

Influencer Marketing: College Students' Attitudes on Social Media

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is a type of marketing in which respected experts are paid to advertise a product to influence follower attitudes. With the rise of social media use among college students, this study examines the effectiveness of influencer marketing in this market segment. Using data from 150 college students this study empirically examines the use of influencer marketing and the effect on college students' consumer attitudes on social media. The results indicate that college students' use of social media is positively associated with elevated consumer attitudes towards brands through influencer marketing. Discussion of these findings, their implications, and limitations are provided in the research.

Key words: College Students, Influencer Marketing, Social Media, Attitude

I. Introduction

Social media use among college students has exploded over the past decade. Students looking for recommendations from friends and experts who they know and trust to create relevant content that could lead them to make purchasing decisions. In some cases, their friends on social media could also be influencers who are receiving compensation from marketers looking to cash in on this lucrative market segment. For the purpose of this study, influencer marketing is referred to as a type of marketing where marketers focus their

efforts on influential people to reach their target markets instead of trying to reach them directly. For years, marketers have been trying to inch their way closer to this segment, the Millennials. After college, these students will look to purchase items they wanted in adolescence but could be ready to make more frequent purchases if marketed to. The phenomenon has intrigued market researchers because success in this market will yield great results for businesses catering to this group.

The segment of college students between the ages of 18 to 29 are using social media more than ever in 2017, so it seems natural that researchers would aim

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논문접수일: 2019. 11. 11., 심사완료일: 2019. 12. 10., 게재확정일: 2019. 12. 17.

to study the applications developed to allow users to create and share content for the purpose of networking. Seventy-four percent of consumers rely on social media to influence their purchasing decisions (Bennett, 2014). The increase in social media usage among college students could potentially lead marketers to believe that they can reach students better through targeted influencer marketing on social media.

As Baby Boomers age, and Millennials, the generation with the most purchasing power, born between 1980 and 2000 become the segment with the highest consumption patterns, marketers are becoming obsessed with acquiring the loyalty of Millennials from a young age. If marketers can convert student consumers as they mature, college students' lifetime value will be exponentially greater and more attractive to companies over extended periods of time.

Marketing researchers have also studied the celebrity or influencer marketer. This type of influencer creates unique brand images that could not be successful without their celebrity influencer status. This important phenomenon is proof that the social influence theory exists, and if properly applied, could yield great returns. Many college students buy a specific brand because they are influenced to purchase these brands by someone they trust. They may already be aware of the brand or familiar with it, but these types of influencers could give key recommendations to customers looking to make a purchase. One of the most important questions asked by marketers looking for marketing opportunities among college students is, "How can we reach these students?"

Marketers are looking for the right expert influencers to recommend their brands on social media more than ever. An article in Forbes magazine recently explored the marketing budgets of companies in 2017 and unsurprisingly, over 73% of marketing professionals are allocating resources towards influencer marketing (Ward, 2017). Because of this trend, marketers

are looking to market researchers to deliver qualitative data on how they can reach college students more readily through influencer marketing. By partnering with influencers, and using relevant data, marketers can reach their target audiences better than ever.

This research study adds a contribution to marketing research by showing the relationship between college students and social media usage and the impact of influencer marketing on their consumption behaviors. The study identifies the effects of brands using influencers to indirectly nudge college students to make purchases. It also adds the relation of the rise of social media usage and the rise in influencer marketing. While most of the research has been focused on social media usage among college students, this study takes it a step further and examines what that increase in social media usage does to consumption behaviors when exposed to influencer marketing. The habit of college students to use social media more than ever coupled with the increased exposure to influencer marketing shows that these students could be influenced to change their consumption behaviors.

The way our study was conducted was influenced by the fact that college students' decisions can be heavily influenced, especially from the age of 18 to 29, and backed up by research on social influence theory. This prior research has also told the story that even though college students are using more social media than ever, they are still being socially active in face-to-face. This study attempts to comprehensively look deeper into the phenomenon of influencer marketing and the implications of its use on Millennials particularly college students. The implications of this study for marketers could be remarkable, allowing them to capture the interest and brand awareness of the fastest growing segment today.

This research aims to study how active college students are on social media and to evaluate how much time they spend on social media. The study

also examined social media use among college students and influencer marketing effects on consumption. Do influencers make the difference between college student's consumption rates rising at all? Additionally, examined the research problem between influencer marketing and social media, and how they relate to one another. Do they combine to play a role together, or are these two-phenomena unrelated to each other?

II. Literature Review

Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). The impact social media has in our everyday lives and communication had gradually increased over decades. Social media is powerful and in order to engage with customers, businesses use this platform to communicate and market themselves.

With 88% of 18 to 29-year-olds using social media in 2018, it is no wonder this segment of the population is key to modern marketer's strategies (Pew Research, 2019). Marketers can reach students through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Applications such as these operate in real time and most college students carry smartphones everywhere. This behavior allows marketers to access college students easily and convert them into customers more quickly than ever before.

The Internet and social media are a wonderful way to stay connected to people around the world, and to find out what is new on the market; "These social media networks are also very popular among the generation with the most purchasing power, millennials, with 90% of U.S. 18- to 29- year olds being active on social media..." (Woods 2016). Woods states, "92% of consumers believe recommendations from friends

and family over all forms of advertising..." (Woods 2016). What better way is there to reach consumers than by putting faces of people they trust and admire these social media influencers, on their brands?

Which brings us to the "Impressions/Engagement" section of this article that affirms this by this statement that "The real power of working with influencers in advertising is to get the followers of the influencers to share and amplify the post about a brand..." (Woods 2016). According to Woods' findings within his interviews, he learned that to find a good influencer they must have "built up the trust with their audience to where a paid product placement in a post seems authentic, even though they are receiving compensation." (Woods 2016) this is why consumers turn to reviews and recommendations from these influencers, such as beauty guru Jaclyn Hill or fitness guru Kayla Itsines, and others like them.

Most critics would lead people to believe that the more college students use social media, the less they interact socially. This could be deceiving since some college students actually increase social behavior at the same time as increases in social media use can be found. In a study done by Kim et al. (2016), the researchers found that social media use was positively correlated with respondents' need to belong. The study also showed that respondents' social media use and smartphone use were significant predictors of their social engagement, and that the relationship between the need to belong and social engagement was mediated by smartphone use. These results are particularly interesting because they are not intuitive, but do show that just because college students are using social media more than ever does not mean that these college students are not engaging in social behaviors. In actuality, this points to the underlying fact that some college students do increase social behavior at the same time as they spend more time than ever on social media.

How do marketers decide which influencers to use for the brand when there is not much information on return on investment ROI percentages? Studies have found that influencer marketing can trigger 11 times more ROI than other traditional forms of advertising (Woods 2016). This information is incredibly important, because marketers need to know this data to make decisions about budgeting and contract fees. Since social media users can buy followers and programmed bots do exist, is follower count really as important as it once was? Researchers have found a correlation between a larger number of followers eliciting a greater brand effect. Therefore, the number of influencers with larger follower counts are seen as more popular and worth more to marketers (De Verirman, Cauberghe & Hudders 2016). Besides the follower count, marketers should pay close attention to the values of both the company and the influencer, so that they can make sure that they are aligned.

Consumers rely on social media to get information about purchases more than ever. When consumers need to research a product, it can be as easy as visiting the company's page or seeing recommendations for products from friends on their feeds. Studies show that consumers are looking to social media to dictate purchasing decisions, since 74% of consumers rely on social media to influence their purchasing decisions (Bennett 2014). Marketers are interested in this finding because involvement in social media could lead to higher revenues. Because posts from influencers are the closest thing to word-of-mouth recommendations, the importance of creating brand loyalty through influencer marketing is the key to reaching college students.

Finally, the relationship between the number of companies liked and how often sales and promotions are received through this channel was analyzed. It was found that individuals who like more companies on Facebook are more likely to take advantage of the

sales and promotions being offered through this medium. Correlations with shopping frequency at stores liked on Facebook was analyzed and the relationship between shopping frequency at stores liked on Facebook and the amount of information received from companies about sales was analyzed. Then it was found that individuals increase their shopping at stores liked on Facebook, they are more likely to take advantage of promotional offers received on this site.

III. Methodology

This research focuses on social media usage among college students and influencer marketing effects on consumption. The purpose of the data is to find out if college students are making purchasing decisions based on what they see on social media, to evaluate how much time they spend on social media, and to determine the relationship between influencer marketing and college students. The research was also used to assess if influencers have an effect on college students spending habits and if so how much of an effect. For example, do they go by the influencers recommendation alone or do the students make purchases based on other measurements.

Exploratory research was done to examine and validate the rationale behind influencer marketing on college students' consumption behavior. The participants in this study—150 college students from Texas Wesleyan University, most between the ages of 18 to 29. Participants were randomly contacted via e-mail and asked to complete a five-minute survey. The literature review and evidence found has led to the following hypotheses:

- H1.** "Amount of time spent on social media" is related to "Purchase Intention"
- H2.** "Amount of time spent on social media" is related to "Customer Loyalty"

H3. “Customer Loyalty” is related to “Purchase Intention”

The research was designed to use the survey method. Interviews and questionnaires were used to develop our findings and to find insights on the impact of social media influencers on college students purchasing decisions. The participants in this study—150 people—consist of college students from Southwestern University in the U.S., between 18 to 29 years of age. Built for the purpose of this study, the survey method was selected to gather data.

The criteria and questions for evaluating such constructs were designed to find insights on the impact of social media influencers on college students’ purchasing decisions. After determining the relevant information, a fifty-seven-item questionnaire related to social media and influencers’ impact on college students’ consumption behavior was created through the use of Qualtrics. Specifically, 27 of those items for “Purchase Intention” were adopted from the study by Thoene (2012), 11 items for “Social Media Usage” were adopted from the study by Khamis, Ang & Welling (2016); and 19 items for “Customer loyalty” were adopted from the study by Tang (2010) as well as the qualitative research stated in the previous sections. The questionnaire was recorded and organized using a nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio scale of measurement.

The survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed via email, online, to be more convenient for the participants. Our survey used convenient sampling to regulate participants. Convenient sampling was utilized in this research based on college students. The reasons being that the survey would be quick, economical, and practical to obtain the information we require for our research. In addition to convenient sampling, judgmental sampling was used as well, since we were using our own judgment to administer the

survey to only college students between the ages of 18 to 29, which also saved us time and money.

IV. Data Analysis

The topic evolved from the increasing demand in e-commerce, specifically the use of influencer marketing by businesses to market their product or service and popularity of social media among college students.

The final data, a sample size of 156, underwent a series of analysis through SPSS specifically an analysis of difference: independent sample t-test, frequency and two analysis of association: bivariate correlation and cross-tabulation. When looking at the independent sample t-test, the p-value is .323, larger than 0.05, meaning the difference between the means of the two groups is not significant, which in turn, suggesting we accept the null hypothesis stating that there is no difference on how much college students spend on purchases through influencers suggestions regardless if they are on social media for just thirty minutes or more than two hours. Not the response expected, we would think the more time spent using social media and seeing influencers post college students’ thoughts on certain products would be influenced, especially if the ad is seen multiple times. But it leads us to magnify our scope for college student’s frequency of consumption behavior through influencer products and on a general one-week basis.

When looking at the result of frequency test conducted on whether college students spend a lot through influencer suggestions only 11.3% of students can agree to being influenced where as 65.2% of the respondents disagree (Table 1).

Also, this study showed that 77.4 % of college students spend less than \$50 per week on average, since 92% of the pool of students that participated were classified as full-time students. Leading us to

〈Table 1〉 The result of frequency test on the perceived influence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	40	25.6	34.8	34.8
	Disagree	35	22.4	30.4	65.2
	Neutral	27	17.3	23.5	88.7
	Agree	11	7.1	9.6	98.3
	Strongly Agree	2	1.3	1.7	100.0
	Total	115	73.7	100.0	
Missing	System	41	26.3		
Total		156	100.0		

〈Table 2〉 The result of correlation analysis

		Purchase Intention	Amount of time	Loyalty
Purchase Intention	Pearson Correlation	1	.543**	.727**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	115	115	115
Amount of Time	Pearson Correlation	.543**	1	.495**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.001
	N	115	115	115
Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.727**	.495**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	
	N	115	115	115

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

further analyze the financial situation through cross-tabulation, this study found a large portion of our sampling pool specifically 77% whether the student made \$10,000 or over \$100,000 year-round, spend on average \$50 or less per week on e-commerce, which 40% percent of the 77% made less than \$30,000.

This study used Bivariate Correlation Analysis to research to find the correlation strengths between out independent variables and dependent variables. The findings of this study show the correlation between amount of time spent on social media and purchase intention(Table 2). It is found that the p-value is

significant (.000) indicating the presence of the relationship. Thus, H1 is supported. This study also shows the correlations between amount of time spent on social media and customer loyalty. The p-value (.000) is smaller than .05 indicating the presence of the relationship. This result supports H2. In addition, the data shows that there is positive relationship between customer loyalty and purchase intention. The p-value is .000 which is smaller than .05 and the strength of relationship is very strong among the relationships empirically tested and supported. Thus, H3 is supported.

From the another correlation test, we see the sentiments college students have towards influencers on social media. In reviewing correlation statistics for how strongly college students agree or disagree with the statements capturing their reasons for purchases made using social media, there are significant relationships that stand out in particular: when looking at “products purchased offered on sale by influencers” and the “attention paid to influencer stories” you notice a p-value of .000 and when looking at There is also a significant p-value of .000 when looking at “products purchased offered on sale by influencers” and their trust for influencers. Both indicating strong relationships show that as college students pay more attention to the influencer stories when they trust the influencers and an even stronger relationship when the product being advertised by influencers is on sale.

V. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of influencer marketing on college students based on the existing literature on college students’ use of social media and the effects on social behaviors (Kim et al., 2016). In this particular study, college students’ increased social media usage was cross-examined with the effects of influencer marketing on their consumption behaviors. The research found that influencers were enough to modify spending habits among college students. Using the data collected from students, this effected influencers on two variables – increased positive brand recognition and increased consumer behaviors among college students tested in this research. The results of this research showed that influencers do positively increase brand recognition among college students when they are actively following them. Also, these positive associations can lead to purchasing decisions if products are on sale. Furthermore, the

more time students spend on social media, the more susceptible these students are to purchasing products influencers were advertising in the first place. However, large follower counts, likes, and comments are associated with how these influencers perform for marketing purposes. They also shed light on the reasons these college students are so willing to purchase products reviewed by these influencers.

This study takes the rising use of social media among college students and tests if this phenomenon has led students to change their purchasing behaviors based on influencer suggestions. Another way to look at this phenomenon is to study the additional research on social media usage among college students, which has led researchers to believe that the more college students use social media, the more they may interact socially in real life (Kim et al., 2016). The results of this study could be interpreted to suggest that increased social media use among college students could lead to increased consumption habits if influencers are followed closely. Students may not realize that their consumer behaviors are being influenced by their increased use of social media. In addition, these paid advertisers both influence college students brand awareness and their consumer behaviors through their blogs. Finally, the study failed to show empirically the role of influencers and the increased use of social media among college students on other buying habits.

The research sheds some insight for marketers looking to cash in on the college student segment as a whole. The results of the study could help develop effective strategies for social media and influencer marketing strategies when targeting college students. The study by Kim et al. (2016) took a look at social media use among college students and their social activity and points out that most of this evidence is qualitative and does not empirically show that these two variables are linked. This study differentiates itself from the rest by offering a 150 sample empirical data

on college students' social media use and consumption behavior.

The results of this research could affect marketing and buying trends. Also, the results of this research can be beneficial to marketers looking to create a strategy to acquire the most lucrative segment, Millennials. Marketers and the business community, in general, should try to formulate strategies that play to a college students' regular habit of using social media. By using social media to reach college students, marketers can employ expert influencers that already have the desired trust in their niche markets and could potentially influence consumption patterns. The interesting part could be the fact that college students need to be actively watching influencers, and more data needs to be added to the equation when developing social media marketing strategies for college students.

Since most college students who participated in this study admitted that they use social media more than four hours per day, our questionnaire should reflect an answer choice of greater than four hours. One of the answers this study admittedly indirectly answers is that the social media use of college students is actually much higher than thought in prior research. The findings show that college students could be using social media for about half of their waking hours. This finding is crucial and can be utilized in further research with regards to college students' behaviors. The research findings in this study also have consequences for college students' wallets. The survey indicated that college students who follow influencers closely and use social media often are highly susceptible to be influenced to make a purchase when the item is on sale. This relationship is the most important finding because it has incredible implications for marketing and advertising researchers. Marketing managers should be aware of the findings and tailor their marketing strategies with regard to influencer budgets that could affect college student's consumption.

With our target market narrowed down to only college students, we could have missed the opportunity to gather better data in this research by expanding our target audience to older generations of college students. By expanding our target audience, the broader expansion of age range could have given a better perspective on college students' consumption habits amongst different generations.

Results could have been different if the study had not only targeted Millennials and Generation Z, but also to an older group of people (such as Generation X). Since most advertisements are geared towards Generation Z and especially towards Millennials, it would have been enlightening to see how the Generation X responds to social media influencers. If the results of the study had our data for Generation X, it would have been drastically different compared to the age group the study focused on (which was 18 to 29 years of age).

Furthermore, social media influencers are a fairly new concept for businesses who advertise their products. Since there has been a rapid emergence of social media influencers today, there is limited relevant research to shed light on their impact in marketing. These significant factors limited our research. The thought of also expanding outside of college students to people in general and how it affects them crossed our minds. However, we wanted to focus on a certain classification of college students. For that reason, it was necessary to be more organized and feasible to have a specific target range.

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