

Association for Information Systems

AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

ECIS 2023 Research-in-Progress Papers

ECIS 2023 Proceedings

4-24-2023

EDUCATING, EVALUATING, ADVISING, AND ENTERTAINING - DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND THEIR NARRATIVES

Shahper Richter

Victoria University of Wellington, shahper.richter@wgtn.ac.nz

Alexander Richter

Victoria University of Wellington, alex.richter@vuw.ac.nz

Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2023_rip

Recommended Citation

Richter, Shahper and Richter, Alexander, "EDUCATING, EVALUATING, ADVISING, AND ENTERTAINING - DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND THEIR NARRATIVES" (2023). *ECIS 2023 Research-in-Progress Papers*. 20. https://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2023_rip/20

This material is brought to you by the ECIS 2023 Proceedings at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in ECIS 2023 Research-in-Progress Papers by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.

EDUCATING, EVALUATING, ADVISING, AND ENTERTAINING - DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND THEIR NARRATIVES

Research in Progress

Shahper Richter, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand,
shahper.richter@wgt.ac.nz

Alexander Richter, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand,
alex.richter@wgt.ac.nz

Abstract

Organizations have been increasingly exploring storytelling as a valuable strategy to engage customers to increase their attention and retention. Social media platforms like Instagram have become essential tools for many brands to use storytelling through influencers. In this study, we explore the narratives constructed by digital influencers, as they play a crucial role in shaping their brand image and engagement with their audience. By analysing the narrative strategies used by digital influencers, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the role and impact of digital storytelling. We identify, illustrate, and discuss four narrative strategies: educating, evaluating, advising, and entertaining. Our study motivates further research to develop a detailed conceptual understanding of digital influencers and digital storytelling.

Keywords: Digital influencers, digital narratives, storytelling

1 Introduction

In a world of (digital) distractions, many organizations have been exploring digital storytelling as a powerful tool to get stakeholders to engage emotionally with content and better remember brand messages (Damodaran, 2017). Stories have proven to be a staple of branding, advertising, and public relations, as organizations compete for brand loyalty and customer identification (Woodside, 2010). Social networks like Instagram have become essential tools for many brands to tell their stories or to let influencers do it for them (Lambert, 2012). In addition, today's consumers tend to place more trust in the opinions of influencers, who appear to be more 'real' (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Stories can be inspirational and have the power to encourage and stimulate changes in behavior (Gill, 2015). Increased digitalization and social media use has meant that storytelling has become more and more relevant within information systems research (Weissenfeld, Abramova, & Krasnova, 2017). The motivation for using storytelling is to persuade the audience of a product or story by influencing the audience. In this context, one of the main advantages of storytelling is that it can help to improve the cognitive processing of complex information (Lugmayr et al., 2017). Social media platforms like Instagram help convey the high level of emotional content that influencers often share (Weissenfeld et al., 2017).

The ability of digital influencers to convert their followers into loyal customers relies heavily on the followers' stickiness. Stickiness refers to being unique, making people come back or following your page, and is a big part of what platforms like Instagram are all about (Hu, Min, Han, & Liu, 2020). From an influencer's point of view, storytelling can be seen as a popular tactic to increase their followers' stickiness (Hu et al., 2020). Whereas the extant literature on stickiness mainly has focused on users' stickiness to websites, such as retail websites, group-buying websites, and media websites (Abidin,

2016) our study explores how digital influencers use narratives to engage with and influence the stickiness of their followers.

Social media influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, using their content to encourage interaction and a sense of community among their followers (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020; Rosenthal and Brito, 2017). To better understand how influencers build relationships with their followers, we examine their unique interaction strategies, including interactivity and self-disclosure. These features distinguish influencers from traditional celebrities and are worth exploring further in the context of influencer-fan relationships (Feng et al., 2020; Jun and Yi, 2020; Lou, 2021). With this exploratory study, we want to extend these studies and further understand influencer narratives. Therefore, we ask: RQ1: What narrative strategies do digital influencers utilize?

Our study contributes to a detailed conceptual understanding of influencers' use of digital storytelling. We examine the narratives created by influencers by extending the application of two established theories, the two-step flow of communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and social penetration theory (Taylor & Altman, 1987). This also allows us to understand the role of social media platforms better and can inform their further design. Our study also provides insights into why and what influencers share and the impact of their stories on their audience. Understanding influencer behavior can also help us understand how individuals organize and communicate via social media (Stieglitz, Meske, Ross, & Mirbabaie, 2020) and establish online opinion-based groups (Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, & Potthoff, 2018).

In the next section, we review the literature that combines the importance of narratives and storytelling with the realm of digital influencers on Instagram. The subsequent section then outlines the relevant theories we used to understand this research area. Finally, we present our methodology, how we intend to analyze the data collected, and some preliminary results.

2 Digital influencers and their narratives

2.1 Digital Influencers

When it comes to digital influencers, companies typically look into two dimensions, follower base and engagement numbers, before considering partnering with them (Alassani & Göretz, 2019).

Macro-influencers often have hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers, making engaging and conversing with followers difficult and superficial. In contrast, micro-influencers are generally considered topic experts or fans with follower numbers in the four- or five-digit range (Jin & Phua, 2014).

Micro-influencers are generally topic experts or topic fans with follower numbers in the four- or five-digit range. This includes influencers who are invested in a particular niche, have credibility and authority (relevance), and have a reasonable level of commitment from their followers (Alassani & Göretz, 2019). The power of these influencers to directly influence their connected network, which could result in the purchase of products, is now well-recognized by brands (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). As brands become aware of appropriate influencers, they are often paid (in the form of products or money or both) to mention and present products and brands (Nirschl & Steinberg, 2018). For the remainder of the paper, where we say "digital influencers," we refer to micro-influencers.

2.2 Digital Storytelling

Humans have developed social and neurophysiological capacities to process and disseminate information to communicate with each other using stories (Mirkovski, Gaskin, Hull, & Lowry, 2019). Storytelling has been used as a powerful strategic tool to tap into the hidden potential of human nature and make sense of the world through narratives (Boldsova, 2019). Stories, more than any other communication format, can connect people, persuade, and inform them (Damodaran, 2017; Kent, 2015; Schwabe, Richter, & Wende, 2019).

Digital storytelling has many definitions, but underlying most is the 'idea to combine the art of telling stories with the variety of digital multimedia services, such as images, audios and videos' (Robin, 2006) a mixture that allows expressing and narrating in a vivid way experiences, situations and considerations (Casillo et al., 2016). Instagram a social media platform with more than 800 million active users (Boerman, 2020), has become a source for news, entertainment, research, and, most importantly, shopping (Aydoğan, Gündelik, & Ayar, 2019) and has given rise to new forms of social influence (Jin & Phua, 2014). "Influence" can be defined as the power to affect a person, thing or course of events (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Regarding social media platforms, influence is the ability to drive action through people's engagement on a post shared by a robust social influencer on social media (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Brands often use influencer experiences shared on social media through their posts (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). This makes the product more relevant and trustworthy to its consumers.

Visual storytelling, as on Instagram, is the telling of a story enhanced by the use of visual and aural media (Serafinelli, 2018). To maintain their role as opinion leaders and to increase their stickiness, digital influencers use narratives aiming to present their authentic selves (Abidin, 2016). A sticky influencer is one whose content is highly appealing and engaging to their followers, resulting in high levels of interaction (likes, comments, shares, etc.) and a loyal following (Hu et al., 2020). Several factors can contribute to an influencer's stickiness on Instagram. These may include the quality and uniqueness of their content, their ability to connect with their audience on a personal level, and their consistency in posting and engaging with their followers. These influencer posts, reels, and stories form persuasive narratives.

2.3 Narratives

Narratives can be considered a primary mode of communication that best suits how humans think and remember. Abbott (2020) defined narratives as descriptions of events and characters that entertain or enlighten their audiences. Fludernik (2010) referred to narratives as a portrayal of a character's inner world in the story by revealing characters' unique views, perspectives, emotions, motivations, and goals. Narratives can also influence and spur action by connecting the storyteller and listener, making information more compelling (Villaespesa & Wowkoych, 2020). As an extension of this, influencer engagement on Instagram can be seen as stories that are told to invite current and new followers to relate to influencers' lifestyles and, in turn, product recommendations for brands.

Through the study of influencer narratives on Instagram, we begin to see firsthand the embodiment of this concept on a social media platform. Furthermore, understanding the narrative strategies employed by digital influencers from a storytelling perspective can shed light on how influencers foster parasocial relationships with their followers. While previous studies have recognized the importance of parasocial relationships between influencers and consumers (Yuan & Lou, 2020), there are still unanswered questions. These questions concern the drivers that reinforce the relationships and how to determine consumption-related behaviors (Conde & Casais, 2023; Kim & Song, 2016).

Often, influencers' posts contain photos or videos of their images to present authentic, personal, and intimate depictions of their view of the brand or product (Feng, Chen, & Kong, 2021). However, negative opinions and inappropriate narratives about the brand can damage the brand image (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Companies' approaches have been mainly driven by opportunities rather than strategic plans and we lack a deeper understanding of storytelling through Influencers.

In a recently published quantitative study, Feng et al. (2021) analyzed the presentation of influencers' content strategies without investigating their intentions and strategic considerations. They suggest a qualitative study that focuses on unveiling influencers' perceptions of their storytelling techniques may be useful to complete the picture (Feng et al., 2021). In their study of Chinese fashion bloggers, Zhou, Barnes, McCormick, and Cano (2021) used Social Penetration Theory to identify six narrative strategies that digital influencers use to create this feeling of closeness between influencers and their followers. Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010) found that bloggers utilize four narrative styles: evaluation, embracing, endorsement, and explanation, to make their content appear more

trustworthy and relevant and useful to consumers. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2021) found six narrative strategies, including advising, educating, enthusing, amusing, assembling, and appraising, that influencers use to organize and generate eWOM.

3 Theoretical Foundations

In our research, we wish to understand the role of narratives in Influencer engagement on Instagram: what are the narratives being created and utilized, and how are they being played out on Instagram using the various tools this platform offers.

A number of theories have already been applied to research on digital influencers on Instagram, such as the uses and gratification theory (Ko & Yu, 2019; Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017), the theory of reasoned action (Copeland & Zhao, 2020), the extended Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology model (Järvinen, Ohtonen, & Karjaluoto, 2016) and social influence theory (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). However, we have identified two theories that could aid in exploring narratives on Instagram, the two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and social penetration theory (Taylor & Altman, 1987). These two theories have been successfully used by a handful of authors trying to understand digital influencers on social media platforms. Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) present a promising paper using the two-step flow communication theory to understand how brands can strategically use bloggers' engagement. Cheung and Thadani (2012) utilize this theory to understand the content strategies of digital influencers in general across many social media platforms. We extend these studies by using this theory to examine narratives used by digital influencers on Instagram.

In the two-step flow theory, *opinion leaders* interpret media information they receive and then pass it to others, thus increasing its influence. In other words, opinion leaders mediate the transmission of information. Opinion leaders have been characterized as experts (Loeper, Steiner, & Stewart, 2014) or non-experts (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013) and, more importantly, are in a central social position (Hinz, Skiera, Barrot, & Becker, 2011). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) suggest three common characteristics and behaviors of opinion leaders: "personification of certain values (who one is); competence (what one knows); and strategic social location (whom one knows)". The first dimension relates to the traits and values of opinion leaders. Competence expresses opinion leaders' level of expertise on specific subjects. Finally, social location concerns the size of their network and the number who value their leadership in a particular area of expertise (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Influencers share many characteristics of opinion leaders; they mediate messages and affect communities on Instagram, where messages are disseminated rapidly and easily with a potentially viral effect. Moreover, the significance of influencers relies on their ability to serve "as the connective communication tissue that alerts their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choices" (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Therefore, they can use their influence to promote products and services (Wang, Liu, Liu, & Wang, 2020). Readers and followers are also critical as they can relay these messages to their network (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). While some researchers focus on opinion leaders as being celebrity influencers with millions of followers (Hu et al., 2020), our study assumes, in line with recent research, that micro-influencers can also be opinion leaders (Brewster & Lyu, 2020; Ouvrein, Pabian, Giles, Hudders, & De Backer, 2021).

According to Social Penetration Theory (SPT), self-disclosure, such as voluntarily sharing personal feelings and thoughts with others, fosters the development of human relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Kim & Song, 2016). Recent research has revealed that personal content shared by influencers on social media seems to be important to their followers (Leite, Pontes, & de Paula Baptista, 2022), who look forward to connecting with digital influencers on an emotional level (Abidin, 2016; Lee & Eastin, 2021). In this context, micro-influencers may outperform traditional celebrities endorsing products (Zeren & Gökdağlı, 2020). This may be due to the personal nature of their interactions, whereby they weave everyday events into their narratives on Instagram, making them more relatable and less distant (Breves, Amrehn, Heidenreich, Liebers, & Schramm, 2021).

Suppose we know that users participate in social media platforms like Instagram primarily for hedonic reasons (Järvinen et al., 2016). In that case, we can shift our focus to understanding how to design social media platforms so that creating and sharing entertaining stories/content can be done with ease. Our study contributes to this strand of literature by examining how Instagram as a platform affords the behaviors and narrative styles of influencers.

4 Research Design and Progress

Despite the increasing popularity of skincare, beauty, and the online image-sharing community, few studies have provided a clear understanding of the purpose behind the phenomena and, more importantly, the use of storytelling to achieve this purpose. Therefore, it is appropriate to research why and how skincare and beauty influencers construct narratives on Instagram.

To examine the activities of skincare and beauty influencers, to understand the purpose behind their participation on this platform, and to explore their use of narratives, we focus on the extensive skincare and beauty community on Instagram. Consistent with contemporary inductive and qualitative methods, our study was exploratory, and we, therefore, made trade-offs that favored exploration over confirmation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As with any explorative study, the selection of a research context imposes limitations and cannot offer a comprehensive articulation of all of the motivations and behaviors, but rather it defines a set of behaviors that are important in the cases we examine.

Following suggestions by Roulet et al. (2017), we will also collect data beyond covert participant observation. We will complement observational data with influencers' interviews (Spradley, 1979). As Russell and Tepperman (2005) outlined, studies utilizing qualitative interviews may purposefully select specific groups of participants to maximize the utility of data for the intended research goals. We identified the influencers through snowball sampling. This method is suitable when looking for participants who have specific characteristics (Lune & Berg, 2017). In this study, all the chosen influencers had to be active members of the beauty community on Instagram, making snowball sampling suitable. Participants have been assigned an alias in order to be able to naturally discuss their interviews without compromising confidentiality (cf. Table 1). The participants were informed about the research procedure and asked to consent to participate in the various stages of the research project. When possible, the interviews will be recorded and then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo. Thus far, we have completed ten interviews with influencers.

Alias	Interview Duration	Follower Count	Country	Alias	Interview Duration	Follower Count	Country
Betty	45 min	3000	USA	Rory	45 min	3000	England
Darla	30 min	3300	England	Rue	30 min	8000	New Zealand
Elisha	60 min	4000	USA	Tory	60 min	2000	Germany
Lucy	45 min	2500	England	Zara	45 min	7000	Australia

Table 1. Interview Participant Summary

We have been following the approach by Langley (1999) as the standard in contemporary qualitative analysis and conduct our analysis in multiple stages, and move iteratively between the data, emergent ideas, and the literature to build a theory (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). This process, referred to as 'inspiration' by Langley (1999), involves drawing inferences from our observational data such that they hold up to credible theoretical claims. This requires the researchers to tread thoughtfully: observing, deliberating, and going back to the fieldwork to verify their conclusions (Vila, Costa, & Ellinger, 2020). Throughout this iterative process, we have actively and continually deepened our emerging theoretical understanding by subjecting it to further data analysis. We did this until a more profound and empirically grounded explanation of how people refer to and practice their involvement with the skincare and beauty culture on Instagram emerged (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). Data was split into several themes that

emerged through the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As this study is inductive, Creswell and Creswell (2017)'s qualitative research data analysis model has been implemented. The researchers then created categories and common themes identified within the data during analysis.

5 Four narrative strategies of Instagram influencers

Before we dive into the results of the research approach outlined above, we want to provide further context on Instagram as a platform. Instagram distinguishes itself from other social networking sites by providing brands the opportunity to present visually appealing and attractive content such as photos, videos, and stories, resulting in higher engagement rates and consumer behavior, including frequent purchasing and following of brands (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Instagram also places a number of rules on its users that set it apart from its competitors, such as Snapchat or Tiktok. For example, the platform encourages the use of mobile technologies by making it difficult to upload pictures from laptops and prioritizes a hierarchical relationship between "the followed" and "the followers" through the use of visual input and engagement (Georgakopoulou, Iversen, & Stage, 2020). In turn, these regulations enable various narrative approaches that influencers leverage to achieve success on the platform. We identified four narrative strategies of Instagram influencers: educating, evaluating, advising, and entertaining.

Educating was by far the most prevalent narrative in all the interviews. Influencers often take the role of a teacher and aim to nurture the development of their followers' knowledge about brands and products. As Darla pointed out, she follows other accounts for *"things like ingredient spotlights which I always find really fascinating. [...] Like, yes, we use all this stuff, but what do the ingredients actually do?got snapshots of, you know, this is the ingredient, this is what it does. And then these are products that you could use like that"*. Another interviewee, Elisha, found herself educating friends and acquaintances on various aspects of products she was using, *"friends that are [...], oh how do you do this? Or what is that? [...] And so I started, you know, thinking of it as more like an educational thing"*.

The **evaluating** narrative decodes the meanings derived from influencers' own or individual followers' experiences with products. As Darla put it, *"I could say I love something, and then someone gets it and tries it, and they may absolutely hate it. And so, it's yeah, just it's sharing experiences there, and an important, I think whether it's good or bad for people to see it just as that experience, it doesn't mean the product is good or bad, it just means it was good or bad for me"*. Thus, this narrative enables influencers to honestly review products from their perspective against the brands' claims and provide impartial evaluations of the products for their followers. One such perspective is that of the influencer as a consumer themselves: *"[I] think a lot of people love to just see the tea that I do spill because I'm a consumer at the end of the day" (Betty)*. This narrative also relates to the influencers awareness of their authenticity. One interviewee, Lucy, expressed their intention to be authentic in the opinion they share and not overstate the value of the products being tested *" [...] testing this & that product and those are the ingredients, and that's what I like about it or whatever without saying, OK, this is going to save my life, and I love this so much"*. Rory also mentioned that: *"It's most important that people trust me and that they believe if I share a product that I actually like and that I'm not just doing that because I want to earn money"*.

Influencers are often considered knowledgeable in specific fields or in particular topics, their suggestions or **advice** are highly valued by consumers. Elisha reflected on this role in her community *"Some people said, [...], I was considering getting this, I won't get it then, but I'm also I often reply saying [...], this is just my experience that there are other people who absolutely love this. I always think it's worth someone trying things out for themselves really, and that goes the same way I could say I love something and then someone gets it and tries it, and they may absolutely hate it."* Through the use of the advising strategy, influencers are able provide advice on the use of particular brands or products to their followers. Most influencers interviewed in this study took pride in this point. *"you know, then went ahead and bought it or you know, and then people Oh my God like I love it, and that makes me feel great" (Darla) or "I probably am an influencer because I am influencing people in their decision of buying products or not" (Tory)*.

Many of the interviewees pointed to the fact that they tried to keep their content fun and lighthearted so as to amuse their followers. *"I'm hoping that I'm entertaining people because not people don't have that much time to be sitting on Instagram anymore like they were when we were locked down. So, when they see my quick skincare video or a quick makeup transition, it's just a bit of fun, light-hearted fun that they can see, they can just watch, and that's snappy"* (Rory). The purpose of the **entertaining** narrative is to frame influencers themselves and the products they are talking about creatively and dramatically to appeal to followers who are entertainment seekers or imagined empathetic audiences. *"I enjoy making makeup reels. I feel like that comes really naturally to me, and I like all the transitions I do. So, I'm not the type of..., I don't want to be makeup artist. So, my videos aren't where I show how to apply things. It's more of a fun transition into, [...], I look terrible and another gray and things like that"* (Rory). Another interviewee confirmed: *"it helped me realize that people's attention span is very, very short. So, you I think it's, I've notice how making my videos snappy and quick entertains people like my recent reels views have been over three thousand, four thousand a month."* (Rue).

6 Discussion

Synthesizing our findings above, we found that participants primarily wish to build a strong community around them. Therefore, they attempt to engage with current followers and invite more followers through their personal and professional sharing of experiences. This can be broadly explained by Social Penetration Theory (SPT) (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Taylor & Altman, 1987), which suggests that influencers often use narrative strategies to connect to their followers on a more personal and emotional level (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Leite et al., 2022). For example, the entertainment value of these interactions makes influencers seem more relatable and less distant to the followers themselves (Breves et al., 2021). As such, our narrative strategy of entertaining aligns with a study by Barry and Hale (2013), who suggested that audiences expect some form of amusement or enjoyment from their social media community influencers.

Our findings partly confirm and extend the earlier-mentioned studies by Kozinets et al. (2010) and (Zhou et al., 2021). While the study by Kozinets et al. (2010) focused on blogs and the study by Zhou et al. (2021) was specific to the luxury Chinese context, they both provided an excellent starting point for exploring how different narrative styles of influencers affect the messages being conveyed on influencers' platforms. Our study extends both studies by examining how digital influencers use these narrative strategies to engage with and influence the stickiness of their followers, which in turn makes them simultaneously more attractive to both: brands who want to work with them and followers who pay close attention to their recommendations.

The perceived usefulness of the content created by influencers influences their credibility and increases their stickiness in the Instagram community. As explained in the theoretical foundations, the two-step flow theory can further help us to understand Digital Influencers as *opinion leaders* that interpret media information they receive and then pass it to others, thus increasing its influence. This finding is in line with other studies, which found that Instagram is considered the platform most used by opinion leaders, due to the sense of immediacy that is generated and because it creates communities (Casaló et al., 2020). For example, followers on Tiktok respond differently to influencers because it differs from other social media sites in terms of publication format, content, and target audience (Barta, Belanche, Fernández, & Flavián, 2023).

Our findings suggest that the three strategies of education, evaluation, and advising fall into this category. Whereby influencers use their level of expertise on specific subjects (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and their role as opinion leaders (Loeper et al., 2014) in the beauty community to help their followers interpret product or brand messages (Wang et al., 2020). By utilizing the educating narrative strategy, influencers can interpret the company or marketers' created meanings of a product or a brand (Allen, Andersen, Khoury, & Roberts, 2018) to consumers. Through the evaluating narrative strategy, influencers often share their evaluations of products they have used. Their followers enjoy reading their opinions as they can relate more readily to influencers rather than the celebrity messaging sometimes used by brands. Finally, our narrative strategy of advising found that influencers who show concern

about their followers and expertise about a subject are more likely to influence their followers to purchase the featured products.

Our findings also shed some light on why micro-influencers are often perceived as more trusted than celebrity influencers. This is because micro-influencers typically have smaller, more engaged followings and are seen as more authentic and relatable (Brewster & Lyu, 2020). Additionally, they are often perceived as having a deeper understanding of their niche, further enhancing their credibility with their audience. On the other hand, celebrity influencers are often seen as being more detached from their followers. They may be perceived as having a less personal investment in the products or services they endorse (Ouvrein et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that the level of trust in any influencer ultimately depends on various factors, including the influencer's reputation, the authenticity of their content, and the quality of their engagement with their audience (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This was echoed by a number of the participants in our study, who prioritized having meaningful and authentic connections with their followers rather than trying to grow their following for the sake of it.

7 Conclusion And Outlook

This paper represents an initial foray into the world of Instagram beauty and skincare digital influencers who construct narratives as part of their content strategy. Where the audience has become immune to other traditional forms of advertising, influencer advertising is an effective new tool that the young audience prefers (Szikszai-Németh, 2020). Furthermore, digital influencers increase brand engagement when they recommend or promote a product, and their audience is persuaded to try those products (Jansom & Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021). Surfacing digital influencers' practices, our study contributes to the shared understanding of digital storytelling and how it can transform social media platforms' use and design.

To lay a foundation for our study, this research-in-progress explores the use of the two-step flow theory to explore the idea that social media influencers act as modern-day opinion leaders who work in a digital environment to provide information for and influence their followers. Additionally, using Social Penetration theory, we can understand how influencers create close personal relationships with their audience in the form of narratives that helps to establish trust and authenticity on their page. Using both of these theories allows for a theoretical perspective on digital influencer activities on Instagram that can benefit organizations' strategic objectives.

In practical terms, social media managers of brands need to be aware of reducing creative constraints to preserve influencers' emotional authenticity and individual narratives (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). As a partnership develops, brands can let influencers choose the products that suit their tastes and generate personalized communication around the selected items. There is a risk associated with giving influencers free rein in the creative process, but attempting to micro-manage this process can erode intrinsic motivation (Audrezet et al., 2020). For example, for skin care and beauty brands, it does not make sense for someone who does not have acne to promote or endorse acne-related products.

While this research mainly proposes an in-depth qualitative study, findings from this research can be a starting point for future research to expand and generalize upon. Future research could include digital influencers from different domains, for example, or a quantitative study that analyses engagement and narratives from a different perspective, this would also be a good place to compare how influencers from different domains utilize these narrative strategies in diverse ways. Finally, another extension of this study could be to investigate the role of technology in facilitating influencer marketing and digital storytelling. This could include studying the features and functionalities of social media platforms that enable influencers to create engaging content and foster relationships with their audience.

References

- Abbott, H. P. (2020). *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*: Cambridge University Press.
- Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?": Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social media+ society*, 2(2), 1-17.
- Alassani, R., & Göretz, J. (2019). *Product placements by micro and macro influencers on Instagram*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, Orlando, United States.
- Allen, C. G., Andersen, B., Khoury, M. J., & Roberts, M. C. (2018). Current social media conversations about genetics and genomics in health: a twitter-based analysis. *Public health genomics*, 21(1-2), 93-99.
- Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Arnould, E. J., & Wallendorf, M. (1994). Market-oriented ethnography: interpretation building and marketing strategy formulation. *Journal of marketing research*, 31(4), 484-504.
- Ashley, C., & Tuten, T. (2015). Creative strategies in social media marketing: An exploratory study of branded social content and consumer engagement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(1), 15-27.
- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of business research*, 117, 557-569.
- Aydoğan, S., Güvendik, Ö., & Ayar, B. (2019). Innovative Consumers of The Digital Age: Opinion Seeking on Instagram. *Business & Management Studies: An International Journal*, 7(2), 609-628.
- Barry, J., & Hale, D. (2013). *Humor Determinants and Relevance in High Performance Social TV Ads*. Paper presented at the Academy of Marketing Science's 2013 Annual Conference, Monterey Bay, California.
- Barta, S., Belanche, D., Fernández, A., & Flavián, M. (2023). Influencer marketing on TikTok: The effectiveness of humor and followers' hedonic experience. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 70, 103149.
- Boerman, S. C. (2020). The effects of the standardized Instagram disclosure for micro-and meso-influencers. *Computers in human behavior*, 103, 199-207.
- Boldosova, V. (2019). Deliberate storytelling in big data analytics adoption. *Information Systems Journal*, 29(6), 1126-1152.
- Breves, P., Amrehn, J., Heidenreich, A., Liebers, N., & Schramm, H. (2021). Blind trust? The importance and interplay of parasocial relationships and advertising disclosures in explaining influencers' persuasive effects on their followers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), 1209-1229.
- Brewster, M. L., & Lyu, J. (2020). *Exploring the parasocial impact of nano, micro and macro influencers*. Paper presented at the International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings.
- Brown, D., & Hayes, N. (2008). *Influencer Marketing: Who Really Influences Your Customers?* Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business horizons*, 63(4), 469-479.
- Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2020). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of business research*, 117, 510-519.
- Casillo, M., Colace, F., De Santo, M., Lemma, S., Lombardi, M., & Pietrosanto, A. (2016). *An ontological approach to digital storytelling*. Paper presented at the Multidisciplinary International Social Networks Conference on Social Informatics, Union, NJ, USA.
- Cheung, C. M., & Thadani, D. R. (2012). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth communication: A literature analysis and integrative model. *Decision support systems*, 54(1), 461-470.
- Conde, R., & Casais, B. (2023). Micro, macro and mega-influencers on instagram: The power of persuasion via the parasocial relationship. *Journal of business research*, 158, 113708.

- Copeland, L. R., & Zhao, L. (2020). Instagram and theory of reasoned action: US consumers influence of peers online and purchase intention. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 13(3), 265-279.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.
- Damodaran, A. (2017). 3. The Elements of Storytelling. In *Narrative and Numbers* (pp. 24-35): Columbia University Press.
- Feng, Y., Chen, H., & Kong, Q. (2021). An expert with whom I can identify: The role of narratives in influencer marketing. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), 972-993.
- Fludernik, M. (2010). Experience, Experientiality, and Historical Narrative: A. *Erfahrung und Geschichte: Sinnbildung im Pränarrativen*, 40-72.
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public relations review*, 37(1), 90-92.
- Georgakopoulou, A., Iversen, S., & Stage, C. (2020). *Quantified Storytelling*: Springer.
- Gill, R. (2015). Why the PR strategy of storytelling improves employee engagement and adds value to CSR: An integrated literature review. *Public relations review*, 41(5), 662-674.
- Gnambs, T., & Batinic, B. (2013). The roots of interpersonal influence: A mediated moderation model for knowledge and traits as predictors of opinion leadership. *Applied Psychology*, 62(4), 597-618.
- Hinz, O., Skiera, B., Barrot, C., & Becker, J. U. (2011). Seeding strategies for viral marketing: An empirical comparison. *Journal of marketing*, 75(6), 55-71.
- Hu, L., Min, Q., Han, S., & Liu, Z. (2020). Understanding followers' stickiness to digital influencers: The effect of psychological responses. *International Journal of Information Management*, 54.
- Jansom, A., & Pongsakornrungsilp, S. (2021). How Instagram influencers affect the value perception of Thai millennial followers and purchasing intention of luxury fashion for sustainable marketing. *Sustainability*, 13(15), 8572.
- Järvinen, J., Ohtonen, R., & Karjaluoto, H. (2016). *Consumer acceptance and use of Instagram*. Paper presented at the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Koloa, HI, USA.
- Jin, S.-A. A., & Phua, J. (2014). Following celebrities' tweets about brands: The impact of twitter-based electronic word-of-mouth on consumers' source credibility perception, buying intention, and social identification with celebrities. *Journal of advertising*, 43(2), 181-195.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Kent, M. L. (2015). The power of storytelling in public relations: Introducing the 20 master plots. *Public relations review*, 41(4), 480-489.
- Kim, J., & Song, H. (2016). Celebrity's self-disclosure on Twitter and parasocial relationships: A mediating role of social presence. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 62, 570-577.
- Ko, H.-C., & Yu, D.-H. (2019). *Understanding continuance intention to view Instagram stories: a perspective of uses and gratifications theory*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Control and Computer Vision, Jeju Island; South Korea.
- Kozinets, R. V., De Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. *Journal of marketing*, 74(2), 71-89.
- Lambert, J. (2012). *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management review*, 24(4), 691-710.
- Lee, J. A., & Eastin, M. S. (2021). Perceived authenticity of social media influencers: scale development and validation. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*.
- Leite, F. P., Pontes, N., & de Paula Baptista, P. (2022). Oops, I've overshared! When social media influencers' self-disclosure damage perceptions of source credibility. *Computers in human behavior*, 107274.

- Loeper, A., Steiner, J., & Stewart, C. (2014). Influential opinion leaders. *The Economic Journal*, 124(581), 1147-1167.
- Lugmayr, A., Sutinen, E., Suhonen, J., Sedano, C. I., Hlavacs, H., & Montero, C. S. (2017). Serious storytelling—a first definition and review. *Multimedia tools and applications*, 76(14), 15707-15733.
- Lune, H., & Berg, B. L. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*: Pearson.
- Mirkovski, K., Gaskin, J. E., Hull, D. M., & Lowry, P. B. (2019). Visual storytelling for improving the comprehension and utility in disseminating information systems research: Evidence from a quasi-experiment. *Information Systems Journal*, 29(6), 1153-1177.
- Nirschl, M., & Steinberg, L. (2018). *Einstieg in das Influencer Marketing*. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler
- Nisbet, M. C., & Kotcher, J. E. (2009). A two-step flow of influence? Opinion-leader campaigns on climate change. *Science Communication*, 30(3), 328-354.
- Ouvrein, G., Pabian, S., Giles, D., Hudders, L., & De Backer, C. (2021). The web of influencers. A marketing-audience classification of (potential) social media influencers. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37(13-14), 1313-1342.
- Pfeffer, J., Zorbach, T., & Carley, K. M. (2014). Understanding online firestorms: Negative word-of-mouth dynamics in social media networks. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20(1-2), 117-128.
- Phua, J., Jin, S. V., & Kim, J. J. (2017). Uses and gratifications of social networking sites for bridging and bonding social capital: A comparison of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. *Computers in human behavior*, 72, 115-122.
- Robin, B. (2006). *The educational uses of digital storytelling*. Paper presented at the Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference, Chesapeake, VA, USA.
- Schwabe, G., Richter, A., & Wende, E. (2019). Special issue on storytelling and information systems. *Information Systems Journal*, 29(6), 1122-1125.
- Serafinelli, E. (2018). *Digital life on Instagram: New social communication of photography*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Stieglitz, S., Meske, C., Ross, B., & Mirbabaie, M. (2020). Going back in time to predict the future—the complex role of the data collection period in social media analytics. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 22(2), 395-409.
- Stieglitz, S., Mirbabaie, M., & Potthoff, T. (2018). *Crisis Communication on Twitter during a Global Crisis of Volkswagen-The Case of "Dieselgate"*. Paper presented at the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Waikoloa Beach, HI, US.
- Szikszai-Németh, K. (2020). Influencer Marketing—Persuasion Of The Followers. *Network Intelligence Studies*, 8(16), 119-124.
- Tafesse, W., & Wood, B. P. (2021). Followers' engagement with instagram influencers: The role of influencers' content and engagement strategy. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 58, 102303.
- Taylor, D. A., & Altman, I. (1987). Communication in interpersonal relationships: Social penetration processes. In M. Roloff & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Interpersonal processes: New directions in communication research* (pp. 257-277): Sage Publications.
- Uzunoğlu, E., & Kip, S. M. (2014). Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement. *International journal of information management*, 34(5), 592-602.
- Vila, M., Costa, G., & Ellinger, E. (2020). An ethnographic study of the motivations of foodstagrammer tourists. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(5), 813-828.
- Villaespesa, E., & Wowkowych, S. (2020). Ephemeral storytelling with social media: Snapchat and Instagram stories at the Brooklyn Museum. *Social media+ society*, 6(1), 1–13.
- Wang, Z., Liu, H., Liu, W., & Wang, S. (2020). Understanding the power of opinion leaders' influence on the diffusion process of popular mobile games: Travel Frog on Sina Weibo. *Computers in human behavior*, 109, 106354.

- Weissenfeld, K., Abramova, O., & Krasnova, H. (2017). *Understanding storytelling in the context of information systems*. Paper presented at the Americas Conference on Information Systems, Boston, United States.
- Woodside, A. G. (2010). Brand-consumer storytelling theory and research: Introduction to a Psychology & Marketing special issue. In (Vol. 27, pp. 531-540): Wiley Online Library.
- Yuan, S., & Lou, C. (2020). How social media influencers foster relationships with followers: The roles of source credibility and fairness in parasocial relationship and product interest. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 20(2), 133-147.
- Zeren, D., & Gökdağlı, N. (2020). Influencer Versus Celebrity Endorser Performance on Instagram. In *Strategic Innovative Marketing and Tourism* (pp. 695-704): Springer.
- Zhou, S., Barnes, L., McCormick, H., & Cano, M. B. (2021). Social media influencers' narrative strategies to create eWOM: a theoretical contribution. *International journal of information management*, 59, 102293.