how it impacts teenage identity will be presented.

Methodology

A content analysis and survey were conducted to collect quantitative data. The content analysis examines the pervasiveness of sponsorships on Instagram and TikTok by identifying the frequency of sponsored posts on certain accounts and hashtags. Instagram posts are sorted into three categories: sponsored, tagged and none. TikTok videos are sorted into two—sponsored and none—because the tagging feature does not exist on TikTok. Due to the diverse nature of influencer marketing and social media posts, it is often difficult to determine accurately whether a person is promoting a product due to a paid sponsorship or because they personally enjoyed it. For this content analysis, sponsored is defined as promoting the products of a certain company's products either in the post or in the description of the post, regardless of intent or reason. Examples range from offering discounts to simply complimenting and recommending a certain company. This metric was used because regardless of whether influencers received money for these posts, the impact of promotion posts on consumers are similar. The second category, tagged, includes posts that do not promote a product but tag a corporation's account. The majority of posts in this section are unlikely to be paid advertising but rather influencers tagging corporations due to personal choice. Tagged and sponsored are considered mutually exclusive categories to prevent double counting. For example, if a post is promoting a brand and tags the brand, that post would be only categorized as sponsored. The last category, none, is for posts who do not fall into either sponsored or tagged. This content analysis occurred during the period from January 2021 to April 2021.

Various accounts were sampled on both social media platforms, with their 25 most recent posts examined and categorized. These accounts include both the Instagram and TikTok accounts of the top 10 most famous Instagram influencers, the top 10 most famous TikTok influencers, the top 10 fastest rising Instagram influencers and the top 10 fastest rising TikTok influencers. As well, a random selection of 15 influencers with followers ranging from 1,000 to 50,000 was examined on each platform. The random selection was done through the influencer hashtag. The most recent 50 posts on the top five most popular hashtags were also examined. In total, the Instagram accounts of more than 40 influencers were examined. More than 1250 Instagram posts were categorized. Approximately 1000 TikTok posts were categorized. The percentage of the raw data was then calculated and averaged. Through the variety of accounts analyzed, both mega influencers (those with more than a million followers) and micro influences (those who have 1,000 to 10,000 followers) are represented.

The survey was sent out to a convenience sample of Canadian high school students who predominantly attended independent or private schools. It consisted of 11 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended short answers. The questions addressed people's usage and opinions of social media. To follow ethical guidelines, all participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was sent out in January 2021 and received 30 responses.

Results

Table 1. The Cumulative Percentage of Sponsored and Tagged Posts Across Different Accounts and Hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

	Average Percentage of Posts on Instagram Accounts (%)		Average Percentage of Posts on TikTok Accounts (%)
	Sponsored posts	Tagged posts	Sponsored posts
Mega Influencers	32.6	19.5	25.0
Micro Influencers	33.3	37.3	8.8
Popular Hashtags	13.6	27.2	0.4
Cumulative Average	26.5	28.0	11.4

Table 2. The Percentage of Sponsored and Tagged Posts of Instagram Mega Influencers on Instagram and TikTok.

	Average Percentage of Specific Posts on Instagram Accounts (%)		Average Percentage of Specific Posts on TikTok Accounts (%)
	Sponsored Posts	Tagged Posts	Sponsored Posts
Most Famous Instagram Influencers	42.8	14.8	33.1
Fastest Rising Instagram Influencers	48.4	18.0	28.2

Table 3. The Percentage of Sponsored and Tagged Posts of TikTok Mega Influencers on Instagram and TikTok.

	Average Percentage of Specific Posts on Instagram Accounts (%)		Average Percentage of Specific Posts on TikTok Accounts (%)
	Sponsored Posts	Tagged Posts	Sponsored Posts
Most Famous TikTok Influencers	21.2	26.8	15.6
Fastest Rising TikTok Influencers	18.0	18.4	23.2

**Table 4.** The Percentage of Sponsored and Tagged Posts of Micro Influencers on Instagram and TikTok.

	Average Percentage of Posts on Instagram Accounts (%)		Average Percentage of Posts on Tiktok Accounts (%)
Number of Followers	Sponsored posts	Tagged posts	Sponsored posts
1,000 - 10,000	24.0	48.8	6.1
10,000 - 25,000	36.0	30.4	6.4
25,000 - 50,000	40.0	32.8	14.0

**Table 5.** The Percentage of Sponsored and Tagged Posts of the Most Popular Hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

	Average Percentage of Posts on Instagram Accounts (%)		Average Percentage of Posts on TikTok Accounts (%)
	Sponsored posts	Tagged posts	Sponsored posts
Top 5 most popular hashtags	13.6	27.2	0.4

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Table 6. The Percentage of Sponsored and Tagged Posts of the Most Popular Hashtags on Instagram.

	Average Percentage of Posts on Instagram Accounts (%)	
Hashtags	**Sponsored posts**	**Tagged posts**
Love	12	12
Instagood	16	3
Fashion	32	48
Photooftheday	2	28
Beautiful	6	18
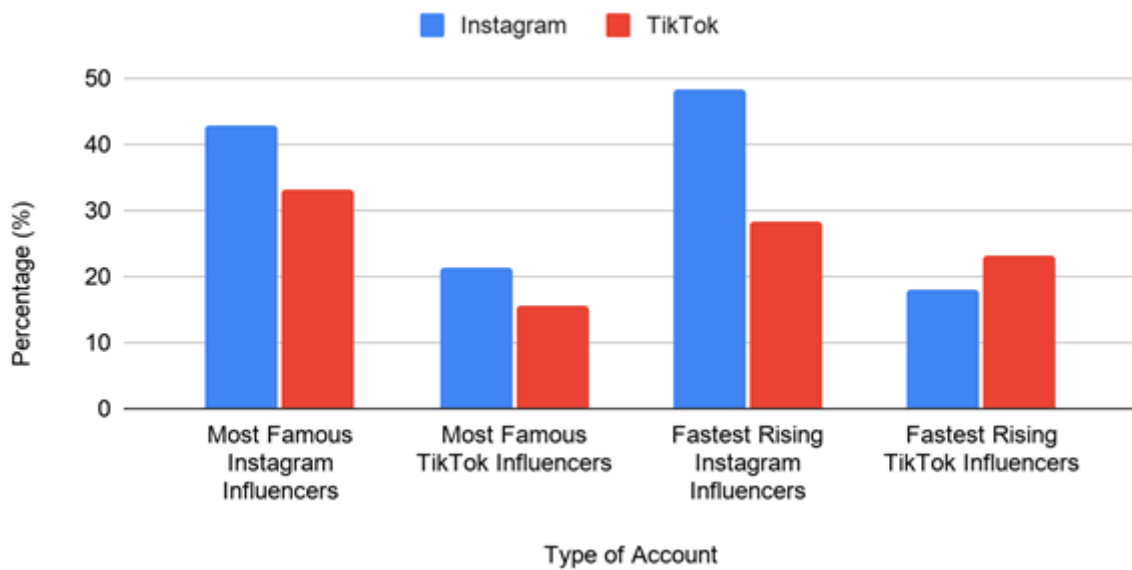
Figure 1. The Average Percentage of Sponsored Posts on Mega Influencer Accounts.

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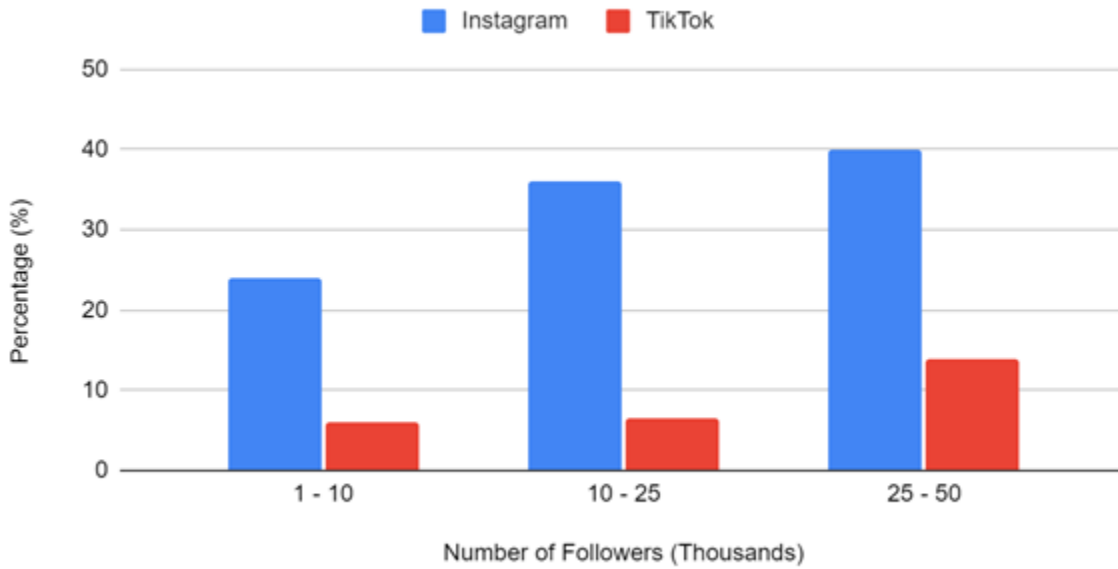
Figure 2. The Average Percentage of Sponsored posts on Nano-Influencer Accounts.
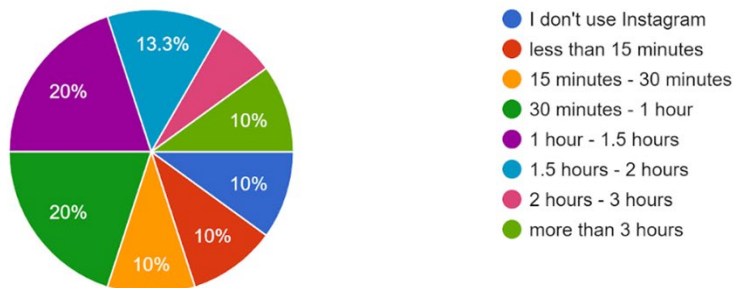
Figure 3. Survey Response to the Question: "Based on Instagram's activity tracker, how much time do you spend on Instagram per day?"
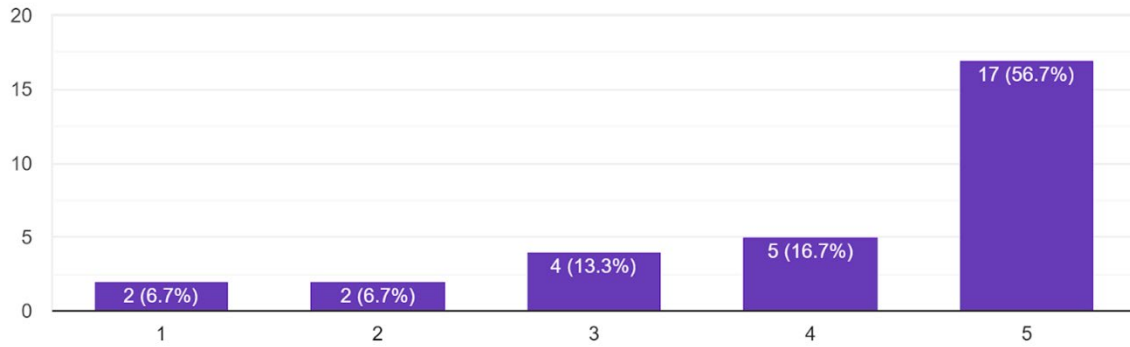
Figure 4. Survey Response to Level of Agreement to the Statement: "Earning more money will make me happier." A response of 1 means that the respondent completely disagrees with the statement. A response of 5 means that the respondent completely agrees with the statement. A response of 3 is neutral.
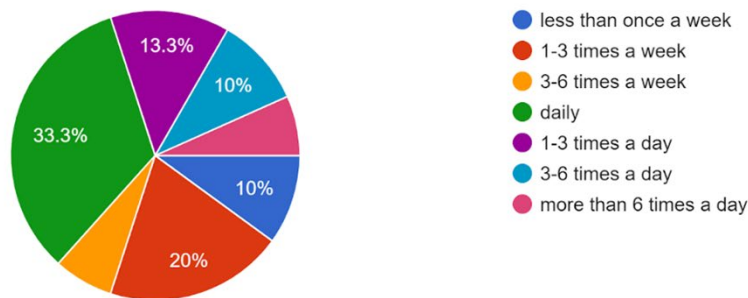
Figure 5: Survey Response to Question: "How often do you see sponsorships by people on social media?"

Discussion

Prevalence of Influencer Marketing

Before examining any psychological impacts, the prevalence of influencer marketing should be analyzed to provide a clear picture of the scope of this social phenomenon. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of sponsored posts across different accounts is approximately 26.5% on Instagram and 11.4% on TikTok. On Instagram, micro influencers, who have 1,000 to 50,000 followers, have the highest concentration of sponsored posts. On TikTok, mega influencers, who have more than a million followers, have the highest concentration. On both platforms, feeds from popular hashtags have the lowest concentration of sponsored posts.

The prevalence also differs across Instagram and TikTok, with the percentage of sponsored posts on Instagram being approximately double the percentage on TikTok. As shown in Figure 1, when analyzing the accounts of mega influencers, Instagram had a higher percentage of all the subcategories except for the fastest-rising TikTok influencer. This also difference is reflected in the combined average of all subcategories, shown in Tables 1 through 6, where Instagram has 15% more sponsored posts than TikTok. This statistic suggests that for celebrities who have

accounts on both Instagram and TikTok, Instagram is more commonly used for brand deals and sponsorships. The pattern continues with micro influencers as well. Shown in Figure 2, smaller accounts on Instagram are almost four times as likely to post sponsored content than small platforms on TikTok. In terms of the five most popular hashtags, Instagram is more than 50 times more likely to display sponsored posts than Tiktok.

While the statistics provide rough estimates of the real frequency, it is important to note the definition of sponsored posts used in this context is any posts that promote the services or products from a certain company. It is possible that many of the posts categorized as sponsored are simply influencers praising certain products out of personal desire rather than a paid contract with a business. Consequently, the percentage of paid sponsorships and brand deals on social media is likely to be lower than the data indicates.

Having established the frequency of sponsorships on social media, the average amount of time teens spend on social media can be examined next to properly estimate an individual's exposure to influencer marketing. As shown in Figure 3, the median self-reported time spent on Instagram was approximately an hour a day, with 11% of respondents reported using Instagram for more than 3 hours a day. Pre-existing research suggests that the average is slightly higher. According to Broadband Search, in 2019, users spent an average of 2.4 hours per day on social media globally. On TikTok alone, users spent an average of 52 minutes per day, with 90% of users opening the app multiple times a day. On Instagram, according to both Vox and Broadband Research, the average time users spent in 2018 was 53 minutes per day ("Average Time Spent Daily on Social Media," 2020). As the world becomes more digitized, the number of people and the amount of time spent on social media will only increase. From 2012 to 2019, the average time spent on social media per day went up by more than an hour, or 62.5% ("Average Time Spent Daily on Social Media," 2020). The daily usage of children from 4 to 14 increased by 116% from May 2019 to February 2020. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, 60% of Americans new adults aged 18 to 34 reported using social media more (Samet, 2020).

When the statistics from the content analysis are combined with information from secondary sources, it can be concluded that an Instagram user typically spends approximately 14 minutes per day willingly and sometimes unknowingly scrolling through sponsored posts. A TikTok user on average spends more than six minutes watching advertisements. Considering that individuals use multiple social media, the amount of time we spend consuming discreet advertisements as entertainment is concerning.

The prevalence of influencer marketing is only going to increase as social media becomes more popular. The industry for influencer marketing, which emerged approximately five years ago, has grown from a 5-billion-dollar industry to a 10 billion dollar industry. According to Kristen Baker, Google searches for influencer marketing increased by 1500% in the last three years alone (Baker, 2019). Currently, 18% spend between $100,000 and $500,000 per year, with 17% spending more than half their marketing budget on influencer marketing. In 2020, 65% of marketers plan to increase their influencer marketing budgets. Approximately 7% plan to spend over a million dollars. Ultimately, social media has exposed users to a massive amount of hidden sponsorship and advertising. Given the prevalence of influencer marketing, it is crucial to fully understand this societal phenomenon and examine its potential harms.

Identity Development

While influencer marketing is an effective tool for businesses, it is extremely detrimental to the identity development of fans and consumers. When influencers promote purchasing a certain good or service, fans are likely to associate, sometimes subconsciously, the act of purchasing with the positive traits of the influencer. They may believe that the product is responsible for the influencer's positive trait and therefore purchase it in an attempt to be more like the influencer. For example, if someone with a cool persona promotes a t-shirt, consumers may perceive that t-shirt as cool and purchase the t-shirt not because they want the actual t-shirt but because they want to be cool. Similarly, if an influencer who is a talented artist promotes a brand of paintbrushes, consumers are likely to associate being good at art with that brand. Consequently, they purchase the paintbrushes in an attempt to improve their art skills. In both situations, a material good is associated with an identity, which results in consumers making purchases because of the

associated identity rather than the material good itself. This effect is also corroborated by a focus group study of Swedish children done by Martinex and Olsson (2019) with 12 focus groups and 46 children. The children were shown a popular YouTube video and asked to discuss it. They talked about the makeup sponsored in the video along with the influencer's young age and YouTube celebrity status (De Veirman et al., 2019). The children's association between makeup and the influencer's success on YouTube reveals how sponsorships lead to an association between identity and material goods. This association directly results in the rise of materialistic beliefs, as people believe buying or owning goods will give them certain desirable traits.

Figure 4 shows the commonality of materialistic mindsets within Canadian teens. When the survey asked respondents whether earning more money would make them happier, 73.4% agreed with the statement and 13.3% answered the question neutrally. The belief that money can buy happiness is a core value of materialism and by equating money with happiness, 73.4% of respondents are engaging in materialistic culture. Though the survey cannot establish a causation between social media and materialism because there are many outside factors, such as parental expectation, it is evident that materialism is becoming more prevalent.

These materialistic beliefs result in individuals' establishing their identity based on the material goods they possess, which directly leads to excess consumption and consumerist culture. Referring back to the earlier example, if a consumer continuously purchases art brushes in hopes of becoming more artistic, their identity as an artist becomes rooted in the art supplies they have. As a result, they feel immense pressure to purchase new or trendy art products in an attempt to maintain their self-image. Whenever they feel doubt about their identity as an artist, they are also likely to resort to consumption as a means of re-affirmation. When a large portion of society subscribes to these views, it becomes an expectation to own certain goods in order to claim an identity. For instance, readers, especially booktubers who share the books they read with an online audience, are expected to have shelves packed with books, even though reading can be done with library books or e-books. Consequently, many readers resort to buying new books when they need to reaffirm their identity as a reader. Similarly, conspicuous consumption, which is consumption for the purpose of displaying social status, is on the rise (Kelly, 2020). Due to the association of wealth and luxury goods, people who view themselves as wealthy are pressured to own prestigious artworks or certain jewelry as a status symbol. While teenagers themselves do not have a lot of money, children from wealthy backgrounds internalize these values. Therefore, influencer marketing results in consumers establishing their identity based on material goods.

The Exclusive Power of Social Media and Influencers

Influencers are uniquely powerful at shaping identity and self-esteem because teens trust them. To begin, there is a deep emotional bond between influencers and their fans that allows influencer marketing to be extremely effective at shaping purchasing patterns and behavior. According to a report by *Frontiers in Psychology*, even children form parasocial interactions with influencers, which means there is a one-sided relationship where children view influencers as close friends while the influencer is not aware of their existence (De Veirman et al., 2019). In an exploratory survey study by Folkvord et al. (2019), tweens aged 10 to 13 were asked about the number of product endorsements in vlogs and their self-perceived susceptibility to those endorsements. The study ultimately reached the conclusion that there is a positive correlation between the time spent watching the vlogger and the child's emotional bond with them (De Veirman et al., 2019). While the study's demographic was slightly younger than the focus of this research paper, it is likely that the same general trends apply. Because many teenagers spend long periods of time on social media, they are likely to have deep emotional connections with certain influencers.

This bond increases the chance of listening to advice or opinions from influencers. According to Sam Selders, a Google Analytics certified internet marketing analyst, 81% of people agree that social media posts from friends influence their purchasing decisions (Selders, 2019). This statistic is also corroborated in the survey, where two thirds of respondents agreed that their peers' opinions affect how they feel about themselves. According to social learning theory, we learn by observing and imitating those around us. Because many of us perceive influencers as role models, we are likely to desire any product they promote.

Additionally, viewers often treat sponsored posts as regular posts, which means paid advertisement is perceived as the genuine opinions of a friend. This phenomenon is revealed by the primary research through a mismatch between the perceived frequency of sponsored posts and the results of the content analysis. As shown in Figure 5, teens self-reported seeing sponsorships only once a day on average in the survey. However, the content analysis suggested approximately 26.5% and 11.4% of posts are sponsored on Instagram and TikTok respectively. This discrepancy is extremely significant, as it portrays how the teenage mind perceives sponsored posts. Rather than seeing them as advertisements, individuals treat them like any other posts on social media. Therefore, when recalling how often they see sponsored posts, they report a significantly lower number. Ultimately, consumers not only face difficulty separating sponsorships from other posts, but they also perceive the advertisement as a friend's genuine opinion.

While the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires influencers to disclose sponsorships, the wording surrounding regulations is extremely vague, and the FTC has accepted a variety of disclosure methods, such as tags, pins and hashtags. For instance, an influencer can simply thank a company for providing them with a product ("Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers," 2019). These regulations simply do not match the versatility of advertisements found on social media. For instance, there have been very few rules regarding the challenges and trends on TikTok, though they are equally powerful at swaying consumer behavior. As a result, the majority of sponsored posts are deceptive by nature and treated like regular posts.

Once people form materialistic habits, social media uniquely encourages impulsive shopping and shopping addictions with their convenient design. Social media platforms, especially those that are well-established in the influencer marketing industry, often develop features that make it easier for consumers to access business websites and products. For instance, Instagram offers a feature that allows businesses to link their shop to their account. With this feature, users can click on a button in the account's bio and browse through the various products, similar to shopping through a catalogue. Businesses are also able to tag a specific product to a post, where users can then click on the tag to see where and how to purchase the items featured on a post. They receive more pictures and details of the product, as well as a price and link to the website. This function is extremely similar to how e-commerce websites such as Amazon and Etsy display items. From there, people are able to add products to their wish list and, due to the new Instagram Checkout feature, make purchases without even leaving the app. Additionally, Instagram's tagging feature allows independent accounts to tag accounts on their posts. When this feature is used, viewers or fans can click on the tag, and it will direct them to the tagged account's home page. This feature is wildly popular among influencers, as shown in the content analysis. In Tables 1 to 5, 19.5% of posts from mega influencers, 37.3% of posts from micro influencers and 27.2% of posts from hashtags have at least one business account tagged. Many influencers, especially those in fashion, tag the companies they got their clothing from as a way of helping fans to find the same products.

While these features may be beneficial to users, their convenience increases the effectiveness of influencer marketing and boosts consumerism. Instead of driving and walking around a shopping mall, people can lounge on their couch and fill their shopping cart without moving more than a finger. Impulsive shopping occurs more frequently, as the product desired can be purchased within seconds (Cole, 2019). Moreover, the act of handing over physical money is now reduced to filling out credit card information and seeing a number reduced in a bank account. It is much harder to understand the value of money when it is only a number rather than physical items. People, especially teens, who cannot fully comprehend the value of the numbers on the screen can be prone to over-shopping. Ultimately, influencer marketing is extremely effective as a marketing strategy because it can reach a targeted demographic, has tremendous reach and is capable of altering consumer behavior. It increases our spending on non-necessity goods by exploiting our trust of influencers and making shopping more convenient.

Consumerism

Material identity is especially damaging to teenagers, who are going through Stage 5 of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and establishing their identities. When they hinge their identities on purchasing goods, they cement materialism and consumption as a fundamental part of their self-image. They see their purchasing habits as a

necessary and integral aspect of their personality. Those suffering from shopping addiction normalize it as part of their lifestyle. As a result, it becomes impossible to change those bad habits without an identity crisis and drastic changes in self-perception. Such individuals inevitably grow up to be victims of consumerism culture, believing that material gain brings them happiness (Hill, 2011).

When enough people share these beliefs, consumerism becomes a culture that does serious harm to the economy, the environment and the psychology of individuals. When individuals consume to maintain their self-image, it is the act of buying that centers them, which means they are more likely to prioritize price and quantity above quality. Because companies shape their practices around societal beliefs, they are likely to engage in practices that mass produce low-quality goods cheaply, such as fast fashion. Economically, excess consumption often leads to high levels of personal debt, which contributes to financial crises. Environmentally, mass-producing cheap goods increases the number of factories and the amount of waste in landfills (Kelly, 2020). On an individual psychological level, conspicuous consumption increases stature stress, where people worry about keeping up with trends. Furthermore, numerous studies have proven that materialistic mindsets decrease emotional well-being by lowering self-esteem and damaging relationships. According to Ed Diener, a psychology professor at University of Illinois, materialism creates an endless desire for goods that can never be satisfied (Goldberg, 2006). Therefore, when influencer marketing associates an identity with a material good, it promotes materialistic beliefs and consumerist culture, which harms society in many ways.

Sexist Social Narratives

Additionally, influencer marketing disproportionately targets young girls by reinforcing sexist and detrimental social stereotypes or expectations. The most popular hashtags on Instagram are love, instagood, fashion, photo-of-the-day and beautiful. As shown in Table 6, of the five hashtags, fashion had the highest rate of sponsored posts of 32% and a frequency of tagged posts of 48% compared to the average of 13.6% and 27.2% respectively for the top five hashtags. This massive increase in percentage for fashion—a topic predominantly and stereotypically associated with females— reveals that the fashion industry as a whole is extremely prone to influencer marketing. As many of these sponsored posts involve skinny influencers who are considered beautiful by societal ideals, they not only reinforce beauty standards but also make young girls especially susceptible to materialistic beliefs and shopping addictions. Female teenagers, who already feel a lot of pressure to fit in and to be "beautiful," may purchase clothing in an attempt to gain self-worth and validation.

The Future of Influencer Marketing

Given the rapid growth of social media, influencer marketing is an ever-changing industry. To predict what future sponsorships will look like, past changes and evolutions in influencer marketing can be examined. Comparing sponsorships on Instagram and TikTok is a good metric at gauging the chances within influencer marketing because Instagram is an established platform for advertising and features more traditional methods while TikTok is newer and more innovative.

Before examining the differences of sponsorships specifically, the two social media platforms in general can be compared. People mainly visit Instagram to see snapshots of people's lives or to keep up with friends (Schiffer, 2019). Partly due to its established reputation as a legitimate platform for ecommerce, Instagram is used by many people to find desirable products. In fact, more than 80% of people use Instagram to research products and 90% of users on Instagram follow at least one business account (Sharma, n.d.). As a result, Instagram marketers can rely on sponsored posts that display influencers using their products because it fits into content viewers want to see when using Instagram. For example, Fossil, a smartwatch company, worked together with six well-known influencers in different niches and paid for a total of 16 posts. These posts reached 660,000 unique accounts and more than 109,000

reactions, resulting in 6,400 people visiting their page directly from influencers ("Instagram vs. TikTok: Choosing the Right Platform for Your Campaign," 2020).

Comparatively, TikTok is often treated solely as a source of entertainment. Users rarely go on TikTok to check up on friends, and their feed is likely to be composed of content from people they don't personally know. As a platform, TikTok is more similar in purpose to YouTube than Instagram. As a result, while influencers on Instagram can simply post about them using an item, TikTok advertisements must be entertaining. Therefore, marketers who work with TikTok are likely to rely on alternative advertising, such as brand contests and hashtag challenges, rather than traditional sponsorships. For instance, Zalando started a hashtag called "freetobe" on TikTok that encouraged users to share their definition of freedom. This hashtag quickly started a trend with users independently posting their own videos, collectively generating more than 15 million views ("Instagram vs. TikTok: Choosing the Right Platform for Your Campaign," 2020). While these videos do not actively promote the product and are therefore not counted as sponsored, they improve the brand image and awareness of companies. Furthermore, if users want to participate in these challenges themselves, they are forced to purchase the product.

The sponsorships on Instagram, often featuring a picture of an influencer using a certain product, are much closer to traditional advertisements. On the other hand, TikTok sponsorships are much more innovative and entertaining, featuring hashtag challenges and matching music soundtracks. These sponsorships are closer in appearance to regular posts than traditional advertisements. The harms of influencer marketing on identity are likely to be greater on TikTok than on Instagram as it is much more difficult for users to differentiate between advertisement and entertainment on TikTok. Additionally, it is possible that the difference in frequency of advertisement between the two platforms is not as drastic as the content analysis implies. Rather, Instagram simply has more traditional sponsorships while TikTok relies more heavily on trends and challenges that are not classified under sponsored posts.

The future of influencer marketing is likely to mirror the advertisements found on TikTok. Many social media platforms have already begun copying features from TikTok in an attempt to attract users. Instagram added Reels, which allows users to share short videos, and remixes, which allows users to post themselves reacting to someone else's videos. The head of Instagram went as far as to make an official statement saying Instagram is no longer a photo-sharing app (Rodriguez, 2021). Similarly, YouTube has also added a "shorts" feature to their platform, allowing individuals to share second-long videos. As more social media platforms offer similar services to TikTok, marketers will have to adjust their strategies accordingly. Furthermore, as noted above, TikTok hashtag challenges have been tremendously successful at increasing brand awareness and bringing in new customers. Therefore, future sponsorships are likely to mimic the styles and appearances of TikTok sponsorships. Due to these factors, the future influencer marketing is likely to be similar to current TikTok advertisement: entertaining and discrete, merging the lines between entertaining content and advertisement. As it becomes harder and harder to differentiate sponsorships, influencer marketing will only increase in effectiveness. Advertisements will be treated as suggestions from a friend and consumerist culture will skyrocket. Gathering data and spreading awareness about the frequency of advertisement will also be increasingly challenging, as the real percentage is likely to be under-reported. Unless governments enact harsher policies regarding influencer sponsorships, the future for consumers is grim.

Limitations

Although the findings of this study are largely corroborated by other research, there are limitations inherent in the data. One limitation of the content analysis is the small sample size. Though approximately 1250 Instagram posts and 1000 TikTok videos were examined and categorized, there are billions of posts on both social media platforms. As a result, the sample is a very small percentage of the population and therefore unlikely to be representative. Furthermore, the random selection process for micro influencers relied on using the influencer hashtag, which means any influencer who does not use this hashtag is excluded. Since the placement of posts on a hashtag feed is determined by an algorithm, the random nature of the selection decreases significantly. These factors can result in a lurking variable and add bias to the data collected. Due to the definition of "sponsored posts," the data collected is unlikely to be reflective of

the prevalence of paid sponsorships specifically. Rather, it portrays the frequency of posts that promote purchasing goods in general. While this definition serves the purpose of the paper, which is to examine the harms of influencers promoting products, the data collected should not be used to estimate the number of paid sponsorships on social media platforms, as it would result in an overestimation.

Some limitations of the survey are the sample population and the sample size. Due to a limited amount of resources and time, a convenience sample of 30 high school teenagers was taken. Due to the nature of convenience samples, there were disproportionately more females than males. Furthermore, the sample largely consisted of teenagers attending private schools, which means the majority of them are from an extremely well-off socioeconomic background. Wealth is a significant lurking variable because individuals who have more disposable income are able to participate in consumerism more freely without suffering any major changes to quality of life. Therefore, they are likely to carry a more light-hearted attitude towards shopping addictions and consumerism. Even within the population of wealthy teenagers, a larger sample would be needed to gain a more representative statistic of the population. Given the survey's voluntary nature, it would be extremely difficult to collect data that properly reflects the population.

Implementation and Future Research

Despite the significant impacts of influencer marketing, many teenagers are unaware of the prevalence and dangers of social media advertisements. Our current health education curriculum is extremely ineffective at covering media literacy, as the teaching material has not caught up to rapid social and technological change, and there is not enough political will to reform and update the course. Without the proper awareness, teenagers fall prey to sneaky advertisements and can develop negative shopping habits before they realize the problem. Dealing with any addiction is difficult regardless of age, but when topics surrounding consumerism are not even covered in class, this experience can be extremely isolating and confusing for teenagers. Therefore, it is critical for this data and analysis to be used to spread awareness of influencer marketing and its effect on identity. Improving awareness is an extremely effective way to mitigate certain harms because it better prepares teenagers when they inevitably come across sponsored posts. This research can be integrated into the public education system and used by media literacy organizations to reach as many individuals as possible. It can also be used as evidence in support of more advertisement laws that apply to digital advertising targeting children. Many of the harms mentioned above could be prevented if there were a standard and obvious method influencers were required to use when flagging sponsorships.

Given that influencer marketing is a relatively new phenomenon, there is much more research to be done. Further content analysis can be performed on a larger scope of influencers for a more representative statistic. Instead of dividing the types of accounts by popularity, other factors, such as gender, age and race, can also be compared. In fact, an interesting disparity between gender was noted during the content analysis, with a disproportionate number of micro influencers being female. Approximately 73% were female on Instagram while 87% were female on TikTok.

Various niches, such as food, fashion, photography, sports, and video games can be individually explored to gain a better understanding of how influencer marketing affects different demographics of the population. This research could not only identify the stakeholders most targeted by influencer marketing, but also provide possible reasons behind the strength of current societal pressures and narratives. On TikTok, the alternative advertisements of hashtag challenges can also be thoroughly investigated. To gain a better grasp of the psychological harms, an introspective method can be applied by conducting in-depth interviews with teenagers.

Conclusion

The goal of this research paper is to examine the impact of influencer marketing on teenage identity development. Both primary and secondary sources confirmed that influencer marketing is extremely prevalent on social media platforms, with sponsored posts making up 26.5% of posts on Instagram and 11.4% on TikTok. This number is

significantly higher than the self-reported sightings of sponsorships, which reveals the lack of differentiation between regular posts and sponsorships. Instagram has a higher concentration of sponsorship compared to TikTok, though TikTok contains many more hashtag challenges, which also serve as advertisement. Influencer marketing promotes materialistic culture by closely associating an identity with a material good, which exacerbates consumerism and pre-existing social norms. Teenage girls are disproportionately impacted by these harms.

As society becomes more digitized and social media grows in popularity, advertisements will only become harder to spot and better at tricking consumers. Furthermore, thanks to the convenience of e-commerce and online shopping, people can now purchase massive quantities of goods from the comfort of their homes, which worsens impulsive shopping. E-commerce and social media represent the future of business, and both are evolving rapidly. The only way to mitigate current harms and prevent future harms is to spread awareness about influencer marketing and implement strict policies on social media sponsorships. While technology can certainly be beneficial in many aspects, society needs to be reactive and flexible when adapting to it.

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