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LIFESTYLES OF THE INSTAGRAM FAMOUS: WHAT FASHION MICRO-  
INFLUENCERS WANT FROM BRANDS AND HOW BRANDS SHOULD  
PARTNER WITH THEM

by  
Reed Ashton Kevin

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford  
May 2019

Approved by

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Advisor: Dr. Graham Bodie

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Reader: Professor Darren Sanefski

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Reader: Professor Scott Fiene

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## **ABSTRACT**

Lifestyles of the Instagram Famous: What Fashion Micro-Influencers Want From Brands and How Brands Should Partner With Them  
(under the direction of Dr. Graham Bodie)

In an age of social media, Instagram ranks among the most popular mobile sharing platforms in the world. Created in 2010, Instagram now boasts over 800 million users and has widespread community engagement, leading worldwide trends. With the exponential growth of Instagram, it is no surprise that companies and their brands began to pay close attention to its marketing potential. And although marketers have utilized Instagram in many ways, perhaps the most successful tactic has been through influencer marketing. An influencer is any person in a position to affect the decisions of others. Influencer marketing works well for brands because of the influencer's highly engaged followership. While influencer marketing is seen as a strong method for modern day marketing, there has been little formal research into the Instagram influencer population itself. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the identities of female fashion influencers on Instagram. By knowing more about influencer motivation, experience, and perspective, brands will be able to more accurately identify how influencer marketing can work to meet their goals. In this study, I discovered data that suggests influencers value real interactions and real relationships, rather than simply presenting a facade. While their presence on Instagram is curated, planned, and strategic, influencers believe their online personas reflect their own identity very personally. It is important for marketers to remember the person behind the social media account if they hope to secure a lasting relationship, as well as gain the full benefits of influencer marketing.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In an age of social media, Instagram ranks among the most popular mobile sharing platforms in the world (“Global social media ranking 2018 | Statistic,” n.d.). Created in 2010, Instagram now boasts over 800 million users and has widespread community engagement, leading worldwide trends (Olenski, 2018). It has been one of the 15 top most downloaded apps every day for more than 5 years, and analysts estimate its value to be around 35 billion US dollars (McCracken, 2017b). Instagram is an Internet-based service that allows users to share photos and videos with followers. The app can be accessed on iPhone, Android, and Windows mobile devices as well as online via a desktop computer. The defining characteristics of Instagram include users uploading photos or videos, the option to follow users, built in filter and editing features, adding locations via geotags, and a scrolling home page of user posts. Instagram is currently owned by Facebook (Rusli, 2012).

With the exponential growth of Instagram, it is no surprise that companies and their brands began to pay close attention to its marketing potential. As an inherently visual medium, Instagram becomes a useful tool to showcase products in visually appealing ways. In addition, Instagram is highly favored by the millennial generation, a generation highly targeted by marketers (Kary, 2019). And although marketers have utilized Instagram in many ways, perhaps the most successful tactic has been through influencer marketing.

An influencer is any person in a position to affect the decisions of others. In the context of social media, influencers are typically thought to have an above average following (high reach) and potential to “move the needle” for a company, brand, or product (Guest Author, 2018). They can be celebrities proper (e.g., a famous actor or musician) or a micro-celebrity, someone who has self-branded as important or otherwise authoritative about some product category (Khamis, 2017). On Instagram, influencers share visual narrations of their personal, everyday lives creating a brand based off their username and page (Abidin, 2016). Most influencers focus on lifestyle choices in one category like fashion, food, or fitness. Influencer marketing works well for brands because of the influencer’s highly engaged followership. The influencers’ followers are not dissuaded by advertising on Instagram, but rather expect it. They trust the influencer as an expert voice.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the identities of female fashion influencers on Instagram. Through interviews with a convenience sample of female fashion influencers I aim to discover common themes regarding motivation, experience, and self-identity. While influencer marketing is seen as a strong method for modern day marketing, there has been little formal research into the Instagram influencer population itself. Through my thesis research, I seek to discover more about a population of Instagram influencers as defined by their personal experiences and self-identity. By knowing more about influencer motivation, experience, and perspective, brands will be able to more accurately identify how influencer marketing can work to meet their goals. In Chapter One, I discuss the history of Instagram and the nature of influencers. Chapter Two outlines the methods I used to collect and analyze my data. Chapter Three presents the results of my research,



and Chapter Four provides an extended Discussion of what I learned including recommendations for integrated marketing communication professionals.

## **CHAPTER ONE: THE HISTORY OF INSTAGRAM AND NATURE OF INFLUENCERS**

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold: First, I provide background information regarding Instagram as a social media platform. Second, I describe the environment that led to the creation of “Instagram influencers.” The understanding of how Instagram grew from a small app launch to an incredibly powerful and influential marketing tool is important when considering the impact of influencers and their value. Toward this goal, I will document the chain of events that led to the creation of Instagram, introduce its initial growth and user base, and provide statistics on the economic influence of the social media platform. I will also introduce the idea of an Instagram influencer, the data supporting its continued growth as a marketing tool, and theories that explain why influencers are able to gain notoriety.

### **History of Instagram**

Created by co-founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, Instagram was introduced as a photo sharing app for iPhone in October of 2010. The introduction was preceded by 8 weeks of building the specific application and over a year of preparatory work (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Before it was created, venture capitalists with interests in platforms such as Twitter and companies such as Alphabet, Inc. were funding Instagram with more than \$500,000 US. Within hours of releasing the app, the platform grew from a

handful of users that consisted of the creators' personal friends to the number one free photography app on the iOS App Store (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012).

Interestingly, the original application idea was not the Instagram finally developed and released. Systrom first created an HTML5 mobile web app prototype called Burbn, which combined elements of Foursquare, a search and discover app based on location, and Mafia Wars, a multiplayer Social network game (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Burbn's features allowed users to post photos, check into locations as well as plan future check-ins, and allowed users to earn points for hanging out with friends by logging activity on the app. After Krieger joined Systrom to further development, they determined that Burbn was too cluttered. The team decided to strip down the service to simply include photo, comment, and like capabilities. The release of the iPhone 4 aided this simplification because the phone had a high-performing camera and could display higher-resolution images (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Users could take photos, edit those photos with in-app features, and post those photos to their followers. The application was renamed "Instagram" to combine the words "instant" and "telegram" (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Eight weeks later, the creators relaunched the app to their friends, beta tested and fixed bugs, and finally launched the app in October of 2010 exclusively for the iOS operating system (Systrom, 2011). In a matter of hours, enough users downloaded the app to cause the computer system handling the photos to crash (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012).

Instagram's successful launch can, at least in part, be contributed to Systrom "whipping up" demand prior to its release (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Systrom first let influential technology bloggers and personal contacts such as Jack Dorsey, a

founder of Twitter and initial Instagram investor, try a test version of the app (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Dorsey began using the app to send photos to his Twitter followers, spreading the anticipation about the upcoming release (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). Instagram started with 25,000 users in the first 24 hours, grew to 300,000 in the first 3 weeks, and hit one- million users after just 2 months (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). In February 2011, Instagram was valued at \$20 million US (Streatfield, 2015). By the end of the same year, during its annual iOS store retrospective event, Apple announced Instagram as its “definitive” top app of the year (Abidin, 2016; Tsukayama, 2011). In March 2012, Instagram was valued at \$500 million US then brought in \$50 million US within the same month of that valuation announcement (Rusli, 2012). An Android version of the app was released on April 3, 2012, which generated more than one-million downloads in 24 hours (Blagdon, 2012).

In late April of 2012, Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion US in cash and stock (Rusli, 2012). The sale is said to be the largest acquisition in the history of social networking (Staff, 2012). The Instagram purchase was the first Facebook acquisition costing more than \$100 million US. The Instagram app had 30 million users at the time of the purchase (Rusli, 2012). Although Systrom had announced no interest in selling, Instagram was owned by Facebook 48 hours after Mark Zuckerberg called (Somini Sengupta & Wortham, 2012). The closure of the sale netted Systrom, who owned 40% of the original company, \$400 million US (Staff, 2012).

The acquisition of Instagram, one month before Facebook’s initial public offering, was seen as a key move for Facebook because Instagram supported Facebook in the realm of mobile sharing, an area that was seen as a weakness for Facebook (Rusli, 2012).

In a post on his personal Facebook page, Mark Zuckerberg emphasized that the two social networks would continue to be operated separately, with a commitment to continue to run Instagram as an independent service (Rusli, 2012). Zuckerberg also added intentions to help Instagram continue to grow by using Facebook's established engineering team and infrastructure (Rusli, 2012). In a separate blog post on Instagram's website, Systrom reiterated intentions to preserve the service's function and autonomy as well as to leverage the new parent company's resources and talent (Rusli, 2012).

After its acquisition by Facebook, the original Instagram team continued to develop the application, adding new features and updates. Key updates included allowing users to upload photos with non-square dimensions, the creation of Instagram stories, a redesigned logo and interior app design, and timeline posts no longer appearing in chronological order. The constant app updates are heralded as the company's ability to keep fans engaged and attract new users at a fast pace (McCracken, 2017b).

Originally, a distinctive feature of Instagram was confining photos to a square; however, this feature was changed in August of 2015 to allow users to upload differently proportioned media (McCracken, 2017b). The decision to change allowed photo proportions was not a small one as it was seen as an Instagram signature, much like Twitter's original 140 character limit (McCracken, 2017b). What first was seen as "sacrilege" became a hit for many users, as well as encouraged developers to keep evolving the app past its original defining characteristics (McCracken, 2017b). Systrom cited the departure from square-bound photos as giving the team "permission" to try new things and claimed their allegiance to the original design had been ultimately holding them back (McCracken, 2017b). Users took the change and embraced it, uploading more

and better quality content than before (McCracken, 2017b). Eventually, Instagram even changed the notion that only one photo could be uploaded in one post. In February 2017, Instagram added the ability to upload up to 10 photos or videos in one post, creating a mini photo album feel (McCracken, 2017a).

Instagram stories were added in August 2016, after four months of development (McCracken, 2017b). While clearly a copy of Snapchat's "story" feature (System even admitted), it has been hailed by many to have a uniquely Instagram-esque feel with aspects even better than the original Snapchat version (McCracken, 2017b). In both versions of stories, users can upload photos or videos with text, drawings, or filters added in-app that disappear on the user's profile after 24 hours. The significance of Instagram stories enabling users to share posts that disappear after 24 hours was that it eliminated the need to "create art" (McCracken, 2017b). Instagram users could now share what's happening with them immediately, in the moment without pressure of a permanent post, while simultaneously overcoming a direct competitor. Snap, Snapchat's parent company, specifically identified Instagram stories as a copycat that could hurt Snapchat's own market share in Snap's S-1 filing for its IPO in 2016 (McCracken, 2017b). While it took Snapchat 5 years to reach 150 million daily active users, Instagram reached 150 million daily active users in just 5 months after its initial release (McCracken, 2017b).

In January 2011, Instagram introduced hashtags as a way to explore brands and ideas, open to users and brand campaigns (Van Grove, 2011). The hashtag feature worked just as on Twitter, with the idea of tagging content with the #hashtag syntax for filtering purposes to gain widespread recognition (Van Grove, 2011). Hashtags have their own RSS feed which allows users to explore photos based on theme (Van Grove, 2011).

The significance of the inclusion of the hashtag was the power and opportunity for hashtags to be created by brands and organizations. Indeed, the hashtag feature was designed with both users and brands in mind (Van Grove, 2011).

Hashtags allowed brands to use Instagram as a platform for social media campaigns (Van Grove, 2011). Systrom believed it to be an “interesting” mechanism for larger brands to collect and generate content under specific tags (Van Grove, 2011). Instagram somewhat defined what a social media campaign on their platform would look like by partnering with companies before the launch of the hashtag feature (Van Grove, 2011). Campaigns deployed by Charity: Water, NPR, and Brisk Iced Tea were the first Instagram campaigns ever launched, but their methods are commonplace now. Charity:Water asked users to share images of water in their life with #charitywater, NPR reposted photos using the tags #love and #hate, and Brisk Iced Tea offered the first incentive of selected photos with the tag #briskpic to be featured on a limited edition can of Brisk (Van Grove, 2011). These three campaigns would set the tone for what Instagram can do to solidify brand identities and campaigns. Because Instagram was working with them to illustrate brand possibilities, the idea of creating a brand identity and connecting users through specific topics of interest was not an inherently organic idea.

With Instagram guiding what marketing on their platform would look like, brand marketing focused on content and quickly developed into content marketing by brands and users. This was the beginning of companies seeking to control brand conversation and identity via Instagram, and the campaigns widely consisted of user generated content and unpaid posts. As the application grew in use, Instagram brand promotion became an

increasingly valuable tool to many brands, a tool valuable enough to merit millions of advertising dollars (Van Grove, 2011).

Today, Instagram is a platform used by more than 2 million advertisers (Instagram, 2018). Through a specialized website and the ability to sponsor and promote posts, Facebook's backing has made Instagram-direct advertising extremely easy. Instagram's internal data boasts over 5 million businesses worldwide, and as of March 2017, 80 percent of Instagram users follow at least one business. Companies feel pressure to control the brand conversation primarily through both paid advertisements and paid influencer posts.

### **Influencer Marketing**

Since its beginning, Instagram has become a powerful social and marketing platform used by many categories of individuals. One category that marketers view as incredibly valuable is the individuals who hold influence over a set of followers, commonly referred to as "Instagram Influencers." A popular definition of influencer marketing describes it as a form of marketing in which focus is placed on influential people rather than the target market as a whole; more modern definitions specify that the marketing takes place on social media (Baker, 2014). Although metrics differ based on the product category, influencers typically have tens of thousands of followers and receive thousands of likes and comments per post. They not only have a huge following, but influencers also possess established credibility and a loyal audience (Maheshwari, 2018).

Because of their established credibility, influencer marketing has become exponentially more important to companies looking to control brand conversation as Instagram is growing. Instagram is believed to be twice as important than other platforms



in relation to influencer marketing by marketing companies, and marketers view influencer posts as the most direct form of reaching their target audience in comparison to traditional media (Morrison, 2015). Seventy-five percent of marketing professionals believe that influencer marketing generates sales and leads, while 90 percent consider it effective at brand awareness (Morrison, 2015). Not only do marketers view influencer posts as the most direct form of reaching their target audience in comparison to traditional media, but, in 2015, 84% of marketers planned to include influencer marketing in their strategy during the coming year (Morrison, 2015). In the same 2015 study, marketers reported to believe Facebook and Instagram to be twice as important than other platforms in relation to influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is not, however, a new concept born with the rise of Instagram. Influencer marketing has been a common tool used by brands to reach their target market for decades. Since the first celebrity was paid to wear a designer's new line, given free products in hopes of creating brand awareness, or was the star of an advertising campaign, marketers have understood the power behind using a big name and recognizable face (Lee, 2018).

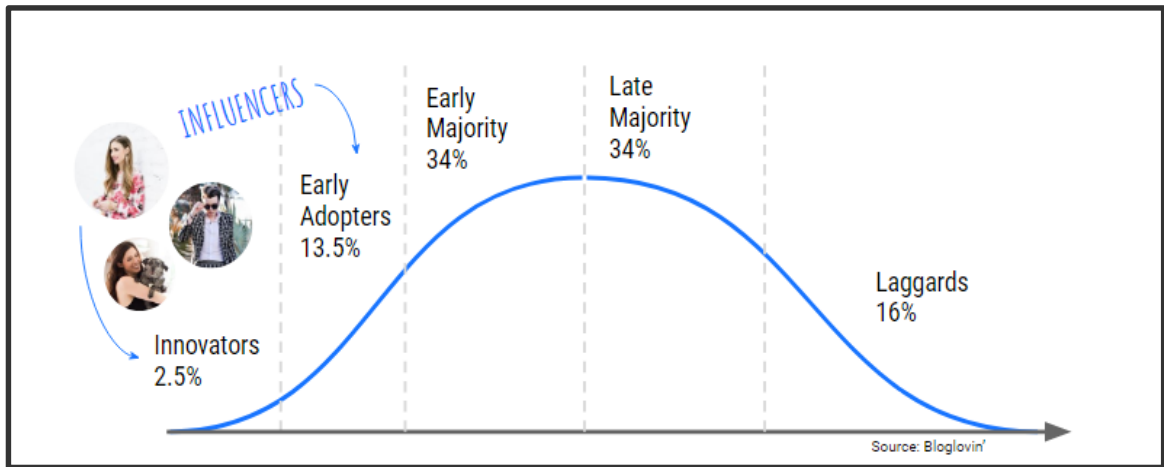
The psychology behind influencer marketing can be explained by a theory called Diffusion of Innovations (DOI; Rogers, 1962). Some individuals argue that understanding DOI is crucial to understanding how to run an effective influencer program (Baker, 2014). DOI was developed in the 1960s, popularized by communication theorist and sociologist Everett Rogers, and seeks to explain how, why, and at what rate ideas are spread. Diffusion, Rogers argued, is the way in which an innovation or an idea is spread through a social group. In this theory, there are five categories of adopters that an idea must go through when an audience gains interest. The categories include:

1. Innovators
2. Early Adopters
3. Early Majority
4. Late Majority
5. Laggards

In the DOI model, influencers fall into the “Early Adopter” category, which can be seen in Figure 1 (Lee, 2018). In today’s social media landscape, influencers are innovators and early adopters who have managed to attract an audience through their expertise and authentic, relatable voice (Lee, 2018). Companies have long understood that they must first attract early adopters in order for their brand to be diffused down the ranks; however, because social media has amplified the voices of early adopters, it has become more important than ever for brands to have early adopter’s on their side (Lee, 2018). Today’s influencers have a band of loyal followers that trust their recommendations and make purchases based on such. Influencer marketing is simply the diffusion of innovation, changed by the power of social media (Lee, 2018).

In today’s market, influencer marketing is no longer restricted to iconic companies with vast resources or well-known celebrities and athletes, categorized as “macro-influencers” (Kemp, 2018). Increasingly, “everyday” individuals, those who were not well known prior to joining Instagram, have developed significant followings. As a result, brands have a larger pool of influencers from which to choose, and, in turn, audiences have a larger pool of influencers from which to follow (Gallegos, 2016).

**Figure 1.** *Influencer Marketing is Nothing New.* Lee, 2018



The number of followers an influencer has determines their categorization as “macro” or “micro.” My research and subject pool will primarily consist of micro-influencers.

“Micro-influencers” are individuals who have smaller but typically more engaged audiences than those with a larger following count; they are thus seen as more valuable to advertisers and brands desiring to work with influencers (Activate, 2016). Micro-influencers have loyal followings, strong personal brands, a dedication to creative, authentic content, and are often much more willing to work together and develop relationships with brands (Activate, 2016). Influencers in this category typically have fewer than 100,000 followers. In a 2016 study conducted by Activate, 89% of micro-influencers posted content to a blog platform, and Instagram is the most popular platform for micro-influencers to post original content. Additionally, fashion and beauty content receive the most amount of engagement from followers when compared to other categories such as food, travel, and home design (Activate, 2016). In the same study, 77% of the fashion micro-influencers interviewed chose Instagram as the most effective platform for engaging their target audience (Activate, 2016).

In my Google search on November 28, 2018, using the phrase “how to become an Instagram influencer,” approximately 12 million results were generated. Countless websites, magazines, and advice columns layout their steps to becoming an influencer, and one can even buy books and enroll in online classes from influencers who promise to teach their methods of success. Although there appear to be countless resources for individuals wishing to become influential on Instagram, there has been little research into the world of Instagram influencers. We know little about what motivates them to create

content, steps they go through to create engaging posts, and how they craft and view their online persona. There seems to be a disconnect and gap in data between marketers' perception of what influencer marketing can do for them and what influencers desire out of their partnerships. In fact, in a recent survey, only 25% of micro-influencers believed that brands have a realistic understanding of how much influencer marketing programs actually cost (Activate, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Considering the influence on market share attributed to Instagram influencers and the high price they are able to demand for their services, it is important to understand how influencers rise in Instagram (and real-life) fame. My goal in this thesis is to explore the influencer's narrative. Toward this goal, I focus on the experiences and self-perceptions of a group of female fashion influencers in order to create a better understanding of what motivates them as an influencer, enabling IMC professionals to identify how brands can fully capitalize on their use of influencer marketing.

## **CHAPTER TWO: METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research process I undertook and the reasoning behind several decisions I had to make. In this chapter, I will detail the research design, population, sampling techniques, and data analysis techniques used in my study.

### **Research Design**

In order to explore the nature of the Instagram “influencer,” I conducted a series of in-depth interviews. I based my interview process on an approach known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2009). IPA methodology is a so-called “qualitative” technique that offers a way to provide detailed examination of the human experience. With IPA investigations, the researcher conducts a series of in-depth interviews, often described like “a conversation with purpose” (Smith, 2009, p. 57).

I had six purposeful conversations with Instagram micro-influencers. Partially based on the fashion context and partially based on my use of convenience sampling, all interviewees were female. I stopped at six because at this point I reached content saturation, the point at which all informants were generally responding along similar themes (Smith, 2009).

The in-depth interview is an ideal method of conducting research for my proposed questions because of the narrative nature of the data sought. Through my interviews, I was able to create a more personal narrative of the individuals being interviewed and

explored the nuances between stories. Through in-depth interviews and guided conversation, I was able to be more exploratory than other methods such as a survey; these interviews created the opportunity for open-ended answers. Because the interviews were semi-structured and not strictly set to one path, I was able to pursue different avenues as they arose in each conversation. Using a semi-structured format was an essential part of my research strategy in respect to the research setting; it was extremely important to create an atmosphere that allowed for the interviewee to feel comfortable enough to share what could be perceived as personal, sensitive, or competitive information in relation to her Instagram account. Through this research method, the interview was able to flow as a conversation. I steered the conversation through natural prompts and allowed for each individual's story to be uniquely described based on her experiences without corrupting her viewpoint with ideas suggested by me, the interviewer. I developed my semi-structured interview questions with the aim of creating questions as open ended as possible, and I used the IPA framework as a basis for creating these open ended questions. My interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

I conducted as many interviews in person as possible; however, due to geographical restraints, I conducted half of them through video chat. It was important to create a casual feel in these interviews because of the personal nature of the information I was seeking. When we were able to meet in person, we met at coffee shops or talked over lunch. When we talked over video-chat, the interviewee was always in her home in a comfortable setting.

## **Population**

To be interviewed, a participant had to be a female between the ages of 18 and 24 and have between 3,000 and 30,000 Instagram followers. I chose this specific range to focus on micro-influencers in the fashion context, as well as to focus on the major characteristics of influencers on Instagram. According to a 2018 study, 85% of influencers who created sponsored posts on Instagram in 2018 were women (“Distribution of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram Worldwide in 2018, By Gender | Statistics”, 2018). Additionally, as of January 2019, 32% of all Instagram users were between the ages of 18 to 24, and 33% of users were between the ages of 25 to 34 (“Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of January 2019, by age group | Statistics”, 2019). I am calling these women “influencers” for the sake of assigning a title, although whether they see themselves as influencers or not is yet to be discovered. I hypothesized that these women will all share characteristics of “opinion-leaders” as defined through Everett Roger’s Diffusion of Innovations. These characteristics include being younger, better educated, more affluent, better connected, information seekers, likes to share new things, extroverted, and risk takers. While all of the Instagram accounts belonging to the women I interviewed are primarily focused on women’s fashion and style, lifestyle is closely connected and interwoven.

## **Sample**

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, and because the total population of micro-influencers as defined above is unknown, I generated a reasonable convenience sample (Lavrakas, 2008). Initially, my interview pool consisted of individuals (a) I know personally, (b) who are “friends-of-a-friend”, or (c) I am connected with through the



University of Mississippi. According to IPA theory, it is advisable to have a small number of in-depth interviews, as IPA studies are focused on quality not quantity and benefit from “a concentrated focus on a small number of cases” (Smith, 2009, p. 51). After I created an initial list of 10 individuals, I began reaching out to schedule interviews. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked the interviewee if she knew of “influencers” similar to herself who would be willing to be interviewed by me; thus, I employed snowball sampling in order to reach more individuals (Lavrakas, 2008). While I reached out to 30 individuals all together, only six responded and agreed to be interviewed. I had greater difficulty getting in contact with individuals who had greater than 50,000 followers than individuals who had fewer than that. I found saturation after six interviews, meaning no new themes that had not been identified in previous interviews arose with new interviews.

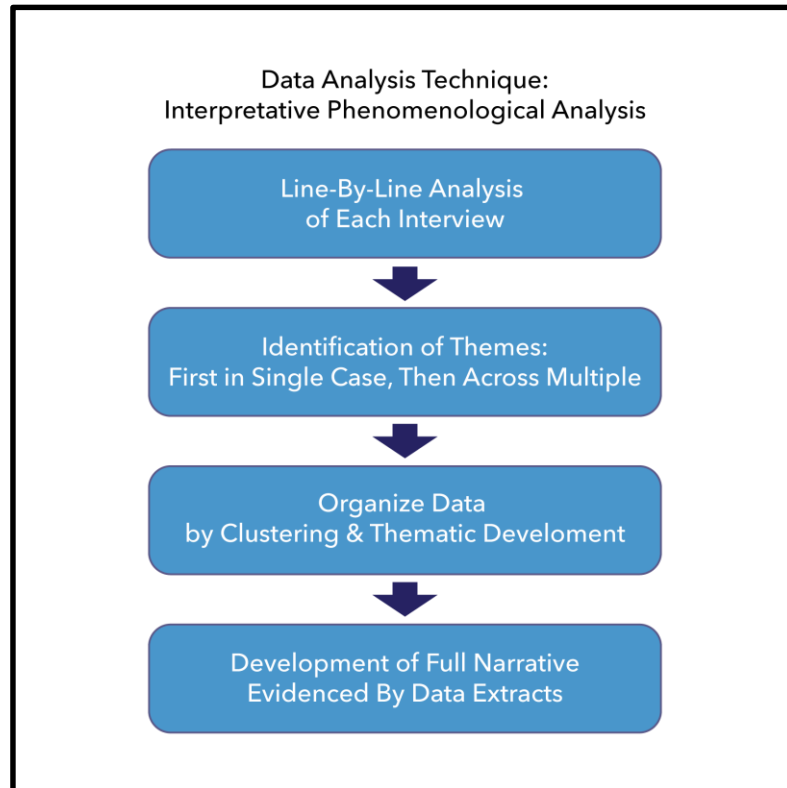
Every interviewee’s identity is concealed in the data reporting by changing the names of people, places, and companies mentioned in the interview in order to protect participant anonymity. Not only does this protect their anonymity, but it also allows the individuals to feel more comfortable sharing information with me, the researcher. My research protocol was approved as exempt by the University IRB (see Appendix B).

### **Data Analysis Technique**

I audio recorded each interview in order to have a transcript of what was said. The transcripts were recorded verbatim by a secure and professional transcription service. From these transcripts, I was able to analyze and determine common themes that arose in our conversation. As per IPA methodology, through reading and analyzing the contents of each interview transcript and identifying common themes, I attributed responses in our

conversation to an emergent theme. In this way I was able to contextualize the emergent themes, compare across multiple influencer's responses, and eventually determine identified themes (Smith, 2009). After determining identified themes, I was able to sort individual's responses into the theme categories, in order to present and discuss the data found by theme. A flow chart of my procedure is presented as Figure 2.

*Figure 2. Flow chart of data analysis decisions*



## **CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS**

In this chapter, I identify the emergent themes that appeared through my analysis of the interviews. Here, I present recurrent themes that address: what is important to a micro-influencer, what motivates a micro-influencer, how influencers struggle with self-identity, and what influencers desire out of brand partnerships. The participants ranged in experience with Instagram from a decade building their brand to just a year. They also ranged in number of followers and their experience working with brand partnerships; despite these differences, recurrent themes still appeared between all of the interviews.

### **Part One: What Is Important to a Micro-Influencer?**

When it comes to how she decides what to post on her Instagram page, each influencer has created her own set of rules by which she chooses to live. One of the strongest rules that controls what she posts is whether or not the post reflects her authentic voice.

The desire to remain authentic on Instagram is so important to an influencer that she will often turn down paid collaboration offers from companies in order not to corrupt her image. Indeed, all women interviewed indicated having turned down at least one offer. The influencer believes her authenticity builds a unique trust relationship between herself and her followers. Every influencer in my sample stated a belief that her followers would be able to “see right through” an inauthentic post, meaning a post that promoted a product that did not fall in line with an influencer’s personal beliefs or brand. Words like “honest,”

“true,” and “transparent” were used often by the influencers to describe how she wanted to communicate on the social media platform.

Authenticity permeated every conversation I had with an influencer and was always a source of both restriction and contradiction. Authenticity can be seen affecting these three aspects of an influencer’s experience: her desire to speak truthfully to her followers, her desire to remain true to her brand image, and her desire to remain true to her personal values.

**Authentic to her followers.** A micro-influencer sees herself as a friend speaking to another friend; she prides herself on the authenticity of the content she shares to her friends, aka followers. Describing her followers as “friends” was common throughout every interview. Every influencer, when asked to describe her typical follower, thought that her followers were very similar to her regarding age, interests, and even geographical location. All of the individuals I talked to attributed her ability to be open and honest on social media to the level of following she possessed, and why people want to continue to follow her and engage with her account. “Lucy,” a 22 year old college student who has been creating promotional posts on Instagram since high school, stressed that she wants her online image to be relatable, and she tries very hard to create a natural-seeming Instagram feed despite her role as a promoter for several brands.

*I want it to be very normal and natural. And like, just a regular feed kind of. And I want people if they're gonna follow me to be like ... “I just wanna be a friend.”*

Although a common theme, there are a different levels of transparency that influencers felt compelled to share on social media. Some influencers want their followers to know every time a post is made through a partnership with a company in

order to remain authentic, and others ignore the legal requirements to clarify if a post is sponsored or not, saying authorities “can’t track everyone.” One influencer that admitted to not including the legally required hashtag #ad or #sponsored on her posts believes it will hurt her authenticity by breaking her “natural flow” and voice of her Instagram presence.

*I always think like, do I need to be saying, "This is a paid promotional post." And I believe in it, but I don't know it, it, it seems, it will come across fake. You know, like I don't, and I think the more naturally I integrate it into my feed, the more natural it feels for followers [i. Um, but if people ask, I would never be like, 'No, this is my own thing.' You know like- I'll completely answer honestly, always if somebody's asking, 'Is this a paid promotion?' Like, 'Yes.' Um, but a lot of times I really do just post things just because I like them. Like, a, a lot of it isn't paid, so yeah. Um, but I do think there's a lot of ethical gray area, um, especially with today. How many people are doing it. You know like you can't track everybody. ...people can get in trouble for not putting hashtag ad, paid promotion with, and I never do that. I, 'cause I, I mean unless in a contract with the company specifically says, 'This has to be your caption.' Um, just because I think it comes across as, eh, "Not for y'all." So I don't personally like to do that. Um, but I'm not, I don't do it in the way of, like, I'm trying to hide from people that I'm getting paid for this.*

Being authentic to her followers directly translates into the influencer’s belief that people follow her because she is relatable. Every influencer described her followers as girls who were “just like her” or wanted to be just like her. Because the influencer believes that her level of following is due to her relatability, remaining authentic is

pivotal to keeping her following and gaining new followers. The micro-influencer possesses a unique perception of self-identity in which she believes herself to “just be like everyone else” or “a normal girl,” while at the same time believing herself to be a source of inspiration; she is someone that other people look to follow. Because she believes she is speaking to another girl just like her, or “a friend,” the influencer wants to speak truthfully and share her normal life. At the same time, influencers admit to not living a normal life. The influencer doesn’t seem to recognize the contradiction that those two identities pose to one another. She sees herself as being ordinary and extra-ordinary at the same time, even in the same sentence in some of my interviews. Lucy described this contradiction. Here she is answering the question, “Why do you think your followers follow you?”

*I think like the relatability of it. ...I would wanna follow people who, like, are kind of going through, like, what I'm going through, like, doing what I'm doing. But, I guess, like, the Instagram scene is, like, perfect. You know, like... 'Oh, they live a great life.' Like, I get it... I do live a really nice life...but I'm portraying the highlights of it, you know not, like, not all of the moments of it. So I think people are like, 'She's my age, and she's like doing fun things. So, like, I wanna follow her.' You know?”*

Other influencers echoed the same sentiment. In one sentence, they would cite that people want to follow them because of how relatable their followers find them, and in the next sentence would say that their followers find them inspirational, living a life that others want.

**Authentic to her brand.** Authenticity for their followers connects directly to why micro-influencers feel pressure to remain authentic to their brand identity. The Instagram

influencer simultaneously desires to be authentic for her followers and be authentic to her brand identity; this dual desire is often a source of contradiction for the influencer.

Within their self-created rules to follow, influencers place immense importance on whether or not their posts reflect their curated, online brand identity. The individuals interviewed all understood the importance of creating a consistent brand identity so their followers and potential company partners can expect consistent messaging and content. Aly, a micro-influencer and recent college graduate who has had over 10,000 followers since she was 15 and now commands an audience of over 30,000 followers, explained the pressure she creates for herself to build an authentic yet filtered image on Instagram. Aly first explained her desire to be authentic with her followers, then continued to describe how her need to have a curated brand image affects her authenticity.

*I definitely try to keep it so it's real, but still, like, a business where, like, if companies are looking at it to work with me they're not, like, 'Oh this girl's just, like, having fun.' Like, you know- just keeping it a little more professional. Like, I wouldn't post photos of me, like, out with friends having like a crazy night. That, that's kinda what I mean with, like, the line...trying to keep it so it's still a little bit professional. But, it's definitely still, like, me... It's very me, but it definitely keeping, like, my image.*

For Aly and the other influencers, brand identity is an important element to distinguish themselves from other influencers on Instagram. Their brand identity is created through their unique use of photography, editing style, voice, and products they promote. Each influencer wants her followers to be able to distinguish her posts from others when scrolling through their Instagram feed. The posts are distinguished through



exceptional photography and/or unique editing, creating a instantly recognizable look, specific to each influencer. Once the follower is hooked with an interesting photo, the caption must express the influencer's specific brand voice, too. Influencers believe their brand identity is so strong and personal enough that their followers can easily tell if a post is disingenuous. For instance, Lucy is very mindful of balancing sponsored content with organic content in order to keep a consistent image.

*I like looking at the grid and like looking to see your profile ... seeing, like, kind of the colors and how they all work together and stuff... And I don't think it looks good when (sponsored posts and organic content) are right next to each other 'cause you can tell. Like, people know.*

**Authentic to her values.** An influencer caters her posts to what she thinks her followers and brand partners want to see. At the same time, she wants her posts to express her own creative identity and personal values. In part two of this chapter, I will address how creativity is a motivating factor for micro-influencers, but authenticity also affects an influencer's creativity on the social media platform. In our conversations, influencers expressed an inner struggle they faced between wanting to remain true to their creative desires, but also give followers what they want to see posted. Hayley, a 22 year old world-traveling college student who has had thousands of followers since the app first launched, explained her struggle between wanting to present her authentic voice and also wanting to please her followers.

*I think it's like part of...why people follow people on social media, I think it has a lot to do with being real and being vulnerable. I know that just from personal experience. I have un-followed so many accounts on Instagram that are just like, very typical*

*surface level people who put on um, a face for Instagram. And I think that even more so now, it's so easy to tell when someone's just posting to make money. Or posting to um, look a certain way. And that's when I realized I don't really wanna be a part of that. Um, but that's like the biggest toss up with Instagram is that, you're, you're showcasing your life, and it has to be interesting enough for people to follow you. But it also like, I just hate that. It's, it's, it's, I don't even know the right word. Like, it's just not very genuine. From certain people. And so, I think um, this past year, I have worked a ton to be more vulnerable and real again in, in post. Honestly what I wanna post, not what my followers maybe want. And I've seen a lot of backlash from that. I've lost a lot of followers. Um, I definitely have lost like business deals with companies. Because my engagement isn't as high. Um, and you know, there's tons of other people on Instagram who are growing at a rapid rate with their followers. And I am maybe not growing as fast anymore. But I don't really mind, just because I wanna make sure that when I post, it's like the content I want. Instead of just living my life for other people. Because that's really dis-in-genuine.*

At the end of our interview, Hayley expressed that she might be “more cynical” than others in her same position because she has been using Instagram and been popular on the social media platform for a long time, since the app first launched in 2011. It was apparent after all six interviews, however, that each micro-influencer I talked to expressed facing an inner struggle of posting what she wants to post versus what she views would be most relevant to her followers. Thus, personal values play a role in content creation. Sharing paid products can become a slippery ethical slope, and all

influencers in this sample were serious about remaining authentic when promoting products, whether they considered it an ethical decision or not.

Each influencer claimed that she would not accept a paid promotional contract for a company or product that she would not use herself without the partnership. To break this rule would betray the trust of her followers and betray her own personal values. At the same time, many individuals who participated in this study claimed that many, if not the majority, of other influencers on Instagram break this unspoken rule and enter into partnerships or promote products that they do not actually own or use themselves. The influencers in this study talked about turning down high-paying contracts with brands because the product or company either did not align with their values, or, mostly, that they would not use the product or did not actually like the product they were being paid to promote. Sydney, a recent college graduate who has been blogging and building her Instagram base for around two years, talked about her first time working with a brand and how it affected her decisions going forward.

*This was within the first few months of blogging. And after that second one, I was like, I am never gonna do this again. Um, because I just felt so not like myself. Um, one was uh, this handbag line called [Designer Name], and the only reason why I took that partnership is because I had seen a blogger um, who was under 10,000 followers at the time, um, who I followed and I trusted collaborate with them. And I was like ‘Oh, you know, this seems like something I can do too.’ And so when they reached out I was like, ‘What the heck? Like, me?’ And I, you know, accepted the bag and everything and I posted it. And I just, I just felt kind of like, gross-y, kind of?”*

I asked her to explain why she thought she felt that way, and she responded that she thought it was “because I wouldn't have bought it with my own money. Like, it wasn't something I would buy.”

Neither how long the influencer I interviewed had been promoting brands on Instagram, nor the number of followers she has, changed her desire to remain authentic to personal values. Aly, who has been on Instagram working as a micro-influencer for at least 6 more years than Sydney and has 30,000 more followers, shared the same opinion and a similar story:

*Whoever it is that I'm working with, I'm super serious about that I would not work with them unless I would go out and buy whatever they were trying to sell. At first I used to work with like just a ton of random ones because for free products...I used to occasionally get in a contract where I'd sign on with a company and be like, 'Oh this will be great.' And then, like, I got the products, and I ended up not loving it or something. For example, I worked for a shampoo company and I didn't like it but I, I had already signed a contract. So that was difficult. Whenever it was, like, I didn't know how to share something that I wasn't, like, excited about. And so after like that experience I just made sure whoever I was working with, I was like 100%, like, super excited about and would, like, 100% want to share their stuff. So I, um, with that I ended up, um, now I, whenever I do post sponsored content I still make it as real as possible.*

For an influencer, staying true to her personal values isn't just motivated by what she thinks her followers want to see. Influencers often see their account as an extension

of themselves, creating a personal connection to the brands they promote. If a brand fails to align with her personal values, the influencer does not want to promote it.

Because an influencer has such a deeply personal connection to her Instagram account, and often views it as an extension of herself, influencers admit to struggling with finding fulfillment in numbers, such as follower count or revenue generated through their account. Every influencer I talked to admitted to this and felt that finding fulfillment in numbers created an unhealthy mindset and unhealthy relationship with Instagram. Many overcame this struggle by first recognizing and becoming aware of the problem, and then taking time away from the social media platform to relieve the pressure of needing to share.

### **Part Two: What Motivates a Micro-Influencer?**

One of the biggest questions I sought to answer through these interviews was “Why do micro-influencers do what they do?” In every interview, influencers were quick to condemn finding fulfillment in numbers, whether it be monetary or follower count; instead, all of the interviewees found fulfillment through personal enjoyment of sharing and reaching people.

In the language of Wrzeniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz (1997), each saw their work on Instagram as a “calling.” Many influencers expressed why they share their lives with thousands of individuals on the internet, and three common motives appeared: using Instagram as a creative outlet, using Instagram as a platform to share their knowledge, and using Instagram as a way to connect with people.

**Instagram as a creative outlet.** Undoubtedly, these micro-influencers view Instagram as a fun, creative outlet. For every influencer, their original inspiration was

simply to share photos. Nearly every influencer I spoke to said explicitly that using Instagram as a creative outlet is a source of joy and fun for her. Using Instagram to share photos that they liked was a common origin story for most of their accounts, including for Lucy,:

*I never really had the intention of like possibly making money off of it, you know? I always just thought like, this is just fun creative, like sharing pictures.*

Hayley's motivation was similar. She wanted to stay connected with her friends and realized the creative outlet that Instagram gave her.

*I didn't wanna get Instagram at all, um, but then my friends convinced me when I was a sophomore in high school. Because my sophomore year, I um, lived with my cousins in Hawaii. (My friends) were like, 'Hayley, how are we gonna know like what you're doing and how, you know, we're gonna miss you... We wanna see like, your life in Hawaii.' And um, they were like, 'You're awesome at taking pictures, so you should get an Instagram.' Um, and finally I was like, 'Okay, sure. I'll get one.' And then I started really liking it. Because I realized it gave me a platform to kind of show off like more of my artistic side.*

Many of the influencers I interviewed cited love of photography as a continuing motivator, and each enjoyed that their account gives them an opportunity to share their creative side with the world. They see their photos as a distinguishing factor separating them from other similar influencers, and they often receive messages from their followers about how they take their photos and how their photos are edited. As Lucy's interview helps illustrate, taking and editing photos is a source of fun.

*I spend more time since it's gotten bigger, but I've always, I enjoy the process, I enjoy editing, and I enjoy, like, all my friends send me their pictures for me to edit for them. And like, my sister would send me her pictures to edit. And like, I take a lot of her pictures when I'm with her. So, it's fun but it's also it takes a lot of time.*

While every influencer expressed a belief in the strong role photography plays in creating brand recognition and attracting followers, even those who do not claim to love the art of photography find Instagram a creative outlet. For these individuals, they share creativity through fashion and brainstorming ideas for new content. Sydney has a blog linked to her Instagram account that addresses women's fashion and how-to style tips. Sydney expressed a wholehearted belief that clothes speak about who a person is, and she loves to express herself through style. Instagram gives her a place to share her most loved outfits, and she edits her photos to create a collage effect, often including dream accessories that she would pair if she was able to own them.

*Anyways, so I don't have like a photographer like that that can just follow me around, and so I've tried, I've had to get innovative with my photography, and that's when I started implementing the um, the checkers and I'm kind of leaning more towards like, a really Photoshopped, like, pictures. Like pictures that make you stop scrolling and be like, whoa, are those glasses Photoshopped in there? ... And so I definitely had to improvise with that aspect, which is why I'm doing the checkers, and I'm starting to add Photoshopped items into my photos, um, because I do know how to Photoshop... Um, and also like I can't really like afford to shop all the time like all these bloggers... And I think that that's how I ma- how I've been able to like, make up for my lack of photography.*

While expressed and fulfilled differently by each influencer, the desire to have a creative outlet drives influencers to continue to post and continue to create new content on the social media platform.

**Instagram as a platform.** Instagram was very often described as a platform in the interviews. For all of the influencers, they found satisfaction in having Instagram as a platform to share their thoughts, views, and opinions. None of them have any formal training in fashion, beauty, or health, but all share their personal recommendations hoping to inspire followers. It was common for an influencer to see herself as an expert, sharing niche knowledge with an amplified voice that comes from having thousands of followers. Typical topics include clothing and jewelry recommendations, travel tips, and sharing beauty products they love. Sydney sees her role as educating her followers on fashion and style:

*I'm not trying to sell anybody an outfit, I'm trying to like, educate them on a c-fashion concept about design or style, styling.*

Not every influencer uses her platform to talk exclusively about “surface level” topics like shopping and fashion; some believe in using their platform to talk about “the hard stuff” including struggles that young women face like bullying and relationships. The individuals I talked to differed on their opinions about what topics were appropriate to share on her personal account or blog. One group agreed that their followers were not interested in topics other than clothes and products. They believed that their followers do not follow them for content that broached difficult topics like relationships and personal struggles. The influencers in this fashion only group generally reasoned that discussing emotional topics would breach their brand identity and would confuse followers if their



content didn't fall in line with typical posts. Their platform is for sharing fashion, shopping, and product information only, mixing in a little of their daily life habits like food and exercise. Sydney talked about why she only focuses on fashion.

*That is my purpose ... to just create like a top of mind brand for everybody who follows me, like, I only talk about fashion, I don't talk about beauty, skincare, like, none of that, just fashion.*

Other influencers, however, expressed a belief that speaking about hard issues that women struggle with was an essential part or her favorite part of her platform. These women spoke of wanting to reach more people and do good with her platform.

Influencers in this group also stressed that being open and vulnerable adds to their follower engagement and follower count. While women in the fashion only group believe it hurts their brand image, the women expressing "fashion-plus" believe that it adds to their brand image and credibility. For Hayley, she claimed her willingness to be vulnerable online gave her an edge when first starting her blog which was integrated into her Instagram account.

*I think that um, actually why I gained so many followers was because um, since I had my blog I was so real on my blog. A lot of what I talked about on my blog was just every day like, struggles in high school like for a girl.*

Despite which group the women fell into, each one of them had a message she wanted to share with her audience, and Instagram was her platform to do so.

**Instagram as a connection.** Not only did each influencer view Instagram as a platform enabling her to broadcast a message (whether fashion only or fashion-plus) to the world, but each also expressed valuing Instagram as an avenue to make personal

connections with people. Influencers possess a dual desire to speak to all their followers and connect one-on-one with individuals at the same time. Almost every one of the micro-influencers that participated in this study referenced personal relationships that developed through her Instagram presence and her thankfulness for Instagram providing the connection. By first using Instagram as a platform to share information to a large audience, influencers then engage with individual followers personally through direct messages and comments (and thus exemplifying the “social” in social media; Shoenberger, 2017). What started as a mass tool for communication becomes a one-to-one conversation when these micro-influencers are able to answer their followers’ questions and share more information with them. Every influencer expressed how much she enjoyed her followers reaching out to her for advice, recommendations, and questions.

As an example, Hayley expressed that her goal was “always to reach people” not necessarily to “gain followers” or “be Instagram famous. It was honestly to reach more people.” Similarly, Sydney commented about treating “followers like ... friends in real life” continuing by stating,

*Like I've sent videos of myself talking in my DMs, like showing people like, this is what I mean. Because I'm like, kind of bad at explaining things over text. And so I'm like, I'm just gonna take a video and like, show them instead. Because that's what I would do for my friends.*

Influencers not only use Instagram to connect one-to-one with their followers, but also with other influencers; connecting with other influencers was a common occurrence for the individuals who participated in this study. For many of them, this connection

allowed them to create collaborative content and thereby gain more followers through cross promotion. Lucy and Aly both mentioned creating content together in the beginning of their Instagram careers, which exposed their respective followers to the other influencer's account. Maggie attends blogger meetups in her city, and cites some of her following to exposure she received by mingling with other influencers. The influencers I talked to differed on their range of opinion of other influencers they have met or collaborated with; while some expressed they enjoyed getting to know fellow influencers, others believed their mutual interaction illuminated some bad practices and mindsets of influencer marketing. Hayley told several stories about other influencers, and their actions that took her by surprise and inspired her to act and think about Instagram differently. During her travels, she was able to meet other influencers who she met through Instagram. One interaction with a particular influencer stood out:

*She was so much different than I thought she was gonna be. She was extremely obsessed with like taking pictures. Like so obsessed with Instagram. And like just, not what I thought. Her, her Instagram is just like completely, she's a completely different person. In person, like in real life. And that was the weirdest thing to me, because I was just like, "How do you look like this in social media?" And like, act like this and then in person you're just so different. And that like really threw me off. And I was like, "I don't wanna be like that."*

For these micro-influencers, Instagram has surpassed social media's simple role to share photos with friends; for them, Instagram is a tool to share their thoughts and opinions while reaching and connecting with thousands of people. An influencer's motivation to share content on Instagram, combined with her desire to remain authentic

to herself and her followers creates several implications for companies looking to use micro-influencer marketing in their marketing mix.

### **Part three: What Does a Micro-Influencer Desire From Brand Partnerships?**

One of the largest missing pieces in my secondary research was desires that influencers have from brand partnerships. While there are plenty of data available illustrating what influencer marketing can do for a brand, very little data are available to explain what influencers actually desire out of these partnerships. Despite influencer marketing's growing popularity among marketers, I was unable to find substantial formal research regarding how influencers want to work with brands and companies. Through our guided conversations, themes began to emerge that described what these micro-influencers desire out of brand relationships and how the influencers wanted to work with companies. In general, influencers expressed that the number of companies they actually work with is slim compared to the number of companies that reach out. One influencer described the ratio as 10 offers to 1 accepted offer, and some other influencers were even more fastidious. Harkening a bit to answers offered in Part One, above, an influencer would much rather work with a brand if the brand is interested establishing a meaningful partnership, if the brand allows her to reflect her own brand image, and if the brand understands the expectations of the influencer.

**A meaningful partnership.** First, influencers prefer substantial relationships with companies that last beyond just one paid Instagram post. Because an influencer invests so much of her personal vision into her account, she values a company that understands her investment by creating a meaningful partnership. A meaningful partnership often includes a company working with an influencer to plan a series of posts rather than a one-

off promotion, allowing the influencer to create her own content using her unique and creative voice, and the company continuously engaging with the influencer's content. Influencers are impressed by companies that continuously engage with her on Instagram and are appreciative of companies that give attention to building a relationship between the two parties that reaches past just a payment. As illustrated in my interview with Maggie, a micro-influencer and blogger based out of Memphis, TN:

*I mean some of them are a lot more personal than others. Like I recently um am doing something with [Company Name] which is like a skin care thing. And um they emailed me and then they're like Instagram DM'ed me and like they've been really like active and like trying to talk to me. And they're like ... like when I post to Instagram, they'll like reply to my story. And I'm just like that is really nice. You know? ... Makes me really want to work with someone more.*

Lucy admitted that if she was “actually going to use (the product)” she would much rather create a partnership with a series of posts spanning over one or two months rather than a “one off post.” By working with an influencer to plan a series of posts rather than a one-time sponsored post, an influencer feels that she is remaining true to her core values of presenting an authentic and real persona to her followers; this long term planning also challenges the influencer to be more intentional about the brands she chooses to partner with, as an influencer would prefer a long term partnership with a company she admires.

**Brands that allow reflection of an influencer's own image.** Second, an influencer wants sponsored posts to reflect her own image. She does not want to give up the authenticity or creativity that her page possesses for brand partnerships. Every influencer

cited that if a company had strict guidelines for paid posts, such as telling the influencer what the photo should look like or what the caption should be, it dissuades her from partnering with that company. Aly put it this way:

*Creative control is super important to me. 'Cause it, once a company starts telling me "You're gonna do this," and like, "We wanna post like this," it takes away, like, the real part of it in my mind.*

The ability to retain autonomy while partnering with a brand is incredibly important to a micro-influencer. For instance, from these interviews it appears that an influencer is much more likely to agree to partner with a brand if she has used the product before or already promotes the product on her page. Because the influencer already uses the product or has already promoted it on her page, she feels that a paid sponsorship post will be easily and naturally integrated into her online presence. Sydney talked about criteria that affect her decision to partner with a company:

*...if it's a brand that I've already shopped and I've already- I already love ... And everybody knows I already love it, I already blog about it for free, then that's when I would do a collaboration.*

Influencers want paid promotions to be as organic as possible, and if a company or product does not fall in line with the influencer's brand, she will not promote it. If a company is interested in using influencer marketing, they can ensure a positive and more meaningful promotion of their product by knowing that the influencer already is a fan of their product, rather than hoping the influencer will like their free product enough to share it on her page.

**Brands that understand expectations.** Lastly, an influencer wants companies to understand how the influencer industry is changing and what is expected from their partnership. Influencers are growing in their understanding of the power they can wield in brand partnerships, and they expect companies to compensate them fairly on industry norms. Aly, who has been working with brands for nearly 7 years, explained how she feels about influencers' transition to be paid fair compensation.

*... Influencers realized that they can make money off this and that this is, like, we are getting a huge benefit, a lot, there's a big shift in, like, like how we, what we expect on our end... It's like, then you're kinda like okay you're asking, like, a lot of me to do, like, a lot of work for you that, like, the only benefit is you're getting stuff. Like, I'm not getting a single benefit from this. So I think just being careful of companies who obviously haven't gotten up to date with, like, what they're asking.*

As suggested in these interviews, influencers are educating themselves on industry standards in regards to payment for promotional social media posts; influences in this sample largely expressed disappointment in companies who do not do the same. Aly talked about her negative feelings toward companies that reach out to her and aren't current on industry standards.

*I'm avoiding companies like that, that obviously haven't done their research into...what is normal now... 'Cause there are companies that just have no idea and I - it's important that...on the other end, like, companies should research, same as me... Like, I try to make sure I'm never asking like astronomical prices for what they're asking and vice versa.*

Research on the company's end is essential to ensuring a successful influencer partnership. Influencers expect companies to do research on the influencer's brand before reaching out for partnerships and appreciate when companies tailor their messages for the specific influencer to prove the company was aware of the influencer's unique brand. An influencer does not want to feel used by a company just for views. She does not want to feel like one of many influencers to which a company is reaching out. She wants to feel like a company is partnering with her for her personal page and her unique voice.

### **Conclusion**

Each influencer is uniquely passionate about why she is active on Instagram. As unique as each influencer is, however, ultimate goals did differ and are each very personal. None of the influencers claimed money or fame to be her ultimate desire, although it is questionable if one would admit that at all. Most of the influencers simply want to find satisfaction in their roles as influencers and to be always motivated by their own muses. Many of them find it healthy to take time away from the social media platform when they find it to be draining, consuming all of their attention or creativity, or find themselves posting in order to seek self worth. Ultimately, influencers are motivated by their own unique passions. Even so, several common themes did emerge in these interviews, organized into three parts as presented in Figure 3.

The importance of authenticity in an influencer's relationship with her followers, brand, and values, along with the motivating factors that drive her to share on Instagram, have a direct effect on what an influencer desires from brand partnerships. Authenticity, creativity, and brand image area all essential elements that an influencer feels must be maintained while working with companies as a liaison for their product. Based on these



findings, we now are led to ask the final question: what does this imply for marketing professionals?

*Figure 3. Themes identified in analysis of interviews.*

Themes Identified	
<b>The Importance of Authenticity</b>	Authentic To Her Followers
	Authentic To Her Brand
	Authentic To Her Values
<b>Micro-Influencer Motivations</b>	Instagram as a Creative Outlet
	Instagram as a Platform
	Instagram as a Connection
<b>Desires From Brand Partnerships</b>	A Meaningful Partnership
	Brands That Allow Reflection of an Influencer's Own Image
	Brands that Understand Expectations

## **CHAPTER FOUR: IMPLICATIONS FOR IMC PRACTICE**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide recommendations for individuals interested in becoming micro-influencers on Instagram and to provide recommendations for businesses or marketers who are interested in using micro-influencer marketing on Instagram. Although all recommendations are necessarily limited to findings from this study, they are nevertheless helpful given the lack of research in this area. It is also important to note that these recommendations are not step-by-step methods, but are instead meant to create a holistic understanding of an individual or business, a set of guidelines that are helpful to know in order to have a successful experience with micro-influencer marketing on Instagram.

### **Recommendations for Individuals**

For individuals who are interested in becoming micro-influencers on Instagram, I recommend diving deep into research. Exposure to the many influencers that are already on Instagram will give guidance and provide visual and practical examples regarding brand image, photography, and personal voice that I described in this paper.

Researching how individuals are able to create a cohesive brand image that balances the duality of personal and professional personas will be essential to crafting your own.

When you begin to create your online persona, find your niche. Every influencer that participated in this study has her own unique niche that she claimed attracted her

particular followers. Being a micro-influencer means being more directly tied to your audience, allowing the micro-influencer to focus on her purpose. Micro-influencing creates for a more devoted audience than macro-influencers because of the more intimate nature of having fewer followers. The micro-influencers who participated in this study all possessed a strong vision of their target audience, or typical follower. They know who their audience is and work to speak directly to them, authentically and personally, through voice and message.

Do not expect over-night recognition for your Instagram account. As discussed in Chapter 3, many of the influencers had been actively working on Instagram for many years. To increase brand awareness and gain more followers, I suggest connecting with other micro-influencers. Many of the successful influencers I spoke to gained followings by being active with other influencers on Instagram, posting photos with each other, and partnering together for events or promotions.

Lastly, I believe that if your goal is to become successful on Instagram by metrics such as followers, notoriety, or monetary compensation, you will be disappointed and might experience burnout. In our conversations, influencers admitted to struggling with finding their value in Instagram numbers when initially starting their page, and said that searching for success from followers or fame on Instagram is an unhealthy mindset and leads them to a unhealthy emotional state. Many of them said that spending a large amount of time on Instagram led them to take time away from the social media platform in order to reevaluate and step back from sharing.

## **Recommendations for Marketers**

If you are a marketer considering influencer marketing, consider what role it will play in an IMC campaign. Micro-influencers can provide a direct way to reach target markets and provide a trusted voice to sell your product or service. Companies interested in micro-influencer marketing need to consider the following conditions before diving head-first into an influencer marketing campaign.

1. Be prepared with the information detailed in Chapter 3. In particular, Part 3 of Chapter 3 (Desires for Brand Partnerships) discussed how micro-influencers desire to work with brands. The danger in choosing not to approach and partner with influencers in a manner that they desire is that your marketing efforts and dollars will not be as effective as they could be comparatively.

2. Choose the right influencers for your campaign. A mass message here will not work. Influencers are able to decipher if a message has been tailored for their account or if it is simply a stock email with their information filled in. Do your research to find micro-influencers whose values align with your company, whose followers would be interested in your product, and who already promote your product or products similar to yours. Partnering with influencers who are simply promoting your product for monetary compensation will hurt your brand image; followers are able to sniff out inauthenticity from influencers, and aligning your company through partnerships with such influencers will associate their followers' negative feelings to your brand. Choosing influencers who align with your brand's vision and values will make partnerships easier, more effective, and will give you a sounder piece of mind when you hand over creative freedom to the influencer.

3. Be willing to give creative freedom over to the influencer. If you have done your research on the influencer and discovered that she has a credible history of creating quality content, work with the influencer to create posts that both reflect your brand image and the influencer's brand image. The advantage of having an influencer sharing your product in an organic, natural way that integrates well into his or her curated feed is that her followers will associate their connection to the influencer to your brand or product. Explicitly telling the influencer how the photo should be composed and what the caption copy should read will not only lower your response rate from influencers you reach out to, but will also be disruptive to the influencer's followers, and therefore, a less effective use of your marketing dollars. This should not discourage you from giving an influencer any direction regarding campaign message, but instead encourage you to embrace the advantages of partnering with individuals who are passionate about creating original content tailor made for their audience.

### **Conclusion**

Influencer marketing can be a unique and innovative method of reaching target audiences outside of traditional media outlets. This study was conducted with the goal of filling in the gap between influencers' desires and marketers' desires, in order for more effective influencer-brand relationships for future campaigns. In this study, I discovered data that suggest influencers value real interactions and real relationships, rather than simply presenting a facade. While their presence on Instagram is curated, planned, and strategic, influencers believe their online persona's reflect their own identity quite personally. It is important for marketers to remember the person behind the social media

account if they hope to secure a lasting relationship, as well as gain the full benefits of influencer marketing.

The findings of this study are limited to the women I interviewed and their characteristics; the individuals focused on fashion, had under 34,000 followers, and were all young women between the ages of 22-24. The findings are also limited to the interview questions asked; the questions were presented in a gentle manner as not to make the interviewee feel uncomfortable, and therefore, the questions did not ask about information the influencer could consider proprietary such as her methodology to creating her account, explicit photo editing techniques, or techniques for growing a following. To further the findings of this study, one could choose a different population of influencers and cross examine the results in order to determine if influencer desires are continuous despite difference in follower count, age, expertise, and gender. Additionally, conducting a series of follow up interviews with the same participants could allow the researcher to ask about more sensitive topics as he or she builds trust with the influencers. Finally, implementing the findings and recommendations in this study as a marketing professional and measuring its effects would give a greater understanding of how companies can improve not only their relationships with influencers, but also the results of influencer marketing campaigns.

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## APPENDIX

### A. Interview Guide

I appreciate you talking to me today. Our interview should take roughly an hour to an hour and a half. Please speak your mind and be open and honest in your answers. Should I ask anything that you feel uncomfortable answering, do not feel any pressure to answer. Let me know and we can move on to some other topics. You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell me. All responses will remain confidential and will be combined with others to ensure confidentiality. Is it ok with you if I record this interview for my records? No one will have access to this transcript but myself and my thesis advisor. By continuing, you acknowledge that you are 18 years or older.

1. To get started, tell me a little about yourself.
  - a. Where they live, educational background, professional background
2. As you may know, I contacted you today about your your Instagram account, or your relationship to Instagram. Can you tell me about your Instagram story?
  - a. What made you get started?
  - b. Did you have a goal when you started? Do you have goals now? Are they the same?
  - c. When did your following grow? Why do you think that your following grew?
  - d. How much time do you devote to Instagram and has it changed since first joining?
  - e. Listen for: WHY THEY'RE ON INSTAGRAM
3. Use of social media brings up questions about how much personal information to share. I am interested in how you fall on this issue.
  - a. Do you make separations in your social media space between private and public life?
  - b. How do you manage that?
  - c. Do you view your account as professional, personal or a mix of both?
4. Another question that comes up with social media is a person's network - their followers and their reach. Can you talk a little about how you view these aspects of Instagram?
  - a. Take a minute to put on the hat of one of you typical followers- describe the typical follower- is there a typical follower? What do you think

- draws these people?
- b. Does what you do on Instagram draw a certain type of person? If so, what are those things that draw them?
  - c. What elements of your Instagram persona/page/brand do you think contributes to the level of following you have?
    - i. Aesthetic? Content message? Personal Voice? Blog?
  - d. What is most important to you in regards your account? Is it the same as what you consider to be most important to popularity?
5. How do you define success when it comes to Instagram?
- a. What is most important to you in measuring the success of your Instagram account? (Follower count? Engagement? Monetary/business gained? Personal enjoyment?)
  - b. Is it important to you that you view your account as successful?
  - c. What elements do you do consider important in order to achieve your success?
6. The term “Instagram Influencer” has become a buzz word recently. What does “Instagram influencer” mean to you?
7. Based on your understanding of an influencer, would you consider yourself an influencer?
- a. How does what you described an influencer relate to you? Are there similarities? Are there differences?
8. Have you ever been paid to share something on your Instagram account, whether monetarily or otherwise (free products, etc)? If yes:
- a. Can you tell me about the first time that happened?
  - b. How often have you shared sponsored content?
  - c. Do you reach out to companies or do they reach out to you?
  - d. Why do you think these companies reach out or agree to pay you for sharing about their product?
  - e. Do you see any connection between your followers and the companies that you work with?
  - f. Without giving me numbers, etc, approximately what proportion of your income would you attribute to Instagram?
  - g. What factors go into you deciding to work with a brand?
9. What does ethics mean to you in regards in Instagram?
- a. Does it influence who you do business with?

b. What you post?

10. What advice do you have to up and coming people who want to gain followers and make money using Instagram?
11. Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to add?
12. Are there any individuals you know that are similar to you and would possibly be willing to be interviewed also?

## **B. Interview Consent Form**

SMBHC Honors Thesis

*By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. [ \_ ]*

### **Description**

The purpose of this research project is to determine how people interact with Instagram. We would like to ask you a some questions about your experiences. You will not be asked for your name or any other identifying information.

### **Cost and Payments**

It will take you approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete this interview.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Should I ask anything that you feel uncomfortable answering, do not feel any pressure to answer. Let me know, and we can move on to some other topics. We do not think that there are any other risks.

### **Confidentiality**

All responses will remain confidential and will be combined with others to ensure confidentiality. Your statements may be quoted in the reporting of research findings. All quotes will be attributed to pseudo-names. No one will have access to the interview transcript but myself and my thesis advisor.

### **Right to Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Ms. Kevin or Dr. Bodie in person, by letter, or by telephone (contact information listed above). You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

### **IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the signing below I consent to participate in the study.

Participant Name:

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Participant Signature:

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Date:

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**C. Audio Release**

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI RELEASE

For valuable consideration, by initialing next to each statement I do hereby authorize The University of Mississippi, its assignees, agents, employees, designees, and those acting pursuant to its authority (“UM”) to:

\_\_\_\_\_ Record my participation and appearance on video tape, audio tape, film, photograph or any other medium (“Recordings”).

\_\_\_\_\_ Use my name, likeness, voice and biographical material in connection with these recordings.

\_\_\_\_\_ Exhibit, copy, reproduce, perform, display or distribute such Recordings (and to create derivative works from them) in whole or in part without restrictions or limitation in any format or medium for any purpose which The University of Mississippi, and those acting pursuant to its authority, deem appropriate.

\_\_\_\_\_ I release UM from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of such Recordings including any claims for defamation, invasion of privacy, rights of publicity, or copyright.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_