**Introduction**

With the rise of social media, smart phones, and everyday media use, we have seen a major change in the way that people get their information. Instead of relying on traditional publications or news sources for information, many individuals have taken to the web, some relying on bloggers, social media personalities, or citizen journalists to help them find answers. This trend has become especially popular in the realm of travel, and travel influencers are now a major personality on social media sites that can’t be ignored. This paper is going to look into existing research on influencers, determine common characteristics within research, and perform a content analysis to find common characteristics of travel influencers within travel influencers’ posts on Instagram from March 2020.

**Literary Analysis**

*Instagram*

As of February 2020, Instagram has over 1 billion monthly *active* users, 71% of which are under the age of 35 (Moshin, 2020). Instagram was founded in 2010 and is a visually oriented platform that is especially relevant for lifestyle topics (Maares 2020). Instagram is considered to be one of the more positive social networks - one that is not for debate or controversy but rather to encourage and motivate (Duffy 2019). Instagram is for the most part apolitical and focuses on topics such as fashion, travel, food, or beauty (Maares 2020). Instagram is currently the most popular and widely used platform for influencer marketing (Brand Ambassadorship, 2018)

*What is an influencer?*

With the rise of the internet and social media, there has been the growth of a new kind of celebrity: Micro-celebrities - people who are famous to a niche group of people (Duffy 2020). Micro-celebrities tend to interact directly with the people who follow them, speaking to their audiences as if they are close friends and referring to their fans as “followers.”

Influencers are a type of micro-celebrity (Bridging, 2018).

Influencers can be described as everyday internet users who have a large following on blogs and/or social media due to their depiction of their personal lives and lifestyles, often valued because they are authentic and relatable to others (Duffy, 2020). Hopkins says that influencers “leverage authenticity through a strategic sharing of aspects of their lives and activities” (2019). Influencers have built their strong followings by sharing original, interesting content that teaches, inspires, or entertains users that have similar interests and desires (Brand Ambassadorship, 2018). Through content creation, influencers give their followers insights into their everyday lives, experiences, opinions, and personal thoughts (De Veirman, 2017). As quoted in an interview, one influencer says, “We connect with people through stories” (Hopkins, 2019). As Duffy defines it, an influencer or microcelebrity is an ordinary life, monetized (2020). Duffy also says that social media influencers and bloggers “document their lives in exchange for compensation” (2020). Put in another way, influencers consume products, services, and experiences, then in turn promote their thoughts on these experiences, and in doing so sell themselves as a brand for audiences to relate to (Duffy, 2020). Oftentimes, influencers are able to turn their cultural capital into financial capital by getting free products, endorsement deals, and exclusive invitations.

Many influencers partner with a variety of brands and participate in different types of promotions and partnerships that leverage an influencer’s audience (Duffy, 2020). Instagram influencers have often been called “tastemakers” in research due to their ability to facilitate aspirations about desirable lifestyles (Maares, 2020). Veirman et al. echo the “tastemaker” sentiment, offering their definition of an influencer as “people who have built a sizable social network of people following them… in regard for being a trusted tastemaker in one or several niches” (2017).

Although influencers can be a model for advertising and are often referred to as commodifying their work, there does seem to be a genuine concern on the part of the influencer to help their audiences live a better life in some way (Maares, 2020).. Additionally, many influencers feel a responsibility to keep *most* of their feed organic. One participant in Duffy’s 2019 study said that they tried to keep 80 - 90% of their feed “real” and have only 10 to 20% maximum that is devoted to ads (Duffy & Hund, 2019). There is a definite responsibility to make sure that they are posting more things about their personal lives to keep their feeds from being entirely made up of ads. There is a good reason for this - A 2018 study found significantly more likes, positive sentiments and comments on organic posts rather than brand-sponsored posts (Brand Ambassadorship).

Influencers differ from celebrities in the fact that they often seem to be more accessible, believable, intimate, and easy to relate to (De Veirman, 2017).

Some platforms offer up a minimum follower count requirement to be an influencer, with a common follower minimum being 10,000 (De Veirman, 2017). Having more followers tends positively to affect follower attitudes toward the influencer due to a higher perception of popularity (De Veirman, 2017).

*Common Traits of Influencers*

*Branding*:Social media influencers’ work involves self-branding, meaning that they must perform consistently, associate themselves with certain values, and create a persona that creates loyalty in followers (Hopkins, 2019). One influencer suggests that followers notice when a post strays from the brand saying , “Once you’ve built a brand persona and that aesthetic that people are used to seeing, when they see something that falls outside of that line, they might either think it’s forced or not authentic (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Even when trying to post “authentically”, influencers must consider things such as styling decisions and how their captions fit in with the personal brand they have produced, avoiding anything that might be out of alignment with that brand (Hund 2019). “Calculated authenticity,” “curated imperfection” and “aspirational ordinariness” are a few phrases that describe the expectation to act authentically while staying in the bounds of their brand (Duffy & Hund 2019). Because social media posting requires a continuous performance of the self, it is important that each performance is a similar “upload” to the brand they’ve created (Raun, 2018).

All in all, the brand that influencers create ends up determining the things they chose to do and share with followers, the experiences they have, and the brands they work with (Bridging, 2018). Pirolli says that bloggers are “calculated” in their selection of topics and writing, even though they are free from editorial limitations (2017).

*Necessity of authenticity and vulnerability:* Authenticity and intimacy are key elements in micro-celebrity strategies (Raun, 2018). “Attention creating performances of a private authentic self is one of the most valuable commodities in social media celebrification.” (Raun, 2019, 108) Basically, people want someone to be real, and influencers that choose to show private thoughts, moments, and opinions are rewarded. We are currently in a cultural moment that authenticity is a highly important ideal, especially on the part of social media influencers and micro-celebrities (Duffy & Hund 2019).

Many influencers feel demands of a “visibility mandate,” meaning they feel it necessary to put themselves out there to a heightened degree (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Many bloggers and influencers consider their platforms to be “extensions of themselves” and use their own life experiences to create authentic content to share (Hopkins, 2019).

Additionally, there seems to be a call to stop showing things so “picture perfect” and show images that more accurately depict everyday life, such as messy rooms or makeup free selfies (Duffy & Hund, 2019). One influencer explains that her “authentic posts” perform better and lead to more engagement:

*“I’ve noticed just looking at the analytics of my posts that when you post things personal, or your family, or what’s actually going on in your life, or lessons that you’ve learned, or trials that you’re going through - those posts actually do probably 50% better than any of those other posts. So… it’s something that I definitely do, because, one, not only does it help other people who might be going through something similar, but also because the posts themselves do a lot better and reach more people.”*  (Duffy & Hund, 2019)

*Want to improve followers lives*: Many influencers want to offer inspiration or a positive attitude by providing new perspectives and inspiring images (Maares 2020). Some influencers feel that they are participating in a form of activism (Maares 2020).

*Travel Influencers*

The travel industry supports 10% of the world’s workforce, contributes over 10% of global GDP, and often has as many as 1.23 billion travelers in a year (Duffy, 2020). Though travel used to be considered more of a luxury adventure to many consumers, in the past 10 years it has transformed into a commercial product, with extensive offerings available for both luxury and modest budgets (Pirolli, 2017).

The addition of online travel booking tools, review websites, and blogs have helped to change the way that travelers get their information.Though guide books and travel publications like *Conde Nast Travel* are still heavily used, the popularity of travel information disseminated by travel influencers is growing. (Pirolli, 2017) (Bridging, 2018). Andrew Duffy refers to the practice of bloggers, reviewers, and commenters sharing thoughts on review sites to guide other travelers as creating a culture of “collective subjectivity.” (Bridging, 2018). At this point, travel information can be considered a process, and the contributions of bloggers and reviewers all contribute to a larger culture. (Pirolli, 2017).

Early travel bloggers didn’t have any predecessors to model from and instead often got into travel blogging simply because they liked traveling and writing or photography. Eventually these hobbies grew more time consuming and larger, and advertisers quickly picked up on the power of working with these bloggers to get their messages out (Bridging, 2018). Destination marketing organizations believe that the relationships bloggers and influencers build with their audiences are valuable (Bridging, 2018).

Travel blogging/social media presence combines the idea of leisure and working - earning money while they travel the world (Duffy, 2020). Many influencers are very open about their commercial intent anda re up front with readers that travels are funded in different ways that do involve links and sponsorships (Duffy, 2020).

Travel bloggers fit into the class of micro-celebrity, as do travel social media influencers. Although travel bloggers and influencers are frequently compared/classified with lifestyle influencers, there is a large difference in the amount of money required to perform the work of a travel influencer compared to a makeup or clothing influencer (Bridging, 2018).

Travel blogs are online journals that often describe a personal journey with personal thoughts, experiences, advice, and photographs. Travel influencers often take their own pictures and videos, and they often post and keep up with followers while traveling, offering “live” looks at where they’re at through posts and Instagram stories (Briding, 2018). These blogs can be very influential because travelers have begun to rely on interpersonal sources and travelers enjoy getting feedback about a location and experience from “a person like me” (Duffy, 2020). Several studies have determined that the shared connection between a blogger and their audience is what makes them so influential, because a bloggers’ writings about a location are based on real experiences (Duffy, 2020). This makes the reader consider these experiences more trustworthy.

Travel influencer’s personal brands determine what they choose to do while at a destination, curating experiences they feel best fit them and their followers (Briding, 2018).

Many travel influencers describe themselves as being on “journeys” to take risks, challenge themselves, explore the world, immerse themselves in new cultures and break out of their comfort zones (Hund, 2019). Many bloggers relate to audiences by relenting on the mundane aspects of everyday life and demonizing the 9 to 5 culture, making followers feel a sense of relatability to them (Duffy, 2020). There is a trend of wanting to be in control of one’s own life and escape normalcy that is prevalent among travel influencers.

*Influencer Marketing*

Brands have used various types of endorsers in marketing efforts for years with the knowledge that having a credible person relay product information can have benefits for consumer behavior (Brand Ambassadorship, 2018).

A common issue for micro-celebrities, influencers, and bloggers can be maintaining their credibility and authenticity as they grow the amount of sponsorships and endorsements with the brands they represent (Duffy, 2020).

Even in paid posts, brand partnerships are indicative of real personal tastes, relationships, and preferences of the individual behind the account, which means there is a level of vulnerability and risk for the influencer behind the persona (Hund, 2019). However, it seems to be this vulnerability that makes influencer marketing all the more successful (Maares, 2020).

Social media influencers that want to endorse products need to be perceived as “credible, attractive, and well-liked” (De Veirman, 2017). Additionally, a 2019 study found that “expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness” increased consumer purchase intentions as well as inquiries about the product (Brand Ambassadorship).

De veirman explains, “As influencers’ endorsements are highly personal and interwoven into the constant stream of textual and visual narration of their personal lives, they will likely be perceived as the influencer’s unbiased opinions and may have relevant persuasive power” (2017, 801). Duffy goes on to say that influencer marketing is “predicated on the assumption that brand ambassadors only hype products that they really, really love” (2019, 4993). Posts are meant to appear simultaneously as personal storytelling, knowledge sharing, and product placement that is meant to direct followers to a sponsor-directed place (Rain, 2018). Additionally, “Because social media celebrities possess traits of both celebrities and peers, they have the potential to be even more influential to consumer behavior than either of the previously discussed endorser types” (Brand Ambassadorship, 9).

A common tactic to further monetize travels is by having a niche or a unique selling point (Duffy, 2020).

*Downsides to the Influencer World*

*Critique is very common*: Identity policing can be very normal on social media, in which members of subcultures can try to monitor the way their groups are represented and can lead to users being called out or “corrected” for not acting in a preferred manner (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Additionally, marginalized groups are especially susceptible to surveillance (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Extreme forms of critique have been normalized by many as “inevitable” and a “side effect” of participating in digital spaces (Duffy & Hund, 2019). For as many positive supporters there are, there are always a few followers that would prefer to “knock [influencers] down a few pegs” (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Some influencers say that you haven’t really “made it” until you’ve been hated on, which is an alarming marker of success (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

*Too much availability to public:* Though many influencers describe their work as “just being themselves,” the reality is that being an influencer requires an excessive amount of emotional labor, and can require revealing personal information, sometimes to the point of discomfort (Raun, 2018) The visibility of being an influencer opens them up to public surveillance and the risks associated (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Social media has led to a blur of “personal and private,” which can leave social media influencers over exposed and vulnerable (Hopkins, 2019).

In Duffy & Hund’s study, one respondent said that the high amount of visibility and required transparency can really take a toll, and that it makes them want to back away from Instagram to avoid having to “make my life always look a certain way… It’s a lot of effort. I realize how unhealthy it can be for me” (2019).

*A Lot of unpaid work:*  Micro-celebrities are expected to perform a lot of time consuming labor that is not necessarily profitable. For example, influencers must engage in practices that signal their accessibility, presence, vulnerability, availability, and connectedness to followers. Micro-celebrities must interact in order to maintain their status (Raun, 2018). Hopkins echoes this sentiment, saying “It is important to note that there is a significant amount of free labor that is required… The skills and time needed to perform influencer roles is often more available to those with more economic and cultural capital” (2019). This means that becoming an “influencer” is not a career that is widely available to all and instead is reserved for people with free time and technological experience. Duffy seconds this opinion, explaining “Many existing influencers attained their standing through fortuitous timing (being first) and economic privilege (having savings or supportive parents” (2020).

Some brands expect travel influencers to work in exchange for free stays or free products, though many established influencers view this as exploitation (Bridging, 2018).

Even on paid work, many influencers feel it necessary to over perform on their contractual obligations to make sure that companies want to work with you and will offer you a good recommendation (Bridging, 2018).

*Need to conform to follower preferences:* Though influencers choose and create their own brand, aspiring influencers must conform in at least some part to make sure they have profit potential and likeability. This conformation can be a mode of gatekeeping on influencers (Hund, 2019). Social media influencers, just like a media company or television show, are beholden to their audiences as well as their advertisers.

Women are often more reluctant than men to post certain kinds of content and will avoid certain topics in order to avoid confrontation or disparagement (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

*Common theories that come into play*

*Commodification of self:* Self-commodification is the capitalization of content as well as a specific way of interacting with customers and arranging visual affects to attract attention, acting out an identity as if it was a branded good (Raun, 2018). Many influencer studies expand on this self commodification, as well as the commodification of everyday life (Brand Ambassadorship, 2018). Duffy claims that travel blogging requires self commodification due to the seemingly repeated mantra of “I did it, so you can do it too” (2020).

It is very common for travel influencers to discuss the amount of money they make each year, or mention that they are paid off their sponsorships, affiliate links, and banner advertisements. Through this process, they openly self-commodify (Duffy, 2020)

Self commodification was the most common theme coded in Duffy’s 2020 study, appearing in 30 out of 50 blogs analyzed.

*Parasocial Relationships/Bonds:* Parasocial bonds, originally introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956, describes the ability of the media or media figures to create the illusion of a relationship between a media personality and the viewer. Social media helps to aid online personalities cultivate one-sided relationships with their audiences (Brand Ambassadorship, 2018).. The high level of authenticity and personal fact sharing on behalf of influencers can work to cement this parasocial bond. This parasocial bond that occurs explains why influencer marketing can be so successful, as the information that comes from friends or acquaintances is much more powerful than messages that come directly from brands (De Veirman, 2017 ). Hopkins says that influencers use affective labor to encourage parasocial interactions with their followers” and that managing intimacy and authenticity help encourage extended parasocial relations as they begin to think of them as a personal friend of mentor (2019).

**Study**

After establishing common traits of influencers listed in previous research, I decided it would be best to do a content analysis in order to see what trends from the literary analysis were consistent of travel influencers. A total of 12 Instagram influencers were analyzed for the month of March. Each post from each influencer was saved within Instagram, and coded with a variety of metrics to find similarities, partnership habits, and authenticity trends.

The influencers that were coded are as followed:

1. Kiki, @TheBlondeAbroad
2. Matt, @ExpertVagabond
3. Ciara, @HeyCiara
4. Cameron, @TheCameronLee
5. Alexandra, @TheWayFaress
6. Eric, @TravelBabbo
7. Annette, @FromAnnetteWithLove
8. Murad & Nataly, @FollowMeTo
9. Matt, @NomadicMatt
10. Louis, @FunforLouis
11. Lee, @SpiritedPursuit
12. Brian, @BrianKelly

For further information on influencers selected for this study, their metrics, and findings, please visit the presentation.

**Limitations**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on travel, many influencers changed up their content approach to address the virus. Because there was essentially no travel going on, influencers either had to post old travel photos or post what they were currently doing at home. March 2020 may not have been the best month to get a true indication of what popular travel bloggers post and how these posts perform.

Another difficulty I found while coding was that because so much of travel influencers’ content revolves around recommendations, it was somewhat difficult to determine which posts were promotions/sponsorships and which were not. A more defined codebook is needed for more in depth results.

A longer time of evaluation, such as six months, would better establish trends.

**Future Studies**

Because influencers are setting trends for social media use, it is very likely that the authenticity of micro-celebrities will eventually affect mainstream celebrities (Duffy, 2020). A future study could compare posts between micro-celebrities and mainstream celebrities to see differences and similarities in what they post and how they address their audiences.

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