

WHAT DO THE INFLUENCERS THINK?

An analysis of brand-influencer relationships from health and fitness influencers' perspective

A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
GRACE HUGUELET
Jamie Flink, Chair
Brandon Butcher
Jon Stemmler

May 2021

Abstract

Social media influencers have become a popular brand marketing tool that many businesses are investing in, especially within the health and fitness industry. The interactivity and personalization of social media platforms have created niche communities of followers that share common interests and goals, many of which follow social media celebrities known as influencers, who embody these communities' values. Recognizing the benefits that influencers can provide, the health and fitness industry has seized this opportunity to select individuals who have built their own community of followers and sense of credibility in their allotted field. While significant industry research has been done from the brand's perspective, very few have taken the influencers' point of view into consideration. Most existing research in this area is quantitative in nature and focuses on the usefulness of influencers to marketing professionals and what influencers provide consumers. This study will analyze the relationship between brands and influencers from the influencer's perspective. Using semi-structured interviews with health and fitness influencers, this study will explore what makes a successful partnership between these two parties and what types of agreements allow influencers to build an effective engagement strategy, according to influencers themselves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
CHAPTER 3: PROFESSIONAL ANALYSIS.....	17
APPENDIX	
1. INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE.....	26
2. WEEKLY FIELD NOTES.....	30
3. EVALUATION FROM MANAGEMENT SUPERVISOR.....	38
4. SELF-EVALUATION.....	40
5. PROJECT PROPOSAL.....	44

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the past decade, social media has emerged and become one of the primary digital platforms for business marketing. The interactivity and personalization of these platforms has resulted in a new form of endorsers with an emphasis on the individual over the company. Social media influencers have built their own community of followers, formulated an unmatched level of credibility, and integrated business tactics into their personal social media accounts.

According to Business Insider Intelligence, the influencer marketing industry was worth upwards of \$7 billion in 2019 with a projected net worth of \$15 billion by 2022 (Schomer, 2019).

Influencers exist across all social media platforms, though nearly 79% of brands utilize Instagram for their influencer campaigns (Schomer, 2019). With the formation of distinct interest communities, health and fitness has become its own niche online. For the purpose of this study, health and fitness social media influencers are defined as influencers who create content that provides their audience with health and/or fitness information, such as dieting tips, recipe ideas, exercise routines, and reviews on food or sports apparel. These social media celebrities' influence on their community—both in mindset and purchase-intent—is unprecedented in comparison to previous versions of celebrity endorsers since social media influencers are average people who get propelled to fame by their followers, creating a unique connection between influencers and their community. Despite this, many business professionals do not take these media moguls' professional perspective and expertise into account before hiring and outlining the parameters of the partnership or contractual obligations.

Studies have been done to analyze the usefulness of social media platforms for branding and marketing purposes (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, 2015; Holt, 2016; Gao & Feng, 2016; Yan, 2011) and the role of influencers on these platforms (Booth & Matic, 2011; Dodd, 2018; Kapitan

& Silvera, 2016; Neal, 2017; Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017; Ioanid, Militaru & Mihai, 2015). Despite this previous research, there are existent deficiencies in academic research regarding the relationship between brands and influencers as well as information from the influencers' perspective. By analyzing influencers under the theoretical frameworks of the social media message transformation process (Kilgour et al., 2015) and Albert Bandura's social learning theory (Lim et al., 2017), one can see the imperative role they have in formulating effective marketing and branding strategies in the modern age, especially within the health and fitness field. Taking influencers' professional opinions and expertise into account could provide marketing professionals from fitness apparel companies, health and wellness consumer packaged goods (CPG) brands, and workout-focused nutrition product companies with insight into the influencers' unique perspective on what makes a more desirable and successful partnership.

The prevalence of health and fitness communities on social media makes this subject especially relevant for research purposes. Despite previous studies that focus on the value and purpose of social media influencers in marketing strategies, there are existent deficiencies in academic research regarding the brand-influencer relationship according to influencers. This gap in research has resulted in these remaining questions:

RQ1: What makes an effective brand-influencer partnership from the influencer's perspective?

RQ2: What types of agreements and collaborations do influencers find allow them to create a strategy that is most effective in engaging their followers?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The means of marketing are constantly on an evolutionary path. With the birth of the internet and the emergence of social media platforms, corporations have been forced to reevaluate their communication tactics — the health and fitness industry is no exception. Millennials are one of the largest target audiences for this corporate sector. According to Pew Research from 2019, 86% of millennials say that they use social media (Vogels, 2019). Looking further into millennials' online tendencies, it was found that searching for health information is the third most popular activity for all internet users over the age of 18a (Vogels, 2019). The high level of interaction on these platforms has altered the level of mass accessibility available to corporations. Unlike previous unidirectional communication platforms such as television, print media, or radio, social media platforms have made these points of entry more accessible and interactional for the audiences and the marketers themselves (Neal, 2017).

The usefulness of these platforms to corporations lies in their ability to make the commercial personal. Social media is a participatory platform, allowing audiences and consumers to interact with and reshape the message being put out as a part of marketing campaigns. This message evolution transforms the perception of a corporate message to a social one (Kilgour et al., 2015). This social media transformation process may be useful for a personalized perception of a corporate message; however, a balance must be kept between the corporation and the interactive consumer. To achieve this message transformation while also maintaining the brand's message, corporations must be able to manage what is being said and, more importantly, who this message is coming from (Hsu, Liu & Lee, 2010).

The global outreach network that social media platforms provide to professional organizations can make successfully targeting audiences increasingly difficult without dividing

these mass users into groups based on interests or preferences, known as crowdcultures (Holt, 2016). A company's ability to target niche interest groups rather than attempting to reach the general public will further reshape these commercial messages into more personalized information. Health and fitness communities on social media are one of these crowdcultures that can be targeted by organizations that fall under this same area of interest. Fitness groups are increasingly popular on social media due to the anonymity that they provide users. Studies comparing computer-mediated and traditional face-to-face interactions have found that indirect interactions can often relieve pressure and sentiments of judgment induced by peers (Teodoro & Naaman, 2013). When analyzed through a health and fitness lens, this finding can be used as an explanation of the high use of the internet for health information. These social media fitness groups often provide their community with exercise and diet information, allowing audience members to attempt new health and fitness routines while avoiding potential feelings of pressure from those around them.

Marketing and Branding

One of the primary purposes that social media marketing serves is the creation and enforcement of branding. The concept of individual profiles and personalized posts allows companies to shape their public portrayal, creating a brand through their social media accounts. This sense of individuality is meant to build brand awareness or the "salience of the brand" to the consumer. In other words, a company's individual brand image can help set them apart from competitors in the minds of the audience (Gao & Feng, 2016, p. 880). Branding is not reserved for social media platforms, but the personal involvement that these platforms provide users can create a unique audience connection to corporate brands.

Similar to the concept of corporate message transformation, social media's interactivity allows branding to be placed into the hands of the consumer. The participatory nature of social media has the company curate their message and allows the audience member to share, comment, or engage with the branding post. The original message and company image are strengthened through user involvement as audiences personally identify and actively engage with it (Yan, 2011). Rather than solely relying on the originally disseminated message, consumers become the brand's secondary communicators. This consumer involvement makes the brand message appear to be more social while also creating a unique connection between the brand and the social media user.

Much like companies' social media accounts, personal accounts act as the user's own brand that they portray to their followers thus making their posts a part of their individual online image. By interacting with professional branding messages, consumers personally identify with the brand and allow the corporate brand to become a part of their personal one. The social connection that companies create through their social media accounts can also help formulate a conversation between the organization and its targeted audience. The users' interactions can provide indirect feedback to the corporate account and facilitate direct conversations between the audience member and the organization itself. In the mind of the consumer, such interactions give them a voice and thus a stronger personal connection to the brand and the company as a whole (Yan, 2011).

However, the control that social media platforms provide its users only go so far. The social media platforms themselves can be limiting for branding purposes. The platforms do not give sole creativity rights to users due to the parameters that exist within the platform's settings. The websites' interfaces create barriers for brand creativity, removing some of the power from

the hands of the company and placing it into the control of the social media organization (Yan, 2011). The anonymity of social media can also weaken a company's branding strategy. One of the many unique benefits that social media platforms provide corporate users is the ability to directly interact with their audience. In order to do this successfully, these organizations must maintain a singular identity. Companies with shared pages or accounts can sometimes present a non-unified brand message, confusing the targeted audience and weakening their brand image altogether (Yan, 2011).

Health and fitness companies have joined this social media branding culture, making physical activity and a healthy lifestyle a personal and corporate brand. Fitness is intrinsically tied to the individual as it affects one's personal and public body image, as does the nutritional information being provided by these influencers. Its direct connection to one's outward appearance can make it an indicator of status and a means of social capital thus becoming a part of one's personal brand (Powers & Greenwell, 2017). Companies have used this social emphasis on an attractive appearance to commercialize physical activity. The creation of fitness videos that include celebrity guests was one of the original means of branding and commodification of physical movement (Powers & Greenwell, 2017). This form of branding has endured a series of evolutions, one of the largest occurring after the creation of social media. Such videos are now accessible instantaneously with no consumer fees tied to them. The usefulness of celebrity endorsers has remained relevant with the passing of time, especially in the health and fitness industry; however, with additional content platforms available, marketing professionals are no longer solely reliant on Hollywood stars' fame. Before social media platforms emerged, the opportunity for fame was limited to Hollywood films or television shows. Now that there are additional means in which individuals can consume content, the ways in which fame is created

and recognized has expanded. Rather than relying on the fame of Hollywood celebrities to represent these brands, influencers have filled this gap and bring their own knowledge and passion for their respective industry to the table.

Social Media Influencers

Influencer marketing emerged from the birth of social media; however, the concept is far from revolutionary. Companies have leaned towards this form of marketing because of the positive effect that their image has on the brand and the large communities of followers that they bring with them (Dodd, 2018). Influencer endorsed messages are often seen as more reliable by audiences, making their methods of persuasion more successful. According to Mintel research, the number of adults following social media influencers has increased from 54% in 2019 to 61% in 2020 and their feelings of connection and trust in influencers has also followed this increasing trend (Poelking, 2020). Looking at the platforms being used by brands, Instagram (79%), Facebook (46%), and Youtube (36%) rank highest for influencer campaigns (Schomer, 2019). Instagram's platform allows influencers to disseminate content in a variety of lengths and mediums, including both in-feed photos and photo collages known as "carousels;" short, informal videos known as "stories;" live in-time videos; and longer, curated videos known as "reels". Youtube's platform provides influencers with the ability to create longer-form, more in-depth content for their audience to consume. Facebook acts as the happy medium between Instagram and Youtube, allowing for both short- and long-form content from influencers. All of these platforms allow the user publishing the content to create a caption to offer explanation and context to the published content and provide personal stories that are related to the shared content. Other users' ability to comment on the content creates a community that is unique to social platforms, ranging from family members to complete strangers providing their input.

Depending on the influencer and crowdculture's focus, certain platforms better align with their objectives. Corporations have recognized this influencers' power on these platforms and have adjusted their endorsement tactics to match with the modern age.

Celebrity endorsers were the original influencers, with companies utilizing their celebrity status to market and sell products. These individuals helped create a sense of company credibility and their connection to the product had consumers mimicking their words and actions. Since the creation of social media, a new endorser has emerged—the social media influencer. The influence that these social media celebrities have on their followers closely aligns with Bandura's social learning theory (Lim et al., 2017). According to this theory, individuals gain motivation and conduct particular behaviors from a number of socialization factors and influences. Studies have tied consumer consumption patterns to suggestions received from celebrities or endorsers. An influencer's power and prestige among their community of followers when paired with endorsements can influence a follower's intent to purchase the product (Lim et al., 2017).

Endorsers and influencers both utilize the social learning theory; however, social media influencers offer unique benefits to companies. An endorser's prestige becomes useful when their name is tied to a product. Their fame can be perceived as expertise, often because of their physical attractiveness, likability, credibility, intelligence, and/or trustworthiness. Whether or not the endorser is actually an expert on the subject at hand often gets overshadowed by their appearance or other likable features. Brands leverage the image of the individual to transfer positive associations from the endorser to the brand or product itself (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Brands also use the endorser's credibility, reputation, and audience familiarity with the endorser to make a more positive and credible impact on the customer on behalf of the brand being

marketed. The features of social media continue to add additional layers of influence. While endorsers may have a group of fans, they lack the direct line of communication that influencers have with their niche community of followers (Lim et al., 2017). Social media influencers share the level of fame and positive attribution that endorsers offer, but influencers bring a more human connection to their audience thus making their mass marketing efforts feel more personal. The term coined by Holt and defined in the "Social Media as a Communication Platform " section explains the advantages of targeting crowdcultures for marketing purposes. Influencers' followers make up their own niche networks formulating crowdcultures that share similar interests. The influencer is the leader of these crowdcultures and takes on a celebrity-esque role. Much like a typical endorser, an influencer's fame and prestige among their niche audience members can motivate consumers to mimic the influencer's words and actions, including purchasing any products that they promote (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Their status along with their large social media following provides companies with a wide scope of a connected network of consumers to target with a credible idol to change the perception of their brand's message from a commercial format to a more social version (Kilgour et al., 2015). This is especially evident with the division of social media users into niche communities. An influencer's subject matter expertise often extends to products and services within the given industry which makes them attractive to companies and brands who want to reach their community of followers. In the health and fitness community, these products and actions are associated with the body and physical movement, making the role of influencers even more important.

As mentioned in the "Marketing and Branding" section, one of the most important social media marketing tactics of companies is the adjustment of the brand message from a corporate version to a more humanized one. Influencers take on this intermediary position to reach their

audience (Ioanid et al., 2015). Companies utilizing influencers in their marketing strategy create a two-step flow of communication, with influencers at the center. Rather than organizations directly targeting their audience with a corporate message, these companies allow influencers to filter and repackage their message with a more personalized note, acting as the gatekeepers between the brand and consumers (Ioanid et al., 2015). Influencers are given the opportunity to provide recommendations and personally-phrased information on various brands and products, making their marketing feel less prepackaged and more authentic. Studies have shown that social media consumers have little interest in generic marketing ploys on social media due to the interactive and personalized nature of the platforms (Holt, 2016). With a high number of corporate messages from a single source on their feeds, social media users can become averse to the companies targeting them. Influencers work against this “brand spam” to make these corporate posts feel more authentic and organic (Holt, 2016). Influencers are also given direct, real-time access to consumers in a way that other forms of marketing do not provide. Not only can the influencer reach their audience, but their followers can also respond and weigh-in on the message that they are receiving. Influencers allow for marketing to become more of a conversation rather than an advertisement. With celebrity endorsers, their fanbase and reachable audience remains abstract, yet with influencers, a brand can gain direct access to a tangible and quantifiable fanbase.

Health and fitness corporations are especially reliant on human liaisons due to their direct connection to the body. The nutrition and fitness components of this industry requires spokespeople who are considered experts, both physically and educationally, to visibly portray and brand physical activity and provide healthy and accurate nutritional advice. With the emergence of social media and the individual accounts that make up these platforms, health and

fitness companies have selected influencers to embody and repackage their products and brand message to target their community of followers (Powers & Greenwell, 2017). These individuals act as hybrid endorsers, providing health and fitness content, such as exercise tutorials and diet recipes, while promoting corporate brands through their posts. This crowdculture of influencers relies primarily on Instagram to disseminate their content. The instantaneous nature of the platform as well as the various posting options that it offers—such as individual photos, short stories, video carousels, and more—better aligns with the short snippets of content that they are putting out. This often includes posting photos or videos of themselves wearing fitness clothing lines and discussing the items' quality or preparing meals while naming the different food brands being used. Due to their subject area, many health and fitness influencers have professional degrees, credentials, or proof of professional training in order to provide their community with safe, legitimate information regarding nutrition and fitness routines (Landy, 2016). The conversational nature of Instagram is another reason why it is the top contender. Influencers create personalized captions and their followers join in on the discussion through the comments. With both the visual and conversational features, Instagram is where influencers initially turn to build their community, and because another platform has yet to provide a significantly better experience, fitness influencers remain dedicated to this platform. As explained by the social learning theory, their connection to and approval of the product is often enough to create positive sentiments about the brands listed and motivate consumers to purchase the product (Lim et al., 2017). The trust and credibility that the influencers' build in the company and products are particularly important for the health and fitness realm since consumers entrust their physical wellbeing to these corporations (Dodd, 2018).

Social media influencers also act as tools of motivation and personal identification for their community of followers. For health and fitness influencers, this is exceedingly important. As previously mentioned, physical attractiveness and a perception of expertise often go hand in hand. Research has shown that source attractiveness for endorsements directly impacts the endorsement's effectiveness with its targeted audience (Rashid, 2019). For influencers in the health and fitness industry, their physical appearance, indicating the effectiveness of their fitness routines and diet tips, is the key to their credibility as branding tools. These social media celebrities also gain credibility by maintaining a balance between appearing "just like us" and remaining slightly above the status quo (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Endorsements are more likely to resonate with social media users that feel as if they personally resemble or identify with the influencer disseminating the brand message (Lim et al., 2017). While an attractive appearance and credibility may be crucial for all influencers, the market in which health and fitness influencers fall under requires an even higher level of both of these attributes.

Though influencers can most closely be compared to endorsers, many originated as bloggers. Both bloggers and influencers market themselves as "authentic" consumers of brands and products, communicating to their audience a more genuine account of their experience with these brands and products (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Bloggers' credibility is historically contingent upon their genuine interest and knowledge in a niche industry, and influencers have emerged to become the modern version of these personal content creators. The basis of social media influencing is creating and disseminating visual content for their audience while being paid for doing so. Bloggers rely more heavily on editorial content to get this same message across to their community. As communication trends have shifted from text to visually-oriented content and the focus on the self-image has become increasingly popular, many bloggers have

fully transitioned to the influencer economy to stay afloat or have continued running their blog while also participating in the influencer landscape (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020).

The Business of Influencers

Since social media marketing continues to evolve with each platform update, the influencer business model follows suit. There is no one-size-fits-all price tag or strategy. Looking back on the original influencers, a celebrity endorser's price relied on their level of fame and the amount of work that they put into their endorsement. Did they endorse the products once or did they agree to be part of a frequently aired commercial? Social media influencers have similar social status intricacies, yet their business agreements can be even more complex. There is always some form of monetary exchange between businesses and influencers, but it is not necessarily a paycheck.

Because influencers are the modern-day bloggers, their methods of payment can be easily compared for a better understanding of the complexities behind influencer compensation. The work and pay of bloggers versus influencers differs despite both being invested in content creation and attempting to authentically evaluate or represent a brand. Bloggers are typically required to conduct extensive research on a particular topic before drafting and eventually publishing the blog all in one post. This can take hours, if not days or weeks to complete. Bloggers are then compensated for the post, either by an hourly wage or a set price for the single piece of content. Influencers, on the other hand, are tied to the instantaneous-nature of social media. Their content requires additional planning and creativity due to the constant demand of social media platforms. Though they may not spend days researching a single topic, influencers have to make a number of unique posts each day and interact with their community to remain relevant. With this increase in demand and abundance of content options, influencers'

compensation is tailored to reflect their agreement with the brands that they represent. It is important to note that not all bloggers and influencers are paid; many begin to participate in the industry's discourse because of their personal interest in the field, not necessarily their goal to forge a career in this area. When a blogger or influencer experiences success, defined by building a large community of followers or subscribers, the platform then provides monetization opportunities through digital advertising on their blog and possibly as transitioning to a paid influencer.

Influencers' sponsored posts are never spontaneous. They may post their own content in between brand-sponsored content, yet their personal and professional brand must align in order for all of their posts to be viewed as genuine content. The creativity behind the post may be under their discretion, but the type of content that they are posting is strategically planned and outlined in the represented brand's business agreement. The following are common influencer marketing strategies, many of which involve alternative forms of compensation to an average paycheck (Kosaka, n.d.):

- Gifting: providing your influencer with free products or services in exchange for a review, mention, or post.
- Guest Posting: creating or contributing marketing content for an influencer's blog.
- Sponsored Content: paying the influencer to feature your brand on their social platforms.
- Co-Creating Content: working with an influencer to create content to be featured on their social platforms, your website, a third-party website, or a combination of both.
- Mentions: Similar to sponsored content, the influencer is paid to feature the company's content. However, they are mentioning the brand, sharing the brand's content, or posting about the brand members rather than simply advertising a single product or service.

- Giveaways and Contests: The brand creates a contest or giveaway and asks the influencer to advertise it to their followers.
- Influencer Takeover: Having the influencer take over the company’s social media platforms for an allotment of time.
- Affiliates: Assigning a unique code to the influencer so that they collect a percentage of each sale that they gain for the company.
- Discount Codes: Providing the influencer with a unique code for them to give to their community of followers.

The influencer marketing strategies outlined above may provide the influencer with compensation in a number of ways. Typical bi-weekly paychecks, itemized payment determinations, free products, and discounts are common forms of compensation given to social media influencers (Kosaka, n.d.).

As is the case with all endorsements, influencer pay is also contingent upon their popularity within their community. In other words, the more followers that an influencer has, the higher their fees. Social media influencers have been divided into tiers based on their number of followers and thus the number of consumers that their posts reach (Pattee, 2020). Depending on the business objectives of a brand, influencers from one particular tier may be more applicable to their marketing strategy than others:

Influencer Tier	Number of Followers on Instagram
Mega-Influencer	Over 1 million
Macro-Influencer	400 thousand to 1 million
Mid-Tier Influencer	75 thousand to 400 million

Micro-Influencer	10 thousand to 75 thousand
Nano-Influencer	1 thousand to 10 thousand

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has recognized the prevalence and power that influencers have with consumers and has released legal regulations for these social media celebrities to follow. There are a number of disclosures that influencers must make to their community of followers anytime they are promoting a product. This is especially relevant for top-tier influencers as their endorsements reach a much larger audience than other influencer tiers. If the influencer has any “financial, employment, personal, or family relationship with a brand,” they are obligated to disclose that they are endorsing the product (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). This is not restricted to those receiving a paycheck for their posts or comments - influencers are required to disclose the relationship if they received anything of value, including free or discounted items, to mention the product. The FTC highlights that likes, tags, pins, and similar ways of showing that they like a brand or product is still considered an endorsement (2019). The disclosures should be placed with the endorsement message, not hidden elsewhere on their account. For photo endorsements, the disclosure should be on the image itself, not just in the caption. For video endorsements, the disclosure should be present in the video, not just in the description. For those making endorsements via livestream, the disclosure should be repeated. The number of content options available to influencers and the frequency of social media platform updates can make it difficult to outline all of the ways in which endorsements can be made and how they should be disclosed.

Chapter 3: Professional Analysis

What Do the Influencers Think?

Insights into what influencers are looking for in brand partnerships

WHAT DO THE INFLUENCERS THINK?
Insights into what influencers are looking for in brand partnerships

- BRANDS WHO UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT THE INFLUENCER'S DEDICATION TO THEIR COMMUNITY**
- BRANDS WHO MAINTAIN A BALANCE BETWEEN PROVIDING DIRECTION AND ALLOWING CREATIVE FREEDOM**
- BRANDS WHO CLEARLY COMMUNICATE THEIR CAMPAIGN GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS**
- BRANDS WHO RECOGNIZE THE INFLUENCER'S SOCIAL EXPERTISE AND UNIQUE POSITION WITH CONSUMERS**
- BRANDS WHO SEEK AUTHENTIC LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS**

In the past three years, the influencer marketing industry's worth has more than doubled, with brands spending \$7 billion on this form of marketing in 2019 to a projected \$15 billion spend by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). Social media influencers have become a popular brand marketing tool that many businesses are investing in.

As a professional working in influencer marketing, I have spent most of my time ensuring that the clients' needs are met, yet I rarely ask the influencers themselves what they are looking for in these business arrangements. I began to wonder what influencers believe makes an effective brand partnership and what types of agreements and collaborations they have found to be most successful.

"I'm not even sure if I would consider myself an influencer, I guess, because I don't necessarily go out of my way to sign partnerships," Plus-Sized Influencer said. "The partnerships that I've had...almost all of them have been the companies approaching me. Occasionally I have reached out to some people whose products I really like, but more often than not, I treat it as a bonus."

Plus-Sized Influencer is not alone in her story of stumbling upon social media stardom. I spoke with ten health and fitness micro-influencers about their professional journeys and brand partnerships to determine what they are truly looking for when it comes to business relationships.

Although the interviewed influencers fall within the health and fitness industry, their responses to my questions about what they search for in brand partnerships are applicable to all industries. I have replaced these ten women's true names with monikers to provide the most honest insights about their work.

What I found is that many of their requests are intangible. Rather than asking for specific contract terms or conditions, all of the influencers highlighted a need for understanding and creative collaboration with the brands.

According to these influencers, there is a lot more to influencing than taking aesthetically pleasing photos littered with brands' products. This business of theirs is deeply personal since their work consists of sharing intimate glimpses into their everyday life.

"My Instagram has always been dictated by what is going on in my life," Bigger Than Biking Influencer said. "It's a lot of sharing my life and sharing what would normally be really private things for people that they don't want to talk about – I talk about it."

It is no secret why influencers are valuable marketing tools yet little research has been done from the influencers' perspective. I took a deep dive into what influencers are looking for as business

professionals, giving influencers the chance to describe what they are searching for in brand partnerships.

Brands Who Understand the Influencer's Dedication to Their Community

Influencers have carefully curated their own brand in a similar but even more personal manner than other business professionals. Influencers grow and profit off sharing glimpses into their own lives, knowing that this is what truly engages their audience.

“I think brands now are slowly realizing that something that feels like an ad, that feels salesy, that feels like the perfect scenario, doesn't always resonate with the community and then there's no point to it,” Vegan Influencer said.

While these windows into their personal lives may be filtered and edited to perfection, their brand is truly built upon their personality and lifestyle.

“I've grown a lot through [my profile page], and so it's grown with me,” College Influencer said. “It's more about empowering other people but also keeping it real with the stuff that I do.”

Because an influencer's work is so personal, it is especially critical that brand marketers understand the influencer's own brand and respect the relationships they have built with their followers over time. Influencers create these communities by opening their personal lives up for public consumption, allowing others to follow and engage with their experiences and join a community of like-minded people.

“People kind of think, even if you've never met them, that you guys are kind of friends,” Plus-Sized Influencer said. “So they're like, ‘okay, if my friend is recommending this, because I trusted her with all this other stuff, I'll trust her now, too.’”

Brand marketers must understand that the influencer knows what their community responds well to and that their community is familiar with the influencer's brand. This makes it easy for influencers to create content that their followers will engage with and for their followers to notice when the influencers are straying from their own voice.

“A brand who is hiring me and understands that what they want is my voice is a better fit than someone who's pretty much just hoping I'm going to post their advertisement word for word,” Running Influencer explained.

Ensuring that the influencer likes the product is not enough to secure a partnership. The brand must also convey a knowledge of how their product aligns with the influencer's brand identity and their community's needs and expectations.

“We had a campaign where we loved the brand. We were super excited about it, we shot the whole thing, we pitched them our take on it, but it just wasn't right,” Twin Influencer said. “They wanted a different voice to it. We couldn't come to an agreement and we had to pass on it.”

Brand marketers should always enter into negotiations with their own influencer brand research in hand, including an understanding of the influencer's tone and content.

“The best partnerships are when people have clearly been stalking [my profile] for a minute because then they have an idea of how I present things, how I speak, and what they're going to get when they do a brand partnership with me,” Plus-Sized Influencer said. “That way when they come along, there isn't, ‘Oh, why did you say it like that?’ If you look at the history of what I've done in partnerships this shouldn't be a surprise.”

Brands Who Maintain a Balance Between Providing Direction and Creative Freedom

Influencers have more to offer than just their voice and community, and many are looking for a partnership that allows them to take on an active role in the campaign.

Influencers are searching for a happy medium between direction and creative freedom. Brand partnerships are a business arrangement for influencers as well and meeting the brand's objectives while also staying true to their identity is a top priority.

“Give your influencers creative freedom and an understanding that you're working with them because you like their content,” Twin Influencer said. “It's great to have some type of direction — having no direction makes it incredibly difficult — but being super restrictive is way too hard.”

Influencers are open to campaign mandates, such as required phrases or hashtags, but when the brand's feedback crosses the line into censorship, the influencer is much less inclined to comply.

“If you're approaching me and asking me to partner, I'm going to assume that you know I run these Internet streets naked and cursing, and no one is going to ask me to change that,” Plus-Size Influencer said.

The personal nature of an influencer's work has led to their desire to take an active role in the campaign, including more than just using their lingo and content. For one influencer, the best form of collaboration begins at the product testing stages.

“There’s this brand that I really like that is taking another approach that I’m really excited about,” Dancing Influencer said. “It’s not just like a regular ambassadorship, but more like, ‘Hey, you’re going to come to our corporate office; you’re going to be in a focus group with us and we’re going to ask you some things about what you like about our clothing. We want you to try on the samples and give us feedback.’”

Another influencer commented on the value of an open, honest dialogue at the outset of the partnership.

“I actually respect companies that are like ‘Look, our diversity sucks; we need you.’ I will happily help them with that,” Plus-Sized Influencer said. “In some cases, maybe even go out of my way if I need to. If I feel like they’re trying to do better, I will gladly be the token or the first one, but if I don’t get the sense that that is important, then I’m like, ‘we’re done.’”

Brands Who Clearly Communicate Their Goals and Expectations

Communication is key in any business relationship, especially in an industry where there are no clear standards. The novelty of social media and influencers has led to inconsistency when it comes to how brand partnerships are structured and managed. Every partnership is unique, which makes it especially important for clear communication from both ends.

“Upfront, it really helps when they have a goal in mind or are able to say, ‘This is the type of aesthetic we’re looking for’ or, ‘This is what the campaign is about’,” Running Influencer said. “A lot of times they will come to me and say, ‘We’re just open to whatever you want to do,’ which is also fine but makes me nervous as to whether I’m going to actually land on exactly what they were hoping for or not. So it’s much easier if they have clear expectations up front.”

Both the influencer and brand should have clear objectives in mind when it comes to deliverables, KPIs, and compensation. Not only will this make the campaign more successful, but it will also set a standard of open dialogue between the brand and the influencer moving forward.

“You always want to be nurturing that relationship,” Empower Influencer said. “You really need to ask them like, ‘Hey, what are you focusing on and how can I help you drive awareness,’ because although it’s about you, it’s not so much about you.”

Influencers have experienced issues in previous campaigns that are a result of unclear communication or unrealistic expectations from the brand. A lack of clarity regarding the creative direction of the campaign has left many influencers having to reshoot or recreate their content and unwilling to work with the brand on future campaigns.

“I recently had an experience with a company that I'm working with where we agreed to the set of deliverables, we agreed to the rate, we agreed to the date that content needs to be delivered, and the content was delivered on time,” Balanced Influencer explained. “We are now on round six of changes and I will never work with them again. I don't care if they offered me \$100,000.”

Oftentimes, influencers will receive free products, rather than monetary compensation, in exchange for their time and willingness to create content. Many influencers referenced the brand's clear lack of understanding of the time and energy it takes to create and share their content while also meeting the campaign objectives.

“A lot of times the clothing companies that send you free products have a lot of outlandish requests,” Balance Influencer said. “Like you get the shipment today and then tomorrow a message in your inbox, saying, ‘When will you post?’ Like sis, I just got the product.”

Many influencers recognize their lack of knowledge of the business world and seek outside help to represent themselves as business professionals and advocate on their behalf.

“I signed on with a talent agency and that was wonderful,” Nursing Influencer said. “Every brand deal that was coming into my inbox, I just forwarded right to them so they could negotiate on my behalf, and they brought some opportunities my way too.”

Now that social media and influencers have been around for some time, many influencer campaigns are run by PR and marketing agencies. Managing influencer campaigns is these marketing professionals' fulltime job, and they have developed more formal and effective processes than brands looking to run these campaigns themselves.

“PR companies are the best to work with because that's their job. Worse is actually dealing with the brand directly,” Bigger Than Biking Influencer said.

Agencies offer a more professional approach to influencer campaigns that many brands have not yet caught on to. These PR professionals will come to the table after conducting research, provide the influencer with a contract that includes realistic deliverables and turn-around times, and offer reasonable compensation for their work.

This can create a more efficient and enjoyable experience for the influencer since expectations are clear and communication is seamless, incentivizing influencers to create higher quality content and work with brands again and again. Brand marketers interested in taking on this role themselves must meet this level of professionalism when approaching influencers with a business deal.

Brands Who Recognize the Influencer's Social Expertise

Working on social media platforms requires constant learning and experimenting. With ever-changing algorithms, the emergence of new platforms, and constant trend updates, influencers are always looking for new ways to successfully engage with their audience. What may have worked last month is unlikely to provide the same results the next time around.

“I get so many questions [from followers] on a daily basis that it gives me a little bit of a clue as to what people are looking for right now,” Running Influencer explained. “I’m watching those comments to see like, ‘Okay, a lot of people are very confused about this topic,’ so I can dive into it more. Instagram stories have been a great place because people are so responsive to polls.”

Influencers recognize the need to find a balance between understanding what their followers are currently looking for and what recent updates are impacting their content’s performance. As a result, a large portion of an influencer’s work involves testing new ideas, similar to what the industry refers to as A/B testing.

“Everything has changed as a result of me learning and experimenting,” Vegan Influencer said. “Whether it’s researching something online, watching a video, taking a course, reading a book—it is a constant evolution.”

For some influencers, directly asking their followers questions allows them to remain at the forefront of current interests and to let their community know that they are listening.

“Usually I’ll be like, ‘Hey, what are you struggling with this week?’ or like, ‘What made you feel good this week?’ just so they know that they’re being heard,” Empower Influencer said.

Others view this approach as not truly knowing your audience.

“I cringe when bloggers are like, ‘What do you want to see from me?’ Do you really need to ask that?” Bigger Than Biking Influencer said. “They are following you because of what you do post. They want to see what you are posting and you can see what is a successful post.”

Influencers must remain up-to-date on their community’s interests and recent platform trends for their own brand’s success. They also seek to surpass the campaign goals outlined by their partnering brands.

“Making sure that we’re both getting the results that we want is really important to me,” Vegan Influencer said. “You know, I don’t ever want somebody to feel disappointed, but sometimes you can’t help it if they have a different idea of how they want things to go than you do.”

It is important for brands to acknowledge the influencers' expertise with social platforms and their community, and place trust in testing new suggestions or campaign ideas that the influencer brings to the table. This may mean setting aside a portion of your campaign budget to testing, asking influencers to produce two different forms of content to see which performs better, or requesting that influencers ask their community for feedback.

Brands Who Seek Authentic Long-Term Partnerships

Influencers are known for their authentic approach to marketing products, and every influencer named remaining authentic to their true selves as their main priority.

“You’ve got to set your boundaries; you can’t mold into what people want you to be,” Empower Influencer said.

In order to maintain this authenticity, influencers have two main strategies: only working with brands that fit their values and interests and striking a balance between organic and sponsored content. This allows them to provide their own valuable content in addition to introducing their audience to new products that align with the influencer’s brand.

“The other day I did an ad for a national sporting goods brand, but I paired it with a workout,” Empower Influencer said. “So it's like ‘Hey here's value for you. By the way, this outfit is sold by this national sporting goods brand.’ So, they can do my workout and maybe go to the sporting goods store.”

Rarely are brand partnerships the main source of income for influencers. This allows them to be selective when choosing partners. A long-term opportunity is more appealing not only from a financial perspective but also because it is viewed as more authentic to the influencer’s community, leaving many influencers leaning towards long-term partnerships rather than flashing single-product posts in front of their followers.

“We think long-term ones are a lot more authentic and genuine because if I'm going to be doing a one-off post as opposed to something that's a product I've been using for six months,” Twin Influencer said, “I think that kind of conveys to our followers a lot more that we truly do love the service and product.”

Influencers can receive hundreds of brand requests each week, some of which they may consider but many of which they will turn down. They search for brands and products that are representative of who they are and what they think their followers will respond well to. Many influencers refuse to represent a product that they have not tried yet.

“I must test the product before I agree to work with you,” Running Influencer said. “Oddly, there are a lot of people who do not do that.”

Running Influencer also highlights how her business structure allows her to be more selective with brand partnerships.

“I have multiple streams of revenue, so I’m not feeling beholden to meeting sponsors,” she said. “I think that honestly for almost any influencer, the biggest growth step is once you’re more diversified.”

Influencers are more open to these free, single ad partnerships at the start of their career, but the overall goal is to secure long-term brand partnerships.

“Now I feel like I’m at the point where I don’t need more free leggings. I’m past the free stuff,” Plus-Size Influencer said. “It’s less about how monetization changes what I post and it’s more of ‘Are we going to do this partnership or not?’”

Once influencers build a strong sense of trust with their community and feel that their brand is truly representative of who they are, their desire for substantial partnerships continues to grow. Influencing is about more than aesthetically pleasing product placement. It is about honing their personal brand, building an ecosystem of followers, and leading this community to authentic, high-quality products for more than just a free pair of leggings.

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE

Interview Discussion Guide	
Research objective(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gain insight into the relationships between brands and influencers ● Determine what makes an effective brand-influencer partnership from the influencer’s perspective ● Discuss what types of business agreements and collaborations influencers find allow them to create an effective strategy for engaging their followers ● Learn how influencers balance their demands from the brands they represent and the expectations from their audience
Research method(s), including number of participants for ea. and how/if they will be segmented	In-depth interviews will be conducted with 10-12 health and fitness social media influencers. These influencers must be of the micro-influencer tier (10 thousand to 75 thousand followers on Instagram), provide their audience with health and/or fitness content, and they must be compensated for their content in some form.
Introduction	<p>My name is _____, thank you for speaking with me today. For the next ____ 45 minutes or so we will be talking about your business experiences as an influencer, including your relationship with the brands that you represent. Your perspective is valid and there are no wrong things to say. Participant information will be kept confidential, and all personal identifiers will be omitted from the report. Feel free to ask questions or stop me at any time throughout our discussion. Your participation is confidential. Your name will not be shared in my report. I will be recording for note taking purposes only. Doing so will allow me to focus more on our conversation. Do you have any questions before we begin?</p>
Introduction to the Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did you start your career as an influencer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: building community of followers, interest in health and fitness, transitioning from personal interest to business o Probe for: how did you grow your community from just friends/family to strangers as well? · How did you make the decision to monetize? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: wanted to make this a career, someone suggested the idea, companies approached them and convinced them

Interest in Health and Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did you become interested in the health/fitness realm of social media marketing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: personal passion in health/fitness, natural ease using social media, support from others o Listen for: educational background, career goal o Listen for: personal health/fitness success story, past struggles with personal health/fitness
Changes in Personal Branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has your branding/professional image changed from your start as an influencer to now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: branding evolution, transitioning from fully “you” to influenced by companies’ requests/expectations, staying true to self, maintaining authenticity o Probe for: pressure from companies to change branding, companies choosing you for your personal brand · How has partnering with companies/brands impacted your community of followers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: gaining followers, losing followers, losing trust, losing authenticity o Probe for: do you think it has had an impact on the way you portray your personal brand? o Probe for: pressure from companies to change branding, companies choosing you for your personal brand, followers reaching out to state their opinions
Professional Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What companies do you work with? · How did you get started with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: how business relationship was initiated, how initial contact was made and by who o Probe for: why do you work with this specific brand, how does this brand connect to you or your community · What decision criteria do you use when deciding whether or not to partner? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: how would you define a good fit vs. not?
Business Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How would you describe your business relationship? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: pos./neg. sentiments, details about the business relationship o Probe for: details of business contract, expectations between both company and influencer · What do you think makes a good business relationship between influencers and brands? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: alignment of company and influencer’s brand, pos./neg. interactions between company and influencer · (If employed by multiple companies) How do your relationships with each company differ?

<p>Work in Detail</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What does your work look like for them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: contractual obligations, examples of work o Probe for: number of posts, frequency of posts, rigidity of contracts · How much creative freedom are you given? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: balance of personal and corporate branding while creating content, influencers' choices in what is created o Probe for: who is actually creating the content? · How are you compensated? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: paycheck, discounts, free products o Probe for: how were the compensation terms determined? By the influencer, business, or through negotiations between the two? · How did the shift to monetize impact the way you think about posting? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: any new concerns from a business arrangement perspective? o Probe for: what about from an audience/followers perspective? How do they factor (or not) into the process? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Listen for: fear of alienating, etc.
<p>Engaging Audience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Have you been asked to adjust your personal branding/image in any way? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: changing branding per company's request, making personal decision to alter personal branding, maintaining authenticity, jeopardizing authenticity o Probe for: impact of brand changes on audience (losing followers, gaining followers, pos./neg. comments from audience) · How do you build your content to fit your audience and company's requests? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: staying true to self, adjusting personal branding to match company's brand, balancing authenticity and company demands o Probe for: which do you prioritize, followers' or company's opinions? · Do you create your own content strategy or is that included in your business agreement? · What strategies are most effective for engaging your audience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What types of posts have been the most effective? What made them effective? Is what you consider to be effective the same as how your sponsor would define it? How do you encourage/drive engagement in a post?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: which typically works better for your audience, a strategy that you create or one that is given to you by a marketing professional? · Are your followers part of your thought process when you are planning a post? How/why? Can you tell me more about this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probe for: is building trust with your followers something you consider? If so, how do you do this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen for disclosure, authenticity, etc. · How do you build a strategy that balances between remaining authentic to your audience while also monetizing upon them?
Close	<p>Okay, that’s about it, but before we wrap up our discussion, is there anything else you wanted to share that we didn’t get a chance to address? Do you have any questions? Your perspective has been extremely helpful. Before you go, I have one more question. Do you know of any other influencers who meet the criteria and would be willing to speak about their experience? Thank you for your help. Have a great rest of the week/weekend.</p>
Documentation and compensation	<p><i>Fill out the online Research Participant Documentation Form for each participant (available in box). You MUST capture ALL information. Once the form is complete, share the box document (using the box share function) with Prof. Flink.</i></p>

APPENDIX 2: WEEKLY FIELD NOTES

Week 1 (1/12-1/15)

This week was my orientation for my influencer marketing internship position with Division-D. The orientation included employee onboarding processes, training sessions about Division-D as a whole, information about the various departments and job positions at Division-D, and role specific training with my supervisor Brad Stewart. He took me through every step of the influencer account management role—what a full time position in the influencer marketing department is titled. This included learning about my team’s relationship with general account managers, what the campaign proposal process involves, how to use Tagger for talent searches, how to pitch and onboard influencers, how the team uses paid amplification, and what final analytic reporting entails. This week I was more of an observer rather than taking an active role in the process. It was interesting to learn about the various platforms available for influencer searches, including how Tagger measures the authenticity of the influencer’s followers as well as their average engagement rate.

I completed my 10 influencer interviews over winter break and began transcribing the interviews during this week. Though Zoom provided me with general transcriptions, I relistened to the interviews to ensure accuracy throughout the auto-generated transcripts. I also began to highlight and pull the most important quotes from each influencer’s interview. I made it through half of my interviews this week and intend on completing the other half next week.

Week 2 (1/19-1/22)

This was my first real week at Division-D and my supervisor put me in charge of updating reports for two of our current campaigns and completing a number of campaign proposals. The reporting process involves tracking all of the sponsored content that is published by our hired influencers for likes, impressions, engagement, and link clicks. I was also charged with verifying that the published photos and copy matched the approved drafts from the client. All of this data is then condensed into a spreadsheet that records the status of the campaign and how it aligns with the outlined goals. In addition to this task, I was also asked to complete multiple campaign proposals each day. This involved creating a Powerpoint presentation that explains what Division-D offers from their influencer marketing campaigns. The proposal also outlines campaign specifics, such as the number of influencers that will be used, the budget for the campaign, and the deliverables. The final slides of the proposal include examples of sample talent and sponsored posts. My focus is primarily on updating the campaign details (budget and deliverables) as well as the sample talent and sponsored posts. I spend most of my time on Tagger, locating talent that aligns with the campaign objectives. At the end of the day, my supervisor has a 30-minute meeting to go over my work from the day and give me feedback.

This week I updated the transcripts and pulled important quotes from the other five influencers who I interviewed. I reached out to my chair, Jamie Flink, for help on next steps in the process.

While I realize that I will need to code and categorize the content that I pulled, I was unsure of how to organize the information and proceed to the next step in my research process. I am hoping that she gets back to me sometime this weekend so that I can get started on the next steps.

Week 3 (1/25-1/29)

This week I was granted much more freedom to take an active role in the current campaigns, including the team's largest campaign for Pepsico. It was interesting to work on such a well-known campaign and really challenge myself to find quality influencers who perfectly align with what they are looking for. Additionally, I had my first experience with working on clients where I had very little previous knowledge of the community that we were trying to meet. We submitted a proposal for a gaming client and I was tasked with the responsibility to provide multi-tiered talent from a variety of categories - all of which I had little to no experience with. This included influencers in the areas of educational history, cosplay, and military and medieval gaming. This campaign really pushed me outside of my comfort zone and previous experience, though the talent that I found was then used in the proposal that we sent to the client.

Over the weekend, Jamie provided me with guidance on how to code and categorize my transcripts. She also gave me examples of students' previous work which was really helpful in guiding me in the right direction. I used my proposal's discussion guide (Appendix A) to create overarching categories in which to place the influencer's relevant quotes. From there, I went through five of the influencers' pulled quotes and began to organize by topic and underlying theme. This was fairly easy for the first few categories, which focus on how the influencer got started in their area of work and how their branding has changed, but I struggled to find underlying themes with the content regarding brand relationships, the influencers' work in detail, and how they engage with their audience. I am hoping that stronger themes will emerge as I add the remaining influencers' quotes.

Week 4 (2/1-2/5)

I went into this week wanting additional responsibility and the opportunity to learn more about the different areas of the influencer account management position. I asked my supervisor if I could take a more hands-on role in the social amplification portion of the position and he showed me how he handles each campaign in Facebook Ads Manager. He then let me try a few on my own which is exciting. In my previous roles, I have been the person creating the content then boosting that same content in Facebook Ads Manager. However, in my role with Division-D, I am boosting content that another person created and put on their profile - something that I have not done before. He also showed me how to combine the analytics from organic posts and the Facebook sponsored posts into one forum. This is also something that I have not done previously. I was also given my first solo proposal this week with no guidance from my supervisor. He then reviewed the proposal and sent it off to the client with very minimal adjustments! Finally, we had another Pepsico opportunity come our way so we had a team

brainstorming session to come up with unique and creative campaign ideas. I am happy to say that three of the six ideas being sent to the client were ones that I had come up with.

Similar to last week, I coded and categorized the remaining five influencers' interviews. I still struggled with finding underlying themes in those last three categories, so I sent my work to my Chair for help. We have a meeting scheduled for this weekend to go over my progress and discuss next steps in my final project.

Week 5 (2/8-2/11)

This week my time was spent working on proposals, gathering talent, and submitting campaign analytics to the server, and learning more on managing paid Facebook ads and sentiment reporting. In my previous positions, I have had a hand in running paid Facebook ads; however, my supervisor set aside time to teach me about the strategy behind running paid Facebook ads rather than simply setting a start and end date for the campaign. He showed me how to determine which posts should be boosted, the importance of finding a balance between prioritizing your most successful ads and increasing your budget for low-performing ads, and how your ad performance can be used as a tool in future campaigns. He also showed me the equations used when calculating overall campaign performance including both the organic and sponsored content. I found it interesting how this is calculated since each platform has their own way of interacting with the content. For instance, Instagram only allows you to “like” posts but Facebook allows you to “react” to posts both positively and negatively. Despite the potential negative interactions on Facebook, these interactions are still recorded and presented to the client because they are still an example of engagement with the content. In regards to sentiment reporting, my supervisor showed me Division-D's process for recording the overall campaign sentiment and how this information can be equally as insightful as the analytics themselves. This is another reason why Facebook reactions are still included in the analytics because the sentiment reporting shows the breakdown of how the message was truly accepted by the audience. Because this was my fourth full, non-training week at Division-D, I also had a monthly review of my performance. It was nice to hear that my work with the team is making worthwhile contributions, and I was also able to ask to take on additional responsibility and learn more about what the full time role entails. My major professional takeaway from this week is how to highlight past campaign analytics in my resume and interviews moving forward. My supervisor told me that I should highlight how well I met the campaign goals in a phrase such as, “the campaign engagement goal was exceeded at X%, with X likes and X comments.”

This past weekend I had a meeting with my Chair in which we went over the work that I had completed so far and created a game plan for the next steps. I have decided to write an industry-esque published article about the takeaways of my research. It will outline what influencers are looking for in their business relationships with brands. I will also create an infographic to go along with the article. Not only will this give the project a visual, creative component, but the

article and infographic together are an easy way to present future employers with proof of my work and expertise in this area. Throughout the week I have created an outline with these takeaways included, as well as a brief summary of the takeaway and tangible proof from my interviews. I am now waiting on Jamie's feedback on what I have so far and am hoping to begin writing the article in the next week or two.

Week 6 (2/15-2/18)

This week was spent finding talent samples for two campaigns. This took up the majority of my time this week as we are going to be sending the talent samples to the clients in the next few weeks. Additionally, I was able to explain my research to the Influencer Marketing team and the head of the Chicago office and discuss how it could be applied to the team moving forward. I have been asked to present my research to the entire sales team at the conclusion of my internship and discuss how they can highlight and pitch brand ambassadorships to bring in a higher revenue for Division-D. I am looking forward to giving the presentation and am happy to see how well my internship and research project are lining up. My professional takeaway from this week is learning how to really apply my academic background to my future career. Being asked to present my work and help the sales team shows that I bring additional skills to the table that I have earned through my Master's degree. Additionally, it has shown me how I can more widely apply my research to extend past my direct team. In other words, just because my research focuses on influencer marketing specifically does not mean that it cannot help other teams and the company as a whole.

This week I had a meeting with my Chair to discuss the details of my research article. She has helped me finetune my outline and I will be writing the initial draft of my article this weekend. I am looking forward to completing this portion of the project so that I can begin to really pull takeaways from my research and apply them towards my work at Division-D.

Week 7 (2/22-2/25)

This week was spent balancing my time between campaign reporting, campaign proposals, and talent search. I have noticed that my responsibilities have increased over the last two weeks as well as the quality of my submitted work. My edits with proposals are often fairly minimal and the feedback that my supervisor has been giving me is much more strategy-focused or higher level for learning purposes rather than right vs. wrong. I learned how to use Tagger for campaign management this week as well which will be useful moving forward into my full-time position here. I am excited to be transitioning towards more of a hands-on role with the team now that I have built my foundational skills.

This past weekend I completed the first draft of my research article and sent it to my Chair. I am waiting on her feedback before diving in and editing further. Division-D has also asked me to present my research and results to the sales team in an effort to educate them on how to improve

their pitches for the influencer marketing team. This is a big step in my position at Division-D and in my career overall as I can really see how my research can be directly applied to my work and the company as a whole.

Week 8 (3/1-2/24)

I began to fully manage my first campaign this week for a new book being released by Penguin Random House. This is my first time really working on the campaign from start to finish, including communicating with influencers and sending them the business agreement to sign on to the campaign. I will be taking this campaign through to the end, including approving their content, monitoring their posts, boosting their paid amplification, and collecting their reporting for the client. It is exciting to see how far I have come in the two months since starting here and I am interested to see how this campaign performs. The book has a slight edge and is not intended for a general audience, so finding the right talent is especially crucial with this campaign. My professional takeaway for the week is learning how to adapt my voice and tone to fit each type of communication being made in my role. For instance, communication with the client (Penguin Random House) has a curated, professional tone whereas reaching out to influencers requires me to match their own personal branding and enthusiasm as shown through their Instagram account. I am learning how to tailor my style of communication to truly match the client.

My Chair will be sending my first round of feedback for my initial research article draft this week. I am hoping to work on editing and sending off my second draft sometime next week. I also have a meeting with my supervisor at Division-D to discuss how I can translate my research findings into a useful presentation for our sales team.

Week 9 (3/8-3/11)

This is the busiest week that I have experienced at Division-D up to this point. I worked primarily on completing proposals and sending them out to potential clients. I have noticed that my quality of work has significantly improved with very few requested edits from my supervisor. I also began putting together my research presentation for the sales team. Though I have never given a presentation in a professional setting, I am learning how to translate the takeaways from an academic project into solutions that can be used in my career.

I edited my research article and provided the second draft to my Chair. It has seen significant improvements since my initial draft, with my primary focus being on pulling the influencers' voices through so that they are the primary drivers of the story. I am hoping that it will be ready to send off to my other two committee members sometime in the next week so that I can move on to the next step of my project.

Week 10 (3/15-3/18)

My primary focus of the week is securing talent for my seeding campaign with Penguin Random House. *The Life of the Mind* has a very niche audience so it has been a challenge to find talent that aligns with this audience. After three rounds of talent reviews, a total of 35 influencers have been approved and 7 have been hired on. If I have learned anything from running my first campaign, it is how difficult it is to secure talent for campaigns. Rarely do the influencers respond after the first reach out and oftentimes they will request a contract to review but not go through with the campaign. Although I have found this frustrating, I am happy to have been placed on a challenging campaign for my first account since it is really pushing me to listen closely to what the client is looking for, use every search tool at my disposal, and focus on building relationships with the prospective influencers with every message sent. Hopefully all of the 12 influencers will be secured by the end of next week.

I finished editing my research article last weekend and sent it off to my committee at the beginning of this week. I also sent out a scheduling poll so that my committee and I can find a time to schedule my research defense within the next month. I am excited to be finishing up my research so that I can really apply my findings in my career.

Week 11 (3/22-3/25)

Not a lot to report on for this week. I spent a lot of time creating proposals and conducting talent searches for those proposals. I did, however, receive my first round of content drafts for *The Life of the Mind* campaign. It was exciting to see the campaign finally starting to see some movement. I would say my one takeaway from this week is that bigger budgets do not make an easier campaign. Oftentimes the larger budget can make the campaign more challenging. This week the RFPs I was working on were for very large budgets, and while I thought this may make the talent search and what we could do with the budget easier, it actually made it more challenging. The smaller influencers often have a very distinct niche audience that they are trying to reach, whereas the larger influencers are more general. I was very challenged this week to find proper fitting talent options for large clients which is not something that I originally thought that I would struggle with. Despite the frustration that came along with it, I enjoyed being pushed to do things a little out of the box since most of our clients provide smaller, cookie-cutter budgets.

I made the final edits to my project before sending it off to my Chair and Committee. I scheduled my final defense for April 13 and I am excited to get there. Until that date, I won't be making any edits to my project though I will begin to create a small presentation for my defense meeting.

Week 12 (3/29-4/1)

This week my work was primarily focused on final reporting. At the end of each campaign, our team will present final reports to the client to provide an overview of the campaign's performance. This includes compiling likes, reactions, and comments to gather a sentiment

analysis on how users accepted the influencer's content. From there, the final reporting is heavily data-focused, including information on the cost per engagement (CPE), cost per one thousand impressions (CPM), earned media value (EMV), total engagements, total impressions, and more. All of this information really speaks to the success of the campaign and is likely the determining factor of the client's next steps with influencer marketing. I learned how to compile all of this information into Division-D's data server and how to translate it for the client's understanding. I enjoyed learning about this phase of the campaign management process because this is the last step in each campaign and will be an important part of my position as I take on a full time role at Division-D.

In regards to my research, I am still waiting to defend my project to my committee but have spent time preparing for my presentation to Division-D's sales team next week. My supervisor and I are using my research to help educate the team on the influencer marketing process and give tips on how they can upsell clients by promoting long-term partnerships. I will be presenting the findings of my research to explain what influencers are looking for in partnerships so that the sales team can provide this information to clients during their pitches. I am excited to use my research in my work and be able to show how my Master's degree can make me an asset in this position.

Week 13 (4/5-4/8)

This week I spent my time doing a little bit of everything, from sending proposals to finding talent for various campaigns and conducting final reporting. Now that I am nearing the end of my internship, I can really see how much I have grown in my understanding of the role and my position on the team. The main focus of my week was preparing to present my research to the Sales team. On Thursday afternoon, my supervisor and I presented to the Sales team, explaining how they can upsell clients and using my research takeaways as support for the argument. I explained what influencers are looking for in their brand partnerships, discussing how the team members can use these research results to their advantage during their sales pitches, and my supervisor highlighted what long-term brand partnerships have to offer that short-term partnerships fail to provide. This was my first presentation in a professional setting, and I think it went really well. I spent time preparing for my portion of the presentation throughout the week, building a presentation slide and a more detailed script to follow. I am hoping that the Sales team found the information insightful and that they can use this information to pull in larger budgets moving forward.

Presenting my research this week was great practice for my defense that is scheduled for next Tuesday (4/13). I was able to use the information that I collected for my Sales team presentation to prepare for my defense next week. One of my committee members sent me some edits for my literature review and stated that he would be sending more edits for the industry article over the

weekend. I am excited to finalize the details of my final project, defend my research, and complete the requirements for my degree next week.

Week 14 (4/12-4/15)

This week my time was spent primarily on proposals (RFP). Our sales team was busy sending us potential clients, and because the full time members of the team have a number of accounts to manage, I am typically tasked with completing the RFPs that come in. I have noticed that over time, my work has been more in-line with what my supervisor is looking for with RFPs, both in pricing and campaign details and in sample client suggestions. It has felt good to be trusted to complete an RFP and send it off with very little supervision or revision requests. Aside from submitting RFPs, I was also tasked with beginning to compile talent pools for our upcoming campaigns. As my last week in my internship, I am happy to say that I have learned a lot over the last semester and am excited to take on more responsibility as I transition into a full time member of the team.

This week I finally defended my research to my committee. I felt fully prepared for the defense since I gave a very similar presentation last week to Division-D's sales team. The defense went very well and I have submitted all of my final requirements to complete my graduate research project!

APPENDIX 3: EVALUATION FROM MANAGEMENT SUPERVISOR

Grace Huguelet

January 2021 – April 2021

Influencer Marketing Intern

Position Overview

The Influencer Marketing Intern role serves as a multi-functional position intended to provide a holistic view of influencer marketing campaign execution including assisting in the creation of proposals by identifying potential talent partnership opportunities, researching talent to ensure the highest quality, facilitating campaign process flow, and analyzing campaign metrics to produce detailed reporting.

Core Responsibilities

- Conduct research to identify and vet talent with high brand affinity to recommend across advertising campaigns
- Performed fraud analysis to ensure no purchased followers or incentivized engagements
- Assist in advertiser proposal creation
- Analyze and report on success metrics for campaigns
- Analyze content before and during campaign launch to ensure that content meets brand standards
- Manage internal talent lists
- Participate in brainstorming sessions to share ideas, define strategy, and help bring them to life

Grace's Performance – Review by Brad Stewart – Director of Influencer Marketing

Grace has been an incredible asset throughout her internship and has carved out her own spot as part of the team for a full-time position starting in May. Grace brings a great basis of industry knowledge and insights that has proved incredibly valuable.

She has been able to juggle multiple projects simultaneously, utilize critical thinking to problem solve and offer efficient solutions, and has an attention to detail to ensure smooth campaign and proposal execution.

Grace initially started off her internship focused on Talent Discovery for proposals and campaigns. This included finding creators that aligned from a content and personality, using hashtags, mentions, and more. Once a content fit was found, she then analyzed the creator's audience data (demo, geo, etc.) to ensure alignment with the brand's objective and verify no fraudulent or misleading practices were being done to inflate follower counts or engagement metrics. This talent was then included in proposals for client consideration, as well as for recommendation on active campaigns.

As Grace's internship progressed, she became more involved in campaign set up and execution, including managing a small campaign from ideation to execution. Grace identified a curated list

of creators to partner with a book publisher for the promotion of a new release. She vetted the talent and provided recommendations to the client for approval. Once given approval from the client, Grace then began communicating with approved creators about the campaign deliverables, coordinated shipping, secured post drafts for client approval, then monitored posts as they went live ensuring compliance with approved drafts, and compiled campaign reporting for client review.

Grace is a great team player and one that we are very happy to have on our team.

Brad A. Stewart

APPENDIX 4: SELF-EVALUATION

My internship at Division-D began at the start of January 2021. Since the COVID-19 pandemic was still raging across the country, all of Division-D's employees were required to work remotely for the time being. The unpredictability of the pandemic and each state's shifting stay-at-home orders made me uncertain of what my semester working from home would look like. I was concerned about how I would learn the team's processes, how well I would integrate into a remote team, and how much responsibility I would be given if I had never met my supervisor or co-workers. From the start, however, I was extremely impressed with the program, my role on the team, and how well my position at Division-D aligned with my graduate research project.

Division-D is a six-office company that spans the U.S. – I was based in the Chicago office while the rest of the Influencer Marketing team is based in Columbia, MO. The Influencer Marketing team is the company's newest and smallest division, and although this initially concerned me, I began to see this brand-new team as an opportunity to become an integral part of the team from the ground up. Because the team is currently on a path of growth and evolution, I figured that working on this team would give me good insight for my graduate research and also provide me with the opportunity to apply the findings from my research to my everyday work. My graduate research analyzes the brand partnerships from the influencer's perspective and my account management position at Division-D required me to act as the liaison between brand clients and influencers, giving me the perfect opportunity to use my research findings in action.

From the start of my internship, I felt that I was a true member of the Influencer Marketing team, not just an intern. My first few weeks working at Division-D involved lots of training modules, practice projects, and one-on-one meetings with my supervisor to ensure that I

was fully prepared for my position before I was given true responsibilities. I learned the account management process from start to finish. In my role, this includes creating and submitting campaign proposals to prospective clients, vetting talent using influencer search software, providing clients with talent samples for approval, communicating with the approved influencers, managing the influencers' content drafts and approved content, boosting the sponsored content using Facebook Ads Manager, and providing the client with final reporting. At the start of my internship, I was responsible for submitting proposals and searching for talent that aligns with the client's brand, but as I became more familiar with this work my supervisor allowed me to become more hands-on with the other aspects of the campaign management process.

I was asking to fully manage my first campaign halfway through my internship. The client was Penguin Random House and the campaign was to promote the launch of a new book, *The Life of the Mind*. While I thought this would be an easy campaign to run, the serious subject matter of the novel made it difficult to find influencers who were willing to promote the novel. The campaign was slow to start since Penguin Random House denied all of the talent samples that I sent to them. After asking for more insight into what they were really looking for, I began to use the skills that I had learned from the branded strategic storytelling course that I took last semester at the University of Missouri. I realized that this book's niche brand needed to be further analyzed to better understand what type of a reader and influencer Penguin Random House was looking for. I provided the client with three more rounds of talent samples, many of which they approved, and finally found the 12 influencers needed to get the campaign off the ground.

Managing this Penguin Random House campaign was the most impactful part of my internship. Though the campaign was much more challenging than expected, it taught me how to truly use the skills I learned throughout my strategic communication courses. It also helped prepare me for the talent vetting process on future campaigns. Every influencer is not one in the same and picking up on the brand insights of each influencer is the key to running a successful influencer campaign. Despite the initial challenges that I had finding talent and truly homing in on what the client was looking for, the campaign was a success. We surpassed our campaign goal by 200%, with 4,000 engagements, a 400% engagement rate, and a \$0.65 cost per engagement (eCPE).

What I loved most about my internship was how my supervisor recognized the value that I bring to the team, even as an intern. I felt like a respected member of the team from the start and was granted the opportunity to share my graduate research with the Sales team. This was my first presentation in a professional setting and it was a great learning experience. My supervisor and I used the findings of my research to teach the Sales team members how to upsell clients and promote brand ambassadorships. My portion of the presentation focused on the results of my research and how long-term partnerships are the golden standard for influencers. My supervisor highlighted the value that influencers bring to the table using our own campaign results as evidence. I really enjoyed the experience of being able to present my work in a professional setting and it helped me recognize that my decision to pursue my master's degree and the subject of my research are valuable.

I am extremely grateful that I chose this internship for the professional experience, the ability to share my academic knowledge, and the business relationships that I have created. Upon the completion of my internship at the end of April, I will be joining Division-D's Influencer

Marketing team on a full-time basis as their newest Account Manager. I am excited to start this new chapter in my life, to continue to conduct market research in this industry, and to use the skills that I learned at the University of Missouri and in my internship role in my future career.

APPENDIX 5: PROJECT PROPOSAL

Introduction

In the past decade, social media has emerged and become one of the primary digital platforms for business marketing. The interactivity and personalization of these platforms have resulted in a new form of endorsers with an emphasis on the individual over the company. Social media influencers have built their own community of followers, formulated an unmatched level of credibility, and integrated business tactics into their personal social media accounts. According to Business Insider Intelligence, the influencer marketing industry was worth upwards of \$7 billion in 2019 with a projected net worth of \$15 billion by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). Influencers exist across all social media platforms, though nearly 79% of brands utilize Instagram for their influencer campaigns (Schomer, 2019). With the formation of distinct interest communities, health and fitness has become its own niche online. For the purpose of this study, health and fitness social media influencers are defined as influencers who create content that provides their audience with health and/or fitness information, such as dieting tips, recipe ideas, exercise routines, and reviews on food or sports apparel. These social media celebrities' influence on their community, both in mindset and purchase-intent, is unprecedented by previous versions of endorsers, yet many business professionals do not take these media moguls' professional perspective and expertise into account before hiring and outlining the parameters of the partnership or contractual obligations.

Studies have been done to analyze the usefulness of social media platforms for branding and marketing purposes (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, 2015; Holt, 2016; Gao & Feng, 2016; Yan, 2011) and the role of influencers on these platforms (Booth & Matic, 2011; Dodd, 2018; Kapitan

& Silvera, 2016; Neal, 2017; Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017; Ioanid, Militaru & Mihai, 2015). Most existing research in this area is quantitative in nature and focuses on the usefulness of influencers to marketing professionals and what influencers provide consumers. Despite this previous research, there are existent deficiencies in academic research regarding the relationship between brands and influencers as well as information from the influencers' perspective. By analyzing influencers under the theoretical frameworks of the social media message transformation process (Kilgour et al., 2015) and Albert Bandura's social learning theory (Lim et al., 2017), one can see the imperative role they have in formulating effective marketing and branding strategies in the modern age, especially within the health and fitness field. Taking influencers' professional opinions and expertise into account could provide marketing professionals from fitness apparel companies, health and wellness consumer packaged goods (CPG) brands, and workout-focused nutrition product companies with insight into the influencers' unique perspective on what makes a more desirable and successful partnership.

The prevalence of health and fitness communities on social media makes this subject especially relevant for research purposes. Despite previous studies that focus on the value and purpose of social media influencers in marketing strategies, there are existent deficiencies in academic research regarding the brand-influencer relationship according to influencers. This gap in research has resulted in these remaining questions:

RQ1: What makes an effective brand-influencer partnership from the influencer's perspective?

RQ2: What types of agreements and collaborations do influencers find allow them to create a strategy that is most effective in engaging their followers?

Professional Component

I have tailored the subject area of my research to align with my career goals which include working in brand and social media strategy within the health and fitness industry. At this time, I do not have a spring internship placement, but I have applied to more than 30 companies nationally. The internship roles that I have applied to focus primarily in communications, digital marketing, social media strategy, and public relations as I am interested in working in any of these positions moving forward. These internship opportunities vary from large international corporations, such as The Clorox Company and ViacomCBS, to large and small agencies, like FleishmanHillard, RPA, and Monigle, as well as organizations, including Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Women Deliver, and Truth Initiative. Throughout my search I have found that, unfortunately, most fitness apparel, sporting goods, or health and wellness consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies reserve their internship positions solely for the summer semester. I will continue to apply to more internship positions moving forward, as I still have time in the semester to do so. Additionally, I currently hold two positions that could serve as spring internships if need be. I am a digital marketing coordinator at OVC, INC.—a digital marketing agency for attorneys—and a public relations intern at Mizzou Athletics. I have confirmation from both employers that I could complete my internship requirement under their department if necessary. Although these positions do not involve working with health and fitness influencers, the flexibility of my selected methods will allow me to conduct my research even if I am not employed within the health and fitness industry.

Research Methods

In order to complete this research, semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted with health and fitness influencers. For the purpose of this study, these individuals are defined as social media influencers who create content that provides their audience with health and/or fitness information, such as dieting tips, recipe ideas, exercise routines, and reviews on food or sports apparel. The content from these interviews will then be organized according to emergent themes found in the transcriptions. Since the purpose of the study is to analyze the influencer perspective of business relationships and their work, it was determined that interviews would be the best way to conduct this type of analysis. Unlike many other methods, interviews provide researchers with a more in-depth and detailed look at “subjective realities” — in this case, the thought process of influencers (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 172). According to Lindlof and Taylor, interviewing is one of the best means of obtaining information about things or processes that cannot be observed by a researcher (2011). Because this study will be considering influencers’ perspectives and business intentions, having a discussion about their work would be a realistic and effective way of collecting this data. Providing influencers with a platform to discuss their perspective is an effective way to explore various explanations for their work without limiting their ability to elaborate on their responses (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

Once the interview transcriptions are collected and complete, one must make sense of the conversations and translate them into digestible data. This can be done through loosely coding the conversations based on context. Categories will then be assigned according to common themes found within the transcriptions. Though the two may sound similar, codes act as the links between the data collected by the researcher and the categories that they create — these codes

work to characterize the pieces of data that make up these categories (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 248). Ideally, common themes will emerge after speaking with the various influencers which would act as the results of this study.

Previous Studies

There have not been many academic studies conducted that focus on influencers' perspectives regarding their business relationships, especially within the health and fitness realm. Most existing research in this area is quantitative in nature and focuses on the usefulness of influencers to marketing professionals and what influencers provide consumers through social media. These pre-existing studies look at the social media strategies of marketing professionals, identifying useful influencer qualities, and discussing where social media consumers go for health and fitness content. Individually, these studies do not directly pertain to this proposed research, yet their topics and research methods are relevant and informative for planning the proposed study. Noting the existent deficiencies in academic research regarding the relationship between brands and influencers as well as information from the influencers' perspective, the proposed study will analyze this subject in order to help marketing professionals from fitness apparel companies, health and wellness consumer packaged goods (CPG) brands, and workout-focused nutrition product companies build more desirable and successful partnerships.

“The Social Media Transformation Process: Curating Content Into Strategy”

This study identifies and analyzes the themes being discussed across various social media channels and determines their relationship (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, 2015). The purpose of the study was to identify what is being focused on by social media users and how professionals can tailor their marketing campaigns to target these users. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with corporate professionals, including “industry leaders” and “managers” (Kilgour,

Sasser & Larke, 2015). After speaking with these individuals, the researcher then provided graduate students with a survey. They were considered the consumers in this study and were identified as high social media users. After conducting the research, the findings provided companies with insights into how they can repackage their brand message from a corporate one to a personalized one, as this was identified as a successful tactic to reach social media users.

The study is relevant because the researcher employed a similar research method as proposed for this study. The researcher spoke with media professionals in order to collect their “thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions” (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, 2015, p. 328). This data was then used to create a table which acts as a guide for marketing professionals looking to utilize social media platforms in their campaigns. The purpose of the proposed study is similar — to better understand the influencer’s perspective to be used as a potential guide for marketing professionals in the future. By understanding what influencers are looking for in their business relationships with brands, companies adding influencers to their marketing strategies will be able to more effectively select influencers who align with their brand and build stronger business relationships with these hired social media professionals. Kilgour, Sasser, and Larke’s research does not study the use of influencers or other concrete social media marketing tools, yet the purpose of the study and its results are related to this proposed research. The key finding from this work identifies the importance of making the corporate message personal, this has also been identified as one of the primary purposes of social media influencers — to reach an audience with someone who they identify with in order to personalize the brand.

“Mapping and Leveraging Influencers in Social Media to Shape Corporate Brand Perceptions”

This study closely aligns with the influencer focus of the proposed research. Booth and Matic's research highlights the importance of influencers in the social media marketing landscape and its results provide a means of identifying and ranking influencers (2011). The results are presented in this way in order to assist companies who are looking to utilize influencers as marketing tools. The results allow companies to select a number of influencers, use the algorithm derived from this research, and determine which influencer would be most useful for their campaign. This study uses quantitative research methods to produce this data. By selecting a large number of posts and reviewing their data analytics, the researcher creates an algorithm and an "influencer index" to be used by companies that are in the process of searching for influencers and determining which influencer would give them the best results (Booth and Matic, 2011).

The quantitative method of this research does not directly align with the qualitative methods that will be used for the proposed research; however, their identification of themes is similar to the thematic categorization of the proposed study. Booth and Matic's overall purpose in their study is to create a means of identifying influencers, coined as the "new somebodies," and to build an algorithm using these findings to numerically rate influencers in the social media conversation about a particular company, product, or service (2011). The results from their study are useful in the initial search process for influencers. The results of the proposed study will pick up where Booth and Matic left off, providing information about how to build an improved business relationship with these "new somebodies" identified in their study (2011). The proposed study will provide insight regarding successful business relationships from the influencer's perspective while Booth and Matic's study gives a means of identifying who is the "best fit" (2011). The results from the proposed study may not quantifiably identify "what makes a good

influencer” but it will help businesses understand the influencer perspective and build mutually beneficial business relationships.

“How Women Use Digital Technologies for Health: Qualitative Interview and Focus Group Study”

Lupton and Maslen’s recent research was conducted overseas and came from the consumer’s viewpoint rather than the influencer’s (2019). The purpose of this study was to analyze which digital technologies are regularly used by Australian women for “health-related purposes” (Lupton, D., & Maslen, S., 2019). Examples of these technologies include search engines, social media platforms, and health information sites. The researcher conducted two studies to collect their data. Study one included face-to-face interviews and focus groups with women at a health forum. The second study was done using phone interviews in order to reach females across Australia and avoid geographical restrictions. The researchers then analyzed the transcripts for common themes to identify which technologies were most popular among Australian women and determine the reasons for their popularity.

The niche subject matter of this study makes it relevant to the proposed study. Though they did not research fitness influencers specifically, they examined the health and fitness community on social media. The research methods employed by Lupton and Maslen are also similar to the proposed research (2019). The two researchers conducted both face-to-face and phone interviews. In a similar way, it is not likely or realistic that all of the interviewees will be in an obtainable distance for the researcher to conduct in person for the proposed research. The interviews in the proposed research will be conducted virtually. It is helpful to hear how this study successfully employed both types of interviews and that the transcripts produced equally useful data. The researchers also used a similar means of measuring and classifying the data as is

being proposed. By analyzing their transcripts and identifying themes, Lupton and Maslen were able to produce digestible data that is useful to marketing professionals in the health and fitness realm (2019).

Study Design

In-depth interviews will be conducted with 10-12 female health and fitness social media influencers between Dec. 2020 - May 2021. Below is the participant screener criteria in order to ensure a level of consistency in the participants and thus produce results that can be generalized and applicable for marketing professionals who are building business relationships with the following category of influencers:

- *Female health and fitness social media influencers*: defined as social media influencers who create content that provides their audience with health and/or fitness information, such as dieting tips, recipe ideas, exercise routines, and reviews on food or sports apparel. According to a study which analyzed over 3 million Instagram #ad posts from 2019, it was found that 84% of influencers creating sponsored posts on Instagram were women (Guttman, A., 2020). Due to the apparent disparity between male and female influencers on this platform, the researcher has decided to focus solely on female influencers since they are the primary participants in the influencer space.
- *Micro-influencers*: this tier of influencer has 10 thousand to 75 thousand followers on Instagram (Pattee, 2020). Because Instagram is the primary platform being used by health and fitness influencers, their following on this specific platform is imperative to the study. The interviewees must meet the micro-influencer Instagram follower qualifications to be eligible for the study.

- *Compensation:* the influencers interviewed must receive compensation in some form, such as direct payment, free products, discounts, or incentives, from the companies that they are creating content for. Because influencer business agreements and compensation are not standardized, those interviewed must have received a form of value exchange for their work in the past year. Interviewees must publish one post labeled as #sponsored or #ad per month to qualify for the study.

Using micro-influencers as the interviewing subjects will allow for better feasibility for the researcher while still presenting viable results for marketing professionals. Instagram is the primary social media platform for health and fitness influencers which is why their following on these platforms is relevant to the study. Instagram allows these influencers to disseminate content in a variety of lengths and mediums, including both individual photos and photo collages; short, informal videos known as “stories;” and longer video collages that can be used to better-explain a recipe or workout routine. Since influencer business agreements vary, the interviewees must have some form of value exchanged for their work. This does not need to be in the form of a physical paycheck, but may also include free products or discounts in exchange for their work with the brand. The goal is to speak with 10-12 health and fitness influencers who meet this criteria in order to provide a sample large enough to represent more than a single influencer’s opinions, but small enough to be feasible for the researcher. In order to secure interviewees, the researcher will contact influencers who meet the criteria directly via social media or through agents if applicable. In addition to reaching out to the influencers and their agents, the researcher will also seek participants by contacting influencer agencies if necessary. Once an influencer has agreed to participate and the interview has been completed, the researcher will ask the participant if she can provide them with connections to other influencers who meet the criteria, creating a

snowball sample of interviewees. This will help reduce difficulties that the researcher may have securing participants who meet the criteria. Participant information will be kept confidential, and all personal identifiers will be omitted from the report with the assumption that anonymity will provide more candid responses regarding past and current business arrangements.

Individual in-depth interviews have been selected as the research method in order to provide a confidential, one-on-one setting for the interviewees to share their perspective without others' responses impacting their own response. This setting also allows the researcher to probe and gain in-depth responses with each participant. Interviews will last 45 minutes to an hour, providing the interviewer with enough time to build rapport with the participants, ask the allotted questions, and pose additional questions when deemed necessary. Conducting individual interviews also provides flexibility to the researcher and the interviewees for scheduling purposes. Interviews will be conducted virtually, via Zoom, for better feasibility for the researcher and the interview subjects. There are a number of benefits that come along with using this platform, including its wide recognition and easy-to-use features. The interview subjects will not need to download software of any kind, the researcher will simply provide them with a link that will create a virtual chat room. The researcher also has access to Zoom Pro which captures video and audio files of the interview and creates transcripts of the conversation, making the transcription and coding process more efficient.

Interviews will be semi-structured. A discussion guide (see Appendix A) will be used to ensure important topics are discussed, but the researcher will have the freedom to follow the natural progression of the conversation in regards to the study topic as the interviewees provide their unique perspectives that branch out from the outlined questions. The interviews will then be transcribed and categorized thematically.

The objectives of the interviews are to learn the following regarding health and fitness influencers:

- Gain insight into the relationships between brands and influencers
- Determine what makes an effective brand-influencer partnership from the influencer's perspective
- Discuss what types of business agreements and collaborations influencers find allow them to create an effective strategy for engaging their followers
- Discover how influencers balance their demands from the brands they represent and the expectations from their audience

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that may be faced by the researcher for this study, the first being access to health and fitness micro-influencers. The researcher will contact the influencers directly through social media platforms or indirectly by reaching out to their agent if applicable. Ideally, the influencers will be of the micro tier; however, it may be difficult to get a response from them or their agent. This potential roadblock will be mitigated by beginning the outreach process and securing interviewees before the spring semester begins, allowing for additional search time if necessary. The researcher will look into finding health and fitness influencer communities that will provide a high number of micro-influencers to reach out to. The researcher will also ask interview participants if they are willing to identify other participants who meet the aforementioned criteria and might be interested in participating in the study. Another limitation that has been noted is a lack of racial diversity within the proposed interviewee list. When moving forward with contacting interviewees, the researcher will work to secure a more racially diverse group of interviewees. The work placement of the researcher may

also make interview coordination fairly difficult. Since most student internships are full-time positions with a 40 hour work week, it may be a challenge to schedule interviews during business hours or to convince interviewees to speak outside of these business hours. This difficulty may be avoided by speaking with the researcher's supervisor at the beginning of the internship to determine how these interviews could be scheduled during business hours if necessary.

The researcher's internship location will also limit their ability to perform in-person interviews. It is not feasible for the researcher to travel for every interview, thus the interviews will be conducted virtually. Using video chat platforms for these interviews would be preferred to allow the researcher to see the interviewees' facial expressions and emotions, as this may lead to follow-up questions or additional information that could not be gained over a phone conversation. The researcher will utilize Zoom to conduct the virtual interviews.

Research Questions

Health and fitness influencers may only make up one niche group of social media celebrities, but their significance is evident. With many individuals turning to the internet and social media platforms for health information, health and fitness influencers have been able to provide users with this requested content while also promoting brands along the way. Though academic research has looked at marketing and branding on social media and the role of influencers as branding tools, there are existent gaps in the analysis of the brand-influencer relationship from the influencer's perspective. In order to fulfill this deficient research area, the following research questions will be analyzed:

RQ1: What makes an effective brand-influencer partnership from the influencer’s perspective?

RQ2: What types of agreements and collaborations do influencers find allow them to create a strategy that is most effective in engaging their followers?

Questions for Interview Subjects

A discussion guide (Appendix A) has been created in order to provide the researcher with flexibility when conducting the semi-structured interviews, while also ensuring that important topics are discussed in the interviews. This will allow the researcher to follow the natural progression of the conversation in regards to the study topic as the interview subjects provide their distinctive perspectives that branch out from the outlined questions.

Appendix A

Interview Discussion Guide	
Research objective(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Gain insight into the relationships between brands and influencers● Determine what makes an effective brand-influencer partnership from the influencer’s perspective● Discuss what types of business agreements and collaborations influencers find allow them to create an effective strategy for engaging their followers● Learn how influencers balance their demands from the brands they represent and the expectations from their audience
Research method(s), including number of participants for ea. and how/if they will be segmented	In-depth interviews will be conducted with 10-12 health and fitness social media influencers. These influencers must be of the micro-influencer tier (10 thousand to 75 thousand followers on Instagram), provide their audience with health and/or fitness content, and they must be compensated for their content in some form.


Introduction	<p>My name is _____, thank you for speaking with me today. For the next ____ 45 minutes or so we will be talking about your business experiences as an influencer, including your relationship with the brands that you represent. Your perspective is valid and there are no wrong things to say. Participant information will be kept confidential, and all personal identifiers will be omitted from the report. Feel free to ask questions or stop me at any time throughout our discussion. Your participation is confidential. Your name will not be shared in my report. I will be recording for note taking purposes only. Doing so will allow me to focus more on our conversation. Do you have any questions before we begin?</p>
Introduction to the Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did you start your career as an influencer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: building community of followers, interest in health and fitness, transitioning from personal interest to business o Probe for: how did you grow your community from just friends/family to strangers as well? · How did you make the decision to monetize? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: wanted to make this a career, someone suggested the idea, companies approached them and convinced them
Interest in Health and Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How did you become interested in the health/fitness realm of social media marketing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: personal passion in health/fitness, natural ease using social media, support from others o Listen for: educational background, career goal o Listen for: personal health/fitness success story, past struggles with personal health/fitness
Changes in Personal Branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How has your branding/professional image changed from your start as an influencer to now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: branding evolution, transitioning from fully “you” to influenced by companies’ requests/expectations, staying true to self, maintaining authenticity o Probe for: pressure from companies to change branding, companies choosing you for your personal brand · How has partnering with companies/brands impacted your community of followers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: gaining followers, losing followers, losing trust, losing authenticity o Probe for: do you think it has had an impact on the way you portray your personal brand?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: pressure from companies to change branding, companies choosing you for your personal brand, followers reaching out to state their opinions
<p>Professional Information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What companies do you work with? · How did you get started with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: how business relationship was initiated, how initial contact was made and by who o Probe for: why do you work with this specific brand, how does this brand connect to you or your community · What decision criteria do you use when deciding whether or not to partner? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: how would you define a good fit vs. not?
<p>Business Relationship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How would you describe your business relationship? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: pos./neg. sentiments, details about the business relationship o Probe for: details of business contract, expectations between both company and influencer · What do you think makes a good business relationship between influencers and brands? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: alignment of company and influencer's brand, pos./neg. interactions between company and influencer · (If employed by multiple companies) How do your relationships with each company differ?

<p>Work in Detail</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · What does your work look like for them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: contractual obligations, examples of work o Probe for: number of posts, frequency of posts, rigidity of contracts · How much creative freedom are you given? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: balance of personal and corporate branding while creating content, influencers' choices in what is created o Probe for: who is actually creating the content? · How are you compensated? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: paycheck, discounts, free products o Probe for: how were the compensation terms determined? By the influencer, business, or through negotiations between the two? · How did the shift to monetize impact the way you think about posting? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: any new concerns from a business arrangement perspective? o Probe for: what about from an audience/followers perspective? How do they factor (or not) into the process? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Listen for: fear of alienating, etc.
<p>Engaging Audience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Have you been asked to adjust your personal branding/image in any way? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: changing branding per company's request, making personal decision to alter personal branding, maintaining authenticity, jeopardizing authenticity o Probe for: impact of brand changes on audience (losing followers, gaining followers, pos./neg. comments from audience) · How do you build your content to fit your audience and company's requests? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Listen for: staying true to self, adjusting personal branding to match company's brand, balancing authenticity and company demands o Probe for: which do you prioritize, followers' or company's opinions? · Do you create your own content strategy or is that included in your business agreement? · What strategies are most effective for engaging your audience? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What types of posts have been the most effective? What made them effective? Is what you consider to be effective the same as how your sponsor would define it? How do you encourage/drive engagement in a post?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Probe for: which typically works better for your audience, a strategy that you create or one that is given to you by a marketing professional? · Are your followers part of your thought process when you are planning a post? How/why? Can you tell me more about this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probe for: is building trust with your followers something you consider? If so, how do you do this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen for disclosure, authenticity, etc. · How do you build a strategy that balances between remaining authentic to your audience while also monetizing upon them?
Close	<p>Okay, that's about it, but before we wrap up our discussion, is there anything else you wanted to share that we didn't get a chance to address? Do you have any questions? Your perspective has been extremely helpful. Before you go, I have one more question. Do you know of any other influencers who meet the criteria and would be willing to speak about their experience? Thank you for your help. Have a great rest of the week/weekend.</p>
Documentation and compensation	<p><i>Fill out the online Research Participant Documentation Form for each participant (available in box). You MUST capture ALL information. Once the form is complete, share the box document (using the box share function) with Prof. Flink.</i></p>

List of Potential Interviewees

	<p>Berman, Kayla</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creator of Wellness By Kay blog ● Has 23.4 thousand followers on Instagram ● Presents followers with healthy, tasty recipes and overall wellness encouragement ● Posts advertisements for food products such as Ancient Nutrition, incorporates them into her recipes
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------



Dempsey, Emily

- Creator of [Detox2Retox](#) blog
- Has 23.3 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Offers blog about personal experiences with fitness, fashion, and health. Presents fitness routines and wellness information to followers.
- Has page on blog that outlines different agreements that she is willing to make with brands, including giveaways, guest blogger partnerships, ambassadorship, etc. Saw one paid partnership post for drinkbodyarmor.



Greene, Kanoa

- Plus-size fitness advocate - created [PlusSizeRetreats](#) to encourage active lifestyle regardless of your size and posts workout routines on her social platforms
- Has 12 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Has her own Fabletics line that she advertises for and also posts about other brands such as Ursa Major and Propel Water.



Michalczyk, RDN, Maggie

- Creator of [Once Upon a Pumpkin](#) blog
- Has e-books and courses about healthy eating/nutrition and helping dietitians grow their digital brand. Also has workout videos on social media.
- 50 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Has used her blog to forge influencer partnerships with Chomps, Simple Mills, and mindbodygreen



Miller, Sydney

- Instructor at SoulCycle and creator of [HOUSEWORK fitness program](#), includes workout videos and downloadable app
- Has 17.7 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Posts what company her outfits are from, including Onzie, and advertises for the HOUSEWORK app, SoulCycle and Variis



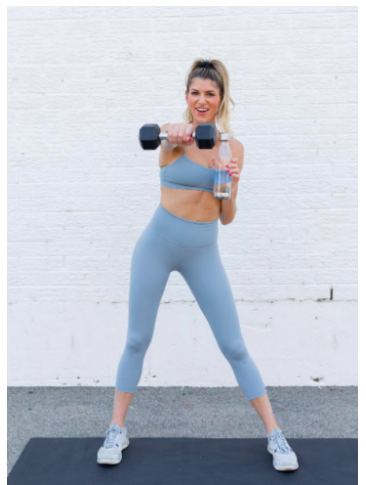
Raphael, Morgan

- Creator of [Bun Undone](#) blog
- Has 25.7 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Offers guide and e-book for self-care, helping women learn how to be healthy in mind, body, and spirit. Also has exercises and recipes on blog/social media.
- Has “fave products” guide that has shoppable items listed in which she receives commission for purchases made using her link



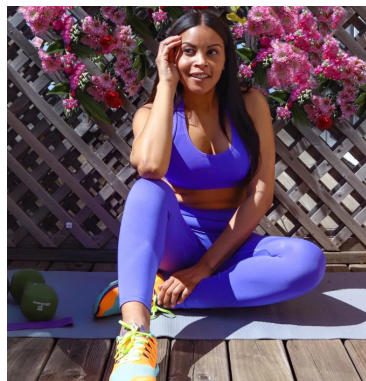
Robyn, Billie

- Offers 1:1 online [fitness coaching](#) for followers and posts fitness videos on her Instagram often
- Has 16.7 thousand followers on [Instagram](#) and a significant number of [Youtube workout videos](#) as “Trainer of the Month” for Well+Good
- Has ad posts for Lily's Sweets and Vana Europe Swim



Schmidt, Marykate

- Creator of [Froyo to Fitness](#) program
- Offers workout program, recipes, exercise videos, etc.
- 35.4 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Creates sponsored posts for Simple Mills, Garden of Life, Fage, etc.



Thomas, JP

- Has [blog](#) that includes lifestyle, fitness/health, and fashion tips
- Has 16.1 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- Has page on blog that allows followers to shop her Instagram looks - the link allows her to collect commission on anything purchased using the link



Thompson Rule, Joslyn

- Is a Nike Global Master Trainer and PT/Sports Therapist
- Has 18.4 thousand followers on [Instagram](#)
- [Offers](#) workout coaching, mentorship, and hosts a podcast about being an athlete/fitness
- Has sponsored posts for Nike's apparel line.

References

- Arriagada, A., & Ibáñez, F. (2020). You need at least one picture daily, if not, you're dead: Content creators and platform evolution in the social media ecology. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120944624>
- Booth, N., & Matic, J. A. (2011). Mapping and leveraging influencers in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions. *Corporate Communications*, 16(3), 184-191.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13563281111156853>
- Dodd, L. (2018). An analysis of the nature and role of social influencer trustworthiness within the health and fitness sector and how it facilitates brand trust. *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 6 (2).
- Federal Trade Commission. (2019, November). *Disclosures 101 for social media influencers*.
- Gao, Q., & Feng, C. (2016). Branding with social media: User gratifications, usage patterns, and brand message content strategies. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 868-890.
- Guttman, A. (2020, January). *Distribution of influencers creating sponsored posts on Instagram worldwide in 2019, by gender*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/>
- Holt, D. (2016). Branding in the age of social media. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(3), 40–50.
- Hsu, C., Liu, C. and Lee, Y. (2010), Effect of commitment and trust towards micro-blogs on consumer behavioral intention: A relationship marketing perspective. *International Journal of Electronic Business Management*, 8(4), pp. 292-303.
- Ioanid, A., Militaru, G., & Mihai, P. (2015). Social media strategies for organizations using influencers' power. *European Scientific Journal*.

- Kapitan, S., & Silvera, D. H. (2016). From digital media influencers to celebrity endorsers: Attributions drive endorser effectiveness. *Marketing Letters*, 27(3), 553-567.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-015-9363-0>
- Kilgour, M., Sasser, S. L., & Larke, R. (2015). The social media transformation process: Curating content into strategy. *Corporate Communications*, 20(3), 326-343.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-07-2014-0046>
- Kosaka, K. (n.d.). *Your Complete Guide to Creating an Influencer Marketing Strategy*. Alexa.
<https://blog.alexa.com/influencer-marketing-strategy/>
- Landy, J. (2016, August). *Six Reasons Brands Should Use Health and Wellness Influencers*. Chief Marketer. <https://www.chiefmarketer.com/six-reasons-brands-should-use-health-wellness-influencers/>
- Lim, X. J., Radzol, A. M., Cheah, J., & Wong, M. W. (2017). The impact of social media influencers on purchase intention and the mediation effect of customer attitude. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 7(2), 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.14707/ajbr.170035>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lupton, D., & Maslen, S. (2019). How women use digital technologies for health: Qualitative interview and focus group study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 21(1), e11481.
<https://doi.org/10.2196/11481>
- Neal, M. (2017). *Instagram influencers: The effects of sponsorship on follower engagement with fitness Instagram celebrities*. [Master of Science thesis, Rochester Institute of Technology]. Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works.

- Pattee, J. (2020, June). *What Influencer Tier is Best for Your Campaign?* Forward Influence.
<https://forwardinfluence.com/influencer-reach-what-tier-is-best-for-your-campaign/>
- Poelking, J. (2020). Internet influencers-US-March 2020: Trust and connection to influencers.
Mintel Solutions.
<https://reports.mintel.com/display/1010786/?fromSearch=%3Ffreetext%3Deffectiveness%2520of%2520influencer%2520endorsements>
- Powers, D., & Greenwell, D. (2017). Branded fitness: Exercise and promotional culture. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17(3), 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540515623606>
- Rashid, A. (2019). The media effect: Implications for manifesting maintainable body image in the context of global fashion industry. *Promotion and Marketing Communications* (pp.157-172). IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.89239>
- Schomer, A. (2019, December). *Influencer Marketing: State of the social media influencer market in 2020*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/influencer-marketing-report>
- Teodoro, R., & Naaman, M. (2013). Fitter with twitter: Understanding personal health and fitness activity in social media. *ICWSM*.
- Vogels, E. (2019, September). *Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life*. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/>
- Yan, J. (2011). Social media in branding: Fulfilling a need. *Journal of Brand Management*, 18(9), 688-696. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2011.19>