

YouTube Influencers Fostering Audience Engagement Through Parasocial Relationships

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As the growing popularity of lifestyle YouTube influencers risks the possibility of over-saturation of sponsored content on YouTube, brands should determine the effectiveness of influencers and identify the characteristics of lifestyle YouTube influencers to make sponsored content successful. Drawing upon parasocial relationship theory, this study incorporates match-up hypothesis and source credibility theories to determine characteristics of lifestyle YouTube influencers and their content that increase their audience engagement and makes social media influencer marketing effective. Using the content analysis of lifestyle YouTube influencers, this study reveals that micro-influencers have a higher engagement with their audience through parasocial relationships than mega and macro-influencers.

Keywords: *lifestyle influencers, YouTube, influencer marketing, parasocial relationships, content analysis*

INTRODUCTION

With the continued rise of social media use and subsequent growth of video sharing, more people are choosing to forgo traditional media consumption in favor of social media and streaming services as a means for information and entertainment, resulting in declining TV viewership. This trend has redefined the word “celebrity” and created a new category of social media personality known as “influencers”, or people who influence trends and lead opinions on video-sharing social media platforms such as YouTube (Arnold, 2017). As of 2023, more than 2.7 billion people log on to YouTube every month (Sheperd, 2024). It is one of the most popular online platforms in America, with nearly 73% of adults regularly using the platform (Kessel, 2019). Top YouTubers receive three times more views than typical celebrities (O’Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016), leading to a shift in influence from celebrities to non-celebrities. Consumers are more likely to be persuaded or motivated by social media influencers than by celebrities, as consumers engage more on social media platforms than with traditional media. As a result, brands who partner with YouTube influencers achieve four times higher brand familiarity than with the use of celebrities (Nazerali, 2017). This suggests that YouTube influencers are better for creating long-term patrons than celebrities and

YouTube influencers may generate higher engagement and potential direct monetary contributions to the brand (Glucksman, 2017).

A popular segment of YouTube influencers is the lifestyle influencer (Glucksman, 2017), encompassing many different categories and having attained a highly committed following (Nazerali, 2017). The growing popularity of lifestyle YouTube influencers risks the possibility of over-saturation of sponsored content on YouTube. Thus, brands should determine the effectiveness of influencers, recognize the factors that make the sponsored content successful, and identify the characteristics of lifestyle YouTube influencers that lead to successful brand-influencer partnerships. There has been extensive research on the use of celebrity endorsers in marketing. However, there are fundamental differences between what makes a celebrity influencer successful and what makes a social media influencer, specifically a YouTube influencer, successful. Although the characteristics of influencers may lead higher engagement and even direct monetary contributions (Glucksman, 2017), there has been little to no research examining the characteristics of lifestyle YouTube influencers that generate the audience engagement, thus building successful brand-influencer partnerships.

Drawing upon parasocial relationship theory, this study incorporates theoretical evidence of match-up hypothesis and source credibility to examine characteristics of lifestyle YouTube influencers and their content that affects their audience engagement and generate positive responses toward the sponsored brand. The objectives of this study are 1) to identify the levels of engagement by types of influencers (mega, macro, or micro-influencers); 2) to examine whether audience engagement varies based on levels of interactivity, consistency of uploading videos, self-disclosure, and the type of content (sponsored versus non-sponsored); and 3) to investigate whether sponsored content engagement varies further based on levels of impartiality (disclosed or not disclosed), relevancy (relevant or not relevant) and self-disclosure (present or not present). Using a content analysis of 30 YouTube influencers in the lifestyle category, this study provides implications for brands in identifying lifestyle YouTube influencers who can foster more audience engagement and ultimately yield positive returns on investments for the brand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Influencer

A social media influencer is a person who has earned a large and committed following through a social media platform and is highly credible in a specific industry due to their perceived authenticity, trustworthiness (Arora et al., 2019), and social closeness to their audience (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016). They influence their devoted following through the content they create and share as opinion leaders and experts in their field. Further, consumers perceive messages and content from social media influencers as more authentic than messages directly from brands (Zhou et al., 2020) as they have a similar level of trust for influencers that they have for their friends (Swant, 2016). Additionally, consumers perceive influencers as independent of the brands; therefore, their opinions and reviews are perceived as more authentic (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The growing impact of social media influencers on consumer behavior can be explained by social influence theory, which is the notion that an individual is influenced by the behavior of others in a social network to conform to the behavioral patterns in the community (Venkatesh & Brown, 2001). Two types of social informational theory are informational and normative (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Informational social influence refers to the “influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality” while normative social influence is “the influence to conform to the expectations of another person or group” (Li, 2013). As consumers look for product information prior to making a purchase, product information and product demonstrations within the influencer lifestyle setting can be the informational social influence that adds greater confidence to a consumer’s purchasing decision. Regarding normative social influence in a social network, a previous study suggests that source credibility, argument quality, and social influence factors impact consumer perceptions and behaviors to conform to the norm (Aluri & Tucker, 2015). In the context of social media influencers, influencers with credibility and expertise in a topic and their argument quality to subscribers can lead consumers to impulsive purchases (Hu et al., 2019). Social

media influencer marketing becomes more efficient than traditional marketing methods and directly influences purchase intentions (Johansen & Gulsvik, 2017). Social media influencers are an effective communication tool between brands and consumers, and marketers have begun incorporating social media influencers into their marketing strategy to engage with customers and to generate electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

Influencer Type

The influencer's number of subscribers can categorize the types of influencers; further designated as mega-influencers, macro-influencers, or micro-influencers. Mega-influencers are household names, celebrities, or public figures with one million or more followers. These influencers can earn \$250,000 per sponsored post (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Macro-influencers are bloggers, critics, and experts within their niche industry with followings between 50,000 and one million and earn between \$5,000-\$50,000 per sponsored posts (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020). Lastly, micro-influencers represent the everyday consumers within their niche industry. While they have smaller followings (between 500 and 50,000) and smaller reach, they tend to have a more engaged and connected audience (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Ellis, 2018; Fontanto, 2017) with the content targeted for their own audience (Wissman, 2018). Campbell and Farrell (2020) suggest that this group of influencers are the ideal candidates for brand deals because they may be open to unpaid partnerships and free products. Engagement, interactivity and perceived trust also vary across the different influencer groups (Ladhari et al., 2020).

Influencers Across Social Media Platforms

Different social media platforms have different types of content and formats (e.g., microblogging, social networking, and content sharing), various scopes of architecture, culture and norms along with fulfillment of diverse needs for its users (Kahn, 2017; Roma & Aloini, 2019; Smith et al., 2012). Thus, social media influencers' characteristics and content are different across platforms. Phua, Jin, and Kim (2017) suggest that there are six uses for social media platforms: passing the time, showing affection, following fashion, sharing problems, demonstrating sociability, and improving social knowledge. Based on the features of these platforms, the different social media platforms would fulfill different uses for its users. The users of these platforms would also differ in levels of trust, therefore, brand engagement.

Among the various social media platforms, YouTube is a video-sharing platform that allows users to upload, view, share and interact with video content (Ladhari et al., 2020). There is both professionally produced content and user-generated content on the platform. Professionally produced content tends to have higher views than the user-generated content which has higher engagement (Smith et al., 2012). Compared to other platforms' content, the user-generated content on YouTube is longer in form and more content rich, allowing for more information about the brand and brand sentiment (Smith et al., 2012). Additionally, YouTube's information-seeking aspect is a strong predictor of liking, disliking, and commenting engagement (Khan, 2017). The YouTubers that have amassed large followings by uploading content in a particular category have become a source of authentic and trustworthy information and have built trusting and persuasive relationships with their audience. In conjunction with the long-format content on the platform, YouTube influencers are ideal candidates for brands and marketers to form partnerships.

Lifestyle YouTube Influencers

A popular segment of YouTube influencers is the lifestyle category (Glucksman, 2017). This group of influencers encompasses many categories (e.g., beauty, fashion, fitness, travel, etc.) with a highly committed following (Nazerali, 2017). YouTube beauty and fashion influencers were among the earlier groups to partner with brands in their videos. Partnerships between brands and influencers have since spread to other genres of YouTube videos.

Lifestyle YouTubers upload content that shares many aspects of their life and activities (e.g., fitness, travel or parenting). Compared to other types of YouTubers such as "review YouTubers", lifestyle YouTubers make up a personal experience archetype in which their content is more subjective as they share their personal opinions, ideas, and experiences (Gerrath & Ursey, 2020). As opposed to traditional celebrity

endorsers representing aspirational goals, YouTube influencers represent their audience. The glimpse into their personal lives gives the audience the perception that they are involved in the YouTubers' daily lives, increasing homophily and emotional attachments, which lead to increased engagement with the content through liking, commenting, subscribing, and following (Ladhari et al., 2020). Lifestyle influencers have changed how brands interact with consumers regarding lifestyle branding (Glucksman, 2017).

Branded and sponsored content from lifestyle YouTube influencers, when attributed to intrinsic acceptance motivations, affects revisit retention, increases word-of-mouth and perceived authenticity, and decreases feelings of betrayal, especially when the sponsored content is not perceived as a common occurrence on the YouTuber's channel (Gerrath & Ursey, 2020). Compared to other types of YouTube influencers, the personal nature of lifestyle YouTuber's content, the wide range of topics their content can feature, and the perceived uncommonness of their sponsored content suggest that lifestyle YouTube influencer marketing is a promising avenue for marketers to explore.

Influencer and Content Characteristics Fostering Audience Engagement

Parasocial Relationships: Interactivity, Consistency, Self-Disclosure, and Engagement

Successful influencers foster audience loyalty toward the influencer's channel and the influencers become more convincing in conveying brand messages and generating monetary benefits to brands. The concept of parasocial relationships explains how intimate relationships between audiences and influencers can be built. Horton and Wohl (1956) claim that individuals develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification of the media persona when repeatedly exposed to the persona. In parasocial relationships, friendship, understanding, and identification are key dimensions fostered in a parasocial context (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When individuals like and subscribe to the influencer channel, they interact and engage more with the influencer, developing intimacy and friendship with the influencer. The frequency of viewing influencers' videos increases audiences' understanding and knowledge about the influencer. This further develops familiarity with the influencer, creating a sense of understanding the values and motives of the influencer's claims (Chung & Cho, 2017). The repeated interaction and viewing of the content foster a psychological attachment between the audience and the media persona, forming loyalty toward that media persona (Cohen, 2001; Cole & Leets, 1999). In the social media context, a parasocial relationship between audiences and social media influencers can be developed through frequent interactions with the audience by replying to audience comments and through consistent uploading of content that demonstrates the use of the product in the influencer's everyday life. The frequent and consistent interactions between the influencer and their audience can create a sense of intimacy, feelings of connectedness, perceived friendships and understanding, and identification with the influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017). This increases subscribers and the number of views on the influencers' videos, thus generating more audience engagement and attachment toward the influencers.

Ferchaud et al.'s study (2018) examined content features, video attributes, and parasocial attributes of the top YouTubers about their effect on building parasocial relationships. The study found that using self-disclosure in online content is crucial in building parasocial relationships between influencers and followers as it gives the followers the feeling of reciprocity. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) examined parasocial interactions and credibility of social media influencers and their effects on purchase intention. Parasocial interactions are the seemingly personal relationships built between influencers and their audience. These "personal" relationships are typically one-sided but encouraged by the influencer through engagement and interactivity. Effective parasocial interaction builds trust and increases message persuasion (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Prior research suggests that influencer marketing through YouTube influencers is effective via the building of parasocial relationships, leading to the increased purchase intention of the viewers (Farivar et al., 2021; Lee & Watkins, 2016).

The content created by lifestyle influencers can promote brands and make the brands relatable to consumers (Glucksman, 2017). The quality of content and the characteristics of the influencer effect can be determined with the following criteria.

Engagement. Engagement is user behaviors manifested in consumption and participation such as the number of likes, comments, and views on content (Khan, 2017). YouTubers with a higher number of likes

and comments than the total number of video views can be considered to have a highly engaged audience. Likes and comments are the behavioral manifestation of online engagement, and indicate future eWOM behavior (Boerman et al., 2017; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Interactivity. Ki and Kim (2019) found that interactive content was positively related to consumer attitudes toward opinion leadership and purchase intent on sponsored social media content. The interactivity of the YouTube influencers and their audience can be measured based on the frequency with which the YouTube influencers encourage their audience to interact with them and their videos via commenting, subscribing, holding contests, giveaways, asking questions, responding to comments, and liking videos.

Consistency. Consistency in uploading videos can build trust and a relationship between the YouTube influencers and their audience. A consistent upload schedule can follow a pattern such as once a week or every Monday over an extended period of time. The site visit frequency of YouTube channels is a strong predictor of engagement behaviors (Khan, 2017). The more often an audience visits YouTube, the more likely they are to participate in engagement behaviors such as liking and commenting. YouTube influencers' ability to maintain a consistent upload schedule encourages continuous site visitation from their audience, and continuous engagement.

Self-Disclosure. Self-disclosure is the purposeful sharing of personal information about oneself to others (Spence et al., 2020). Self-disclosure such as thoughts, feelings and attitudes, can range in depth, frequency, and duration, and are used to create and control social relationships. Initially used to describe the building of trust and source credibility in traditional interpersonal relationships, the definition of self-disclosure has been adopted to explain the social relationships built online. Positive and entertaining self-disclosures from an influencer increase the feeling of connectedness and authenticity (Utz, 2014; Leite & Baptista, 2021). In terms of social media use, specifically YouTube, self-disclosure refers to sharing positive information about one's personal life during a YouTube video and leads viewers to perceive the YouTuber as more authentic and trustworthy, resulting in higher positive perceptions (Ferchaud, 2018). Self-disclosure encourages feelings of reciprocity, in which the viewer may also self-disclose in the form of engagement (Ferchaud et al., 2018).

Drawing on parasocial relationships to identify YouTube influencer characteristics that increase audience engagement, the following research questions are examined:

R1. *Is interaction between influencers and audiences positively associated with audience engagement with influencers?*

R2. *Is consistency in uploading videos positively associated with audience engagement with influencers?*

R3. *Is self-disclosure sharing of the influencer positively associated with audience engagement with influencers?*

Match-Up Hypothesis: Relevancy of the Sponsored Content

The match-up hypothesis suggests that a successful sponsorship is contingent on match-up factors between the brand/product and celebrity, such as expertise, attractiveness, and credibility (Malodia et al., 2017). Celebrities have been effective endorsers for their symbolic aspirational association (Assael, 1984). Compared to celebrity endorsers, social media influencers are described as "micro-endorsers" (Hall, 2015). With the rise of social media use, social media influencers have taken on a role similar to celebrities in traditional media and are now reference groups that consumers use in evaluating products and brands. The favorable characteristics of influencers and their lifestyles curated and presented with verbal and visuals via YouTube videos can further enhance source attractiveness and elevate the brand image and value. Consumers are likely to form positive attitudes toward the product/brand when the brand corresponds well to the influencer's expertise (Hall, 2016). In addition, message relevance is a precursor of source credibility (O'Reilly et al., 2016), suggesting influencers with relevant expertise and background in the topic can increase source credibility and lead to positive responses toward the sponsored brand (Wu & Wang, 2011).

Relevancy between the brand and the influencer can be a determinant to increase the trustworthiness of the content, generating more audience engagement with the influencer.

Relevancy of the Sponsored Content. Previous research has indicated the importance of relevancy when determining the yield of favorable results using sponsored content. The product-influencer match-up can be successful when the brand and influencer are relevant within similar industries or niche markets (McCormick, 2016). Better product-influencer matchups suggest higher levels of influence. In this study, the sponsored content is considered relevant if the brand sponsorship is relevant to the specific lifestyle YouTuber's content. For example, a YouTuber's fitness content sponsored by an athletic wear company would be considered relevant. Thus, the following research question was examined:

R4. Is brand-influencer content relevancy positively associated with audience engagement?

Source Credibility: Impartiality and Content-Type

Source credibility has been a determinant of increased audience engagement and involvement with influencers and their content. Previous studies proposed that determinants of source credibility are source expertise (e.g., competence, knowledge, skills), trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953), and attractiveness (e.g., likeability) (McGuire, 1985). A previous study found that the source of a message must be perceived as an expert on the topic and conveys positive motives for sharing the message for the source to be perceived as credible (O'Reilly et al., 2016). Source credibility determines persuasiveness for communicated messages (Hovland and Weiss, 1951), enhancing message credibility and effectiveness. Further people perceive credible sources as providers of impartial opinions (MacCracken, 1989). The impartiality of the content develops trust between influencers and audience. Consumers perceive the information from the spokesperson or celebrity as trustworthy and tend to have more preferences and positive attitude towards the products (Jones et al., 2006). Thus, sponsored or non-sponsored content may affect audience engagement with the influencers.

Level of Impartiality. Impartial refers to the influencer's content having no brand affiliation, in which the viewer is aware that the influencer's opinions are not influenced by brand sponsorship. Level of impartiality refers to the influencer's level of transparency regarding sponsored content. Levels of impartiality are defined as impartial, sponsored, or not disclosed. Disclosure occurs when the influencer explicitly states that their content is made in partnership with or sponsored by a brand and must be made through the video to qualify as disclosure. Disclosure made at the end of a video's written description is categorized as non-disclosure and a simple lack of disclosure. Impartial posts result in higher perceived credibility of the message and the source of the message (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Disclosure versus non-disclosure also affects brand recall, recognition, and intent to engage (Boerman, 2020). Previous literature examines the effects of disclosure versus non-disclosure of sponsored content from celebrities and brands, and through text-rich content such as blog posts and Facebook posts (Boerman et al., 2017; Hwang & Jeong, 2016). However, there has been little research regarding disclosure versus non-disclosure in YouTube influencers' media-rich content and its presence in the content of various-sized influencers. The possible relationship between the various influencer groups and the level of impartiality of their sponsored content is expected.

Content Type (Sponsored/Non-Sponsored). The type of uploaded videos can be categorized by either sponsored or non-sponsored. Sponsored content will constitute any video content made in partnership with a brand in which the brand provides the YouTuber with a discount or affiliate code, free product, or direct payment for the video.

Source credibility regarding content and social media influencers can increase when the social media influencer provides impartial and honest reviews for the product/brand and discloses whether the product/brand is sponsored or not. Based on the preceding discussion, the following research questions were examined:

R5. Is the level of impartiality positively associated with audience engagement with the influencer?

R6. Does brand sponsorship affect audience engagement with the influencer?

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was used to examine lifestyle YouTube influencers, their video content, and audiences' reactions to the influencers and the influencers' content. Lifestyle YouTube influencer and their content characteristics were evaluated by types of influencers (i.e., mega-influencer, macro-influencer, and micro-influencer) to examine the audience engagement toward the influencers. This study adapted Bergstrom and Backman (2013)'s social media marketing content analysis method and took the following steps of content analysis.

Selection Process

Thirty lifestyle YouTubers were selected and categorized as either mega, macro, or micro influencers based on their number of subscribers. The sample of lifestyle YouTubers were chosen by searching "lifestyle YouTuber" on YouTube and selecting the first channel that met the subscriber count criteria. Additionally, the channels of English-speaking female lifestyle YouTubers were only chosen if their channels' content was based on a variety of topics, as opposed to a singular topic (e.g., travel, fitness, or beauty). As niche influencers tend to have a more engaged following (e.g., beauty influencers, travel influencers), it was crucial that the YouTubers chosen for this content analysis were equally diverse within the "lifestyle" category.

Duration and Content Analysis Process

Selected lifestyle YouTubers' content and their characteristics were examined across a 30-day period to determine the existence or absence of consistency. This study used criteria for follower count, video count, engagement, interactivity, consistency, content type, impartiality, content relevancy, and self-disclosure. Once the final video from one lifestyle YouTuber within the 30-day period was consumed and the criteria was recorded, the next lifestyle YouTuber was chosen from the final video suggested "Related Videos". If all sample criteria were met, the process was repeated until there were ten lifestyle YouTubers for each of the mega, macro, and micro influencer categories.

Coding

The following criteria were used to analyze the influencer and content characteristics for this study purpose.

- *Influencer type.* Influencer type was categorized by the number of subscribers of the YouTuber. Mega-influencers had over one million subscribers, while macro-influencers had a subscriber count between 50,000 and one million. Finally, micro-influencers had a subscriber count between 500 and 50,000.
- *Following.* The YouTubers' subscriber counts were recorded at the time of the content analysis.
- *Video count.* The video content across a 30-day period was selected to be included in the content analysis. For consistency, the videos from the 30 days immediately before the day of analysis were chosen for every lifestyle YouTuber regardless of the consistency of uploading.
- *Engagement.* The engagement level of each YouTuber was recorded by comparing the total number of video likes to the total number of video views and the total number of video comments compared to the total number of video views. This resulted in a percentage that indicated what portion of viewers were inclined to engage with the video, by either liking the videos or commenting on the videos after consuming the YouTuber's content.
- *Interactivity.* Interactivity was measured by observing the number of times the YouTuber encouraged their audience to interact with their channel by encouraging their viewers to like, comment or subscribe throughout their video content. The total number of encouraged interactions across the videos within the 30-day period were recorded. Encouragement to

interact with the YouTuber on other social media platforms was not recorded as instances of interactivity.

- *Consistency*. While the other content criteria were recorded over a 30-day period, observations spanning three months were conducted to determine if the YouTuber followed a consistent uploading schedule (e.g., once a week, twice a week or every Wednesday).
- *Content type (Sponsored/non-sponsored)*. Each video within the 30-day period was categorized as either sponsored or not sponsored. Sponsored video content included any video made in partnership with a brand in which the YouTuber provided a discount code, affiliate code or in which a brand paid for the video. Discount codes and affiliate links listed within the written description of the video, but not actually in the video content, were not considered sponsored content.
- *Impartiality (Disclosed/not disclosed)*. If a brand sponsored the video content, impartiality was identified if the sponsorship was disclosed by the YouTuber within the video itself. If the sponsorship was not explicitly disclosed within the video content, this was considered not disclosed. The number of impartial sponsorships compared to the number of total sponsored videos was recorded.
- *Relevancy*. Sponsored content was considered relevant if the sponsoring brand's category was in congruence with the lifestyle content of that video. For example, sponsorship would be considered relevant if the sponsoring brand was a fashion brand, and the video content was related to fashion. The number of relevant and total sponsored videos across the 30-day period was recorded for relevancy.
- *Self-disclosure*. Self-disclosure was recorded as the number of times a lifestyle YouTube influencer shared something positive about their personal life, for example, moving into a new home, having a baby, or going on vacation.

RESULTS

Through the content analysis of thirty lifestyle YouTube influencers, this study identified three categories of YouTube influencers: mega-influencers, macro-influencers, and micro-influencers. Although each influencer was found to have some commonalities, there were some variances among the three types of influencers (see Tables 1 and 2).

Mega-Influencers

The results of the content analysis revealed that the 10 mega-influencers had an average of 3.71 million subscribers and posted 51 videos with 11 sponsored videos. Of the 11 sponsored videos, only one video was neither impartial nor relevant. Only two of the 10 mega-influencers did not upload sponsored video content. They were the least consistent in uploading content and uploaded less frequently than macro- and micro-influencers. Despite having the largest number of subscribers, on average, their viewers were the least engaged regarding liking (4.68%) and commenting (.36%) on their video content. It was consistent across all influencer categories to have higher percentages of likes than comments compared to total video views. Mega-influencers had the second highest percentage of sponsored content compared to total video content (22%). There was only one instance of lack of impartiality and lack of relevancy in the 11 sponsored videos uploaded by mega-influencers. Mega-influencers were also the least likely to encourage their subscribers to interact with them via liking, commenting, or subscribing. There was not a pattern between those that regularly encouraged interactions, and levels of engagement or number of subscribers.

Additionally, of the four mega-influencers that did not consistently upload videos, three did not have any instances of self-disclosure. These mega-influencers also had the lowest video counts. Interestingly, the mega-influencers had more video views than total subscribers.

Macro-Influencers

The 10 macro-influencers, with an average of 483,800 subscribers, posted a total of 59 videos with 14 of those videos being sponsored by a brand. Of the sponsored content, only one video was not impartial (not disclosed), and only one sponsored video was irrelevant to the lifestyle content. Instances of self-disclosure were relatively similar to that of the mega influencers. Unlike mega-influencers, the macro-influencers were more apt to encourage interactions such as likes, comments, and subscriptions, therefore, they had higher percentages of comment engagement (.77%) and more consistent like engagement (4.36%) than mega-influencers. Further, they had the highest engagement related to video comments among all three influencer types. While macro-influencers were not more consistent in uploading, they uploaded video content more frequently than both mega and micro-influencers. The macro-influencers uploaded the highest percentage of sponsored content at 24%, but they had one instance of lack of impartiality and relevancy. Overall, it was found that macro-influencers uploaded more sponsored content and encouraged their viewers to interact with them more than mega-influencers. Moreover, they were the only group with significantly fewer video views than total subscribers.

Micro-Influencers

Lastly, the 10 micro-influencers with the smallest following, averaging 35,198 subscribers, posted a total of 56 videos with only 5 of those videos being sponsored by a brand. They had higher like (5.24%) and comment engagement (.75%) than mega-influencers and had the highest like engagement of the three YouTube influencer types. Inconsistency of video uploading schedule, six of the ten followed consistent uploading schedules and they uploaded more frequently than mega-influencers. Additionally, the micro-influencers were much more likely to encourage their followers to interact with them and their videos. Despite having more engaged followers and frequently encouraging engagement, micro-influencers had the lowest percentage of sponsored content (9%). Like mega-influencers, the micro-influencers had more video views than total subscribers. This indicates that the impartiality of video increases source credibility and continuous interaction with audiences, accelerating audiences' engagements.

TABLE 1
CONTENT ANALYSIS OVERVIEW OF INFLUENCER CHARACTERISTICS

Influencer Type	Average Follower Count	Video Count	Influencer Characteristics			
			Average Engagement ^a		Interactivity ^b	Consistency ^c
			Likes	Comments		
Mega-Influencer >>1million followers	3.71M	51	4.68%	0.36%	82 times in 51 videos	6 of 10
Macro-Influencer 50,000-1 million followers	483K	59	4.36%	0.77%	112 times in 59 videos	6 of 10
Micro-Influencer <50,000 followers	35K	56	5.24%	0.75%	125 times in 56 videos	6 of 10

Note: Criteria Detail

^aEngagement: Engagement is measured based on the number of likes and number of comments compared to the total number of views.

^bInteractivity: Interactivity is measured based on the frequency of the times that the YouTubers encourages their audience to interact with them and their videos.

^cConsistency: How many influencers, of the total sample, had consistent upload schedules.

TABLE 2
CONTENT ANALYSIS OVERVIEW OF CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS

Influencer Type	Average Follower Count	Video Count	Content Characteristics			
			Content Type ^a : Sponsored/non-sponsored	Level of Impartiality ^b	Relevancy of Sponsored Content ^c	Self-disclosure ^d
Mega-Influencer >>1million followers	3.71M	51	11 sponsored videos	10 disclosed sponsorships	10 relevant sponsorships	22
Macro-Influencer 50,000-1 million followers	483K	59	14 sponsored videos	13 disclosed sponsorships	13 relevant sponsorships	22
Micro-Influencer <50,000 followers	35K	56	5 sponsored videos	3 disclosed sponsorships	5 relevant sponsorships	17

Note: Criteria Detail

^a*Content Type*: Total number of sponsored videos for entire sample of the influencer type.

^b*Level of Impartiality*: Total number of sponsorships that were disclosed.

^c*Relevancy of Sponsored Content*: Total number of sponsored videos that were relevant to the influencer's content.

^d*Self-disclosure*: Self-disclosure is measured as total videos that included an instance of self-disclosure.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to increasing our understanding of lifestyle YouTube influencers, the content characteristics that foster audience engagement, and the subsequent impact on promoting lifestyle product categories effectively. Grounded upon parasocial relationship theory, this study identifies lifestyle influencers and their content characteristics that increase source credibility, message persuasiveness, and audience engagement, yielding positive returns for the sponsoring brands. The findings of this study provide brands with knowledge and direction as they identify successful lifestyle YouTube influencers who align with their brand characteristics and can build attachments between the brand and consumers, forming positive attitudes toward the sponsoring brand.

The content analysis suggests that successful lifestyle influencers build an intimate relationship with their subscribers through interaction with their audience, consistent uploading, content impartiality, and self-disclosure of themselves. These influencers are bringing life to reviews or evaluations of the product and connecting personally with the consumer. Therefore, the influencers become a trusted resource leading to positive responses toward the sponsoring brand. Trust can be established in various ways, including customer's interactions with a brand over time, past performance related to customer expectations, reviews, or evaluations, and through demonstrations of products and services. As such, interactions of influencers with their audience can build credibility and increase audience engagement with their content, yielding positive attitudes toward the brand or product that the influencers are promoting (Bi & Zhang, 2022).

As consumers increasingly use and scrutinize reviews to determine their authenticity and source credibility (Rohrlich, 2020; Wu et al., 2020), lifestyle YouTube videos can act as credible sources once consumers build parasocial relationships through interaction with the influencers via consistently uploaded content, impartial and self-disclosures of the content. YouTube influencers create meaningful connections with their audiences and can lend a personal viewpoint to a brand. This increases consumer trust in the brand and its offerings and benefits all parties.

This study expected that mega-influencers would have the most influence, engagement, and sponsored content related to connecting consumers to brands, thus providing the most credible source to their audience. Interestingly, the findings of this study indicated that although mega-influencers had the largest following and the second largest amount of sponsored content (22%), they had the least engagement and were less likely to encourage engagement from followers compared to their other influencer counterparts. The macro-influencers had the highest amount of sponsored content (24%) and were more likely to encourage interactivity from their audience, but they were the only group that had fewer video views than subscribers. This could mean that they were more successful in obtaining brand sponsorships by signifying a level of trust with the brand. The source credibility theory supports the concept that audience engagement and involvement with influencers depends on the trustworthiness of the influencer as delivering an impartial opinion (MacCracken, 1989; O'Reilly et al., 2016).

The micro-influencers with the smallest following had the highest overall engagement with fewer subscribers. Although this group had the smallest percentage of sponsored content (9%), they were highly interactive with their subscribers by encouraging engagement from them. Consistent with the previous study applying match-up hypothesis theory, when the influencers' features (e.g., expertise and credibility) are parallel to the brands they promote, consumers are more likely to respond with positive attitudes when these features align (Assael, 1984; Hall, 2016). Even though this group was less involved in sponsorships, they have a unique opportunity to intimately connect with their audience on a more personal level and therefore have the potential to build trust and credibility for any brand they promote.

Based on this study, brands could employ several strategies to attain the best benefit from influencer groups. Further implications indicated that brands seeking to determine successful lifestyle YouTube influencers that can align with the company's characteristics and increase source credibility for more audience engagement should employ different strategies to all three influencer categories for maximum reach. A multi-pronged approach using YouTube influencers may yield the highest return on investments to the brand. Although mega and macro-influencers exhibited higher content relevancy and transparency of the sponsored content than micro-influencers, micro-influencers had a higher engagement with their audiences and more frequently posted than mega and micro-influencers. Additionally, micro-influencers are a more cost-effective partnership as they tend to be more willing to create sponsored content for little to no compensation or free products.

A strategy brands could employ for mega-influencers would be to assist them with more sponsored content to leverage their existing large following to be more engaged. This could be in the form of brand-sponsored promotions for audience engagement with the influencer. Brands could assign specific product categories with select macro-influencers, who uploaded the highest amount of sponsored content and were more likely to encourage subscriber interactivity but had fewer video views than their total subscribers. Designating specific product collections featuring the select macro-influencers and their product use and product reviews could increase the number of video views and ultimately drive new sales to these collections.

Brands could capitalize on the small but mighty characteristics of the micro-influencers to establish an avenue for building a stronger brand-influencer partnership. This group also has the most room to grow in sponsorships as they engage and interact more with their audiences than other influencers. They could appear more authentic and their content more trustworthy. Partnerships with micro-influencers may be far less costly than partnerships with mega and macro-influencers, thus it may be a better investment for marketers to partner with several micro-influencers in addition to their other influence brand strategies. Brands could partner with micro-influencers as a niche branding strategy to increase the micro-influencers' visibility through brand advertising and develop a cross-over following from existing consumers while attracting new ones via the micro-influencers influence. Brands might apply these strategies in their decision-making to leverage the best characteristics of the different influencer types. This would allow brands to establish collaborations that best fit their marketing goals and potentially reach new and relevant consumers via the lifestyle YouTube influencers curating their brands.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As any other research, there are limitations in this study. One limitation of this study lies with the short time frame the influencers were observed. A longer period such as six months to one year could either confirm the findings of this study or provide additional results. A longitudinal examination of the impact of these influencers could reveal a broader and deeper level of knowledge regarding their longevity and lasting effects on their audience and brand sponsorships. Another limitation of this study was the method of selection of the influencers. A search for “lifestyle YouTubers” was the initial method of identifying the influencers, but as a growing number of influencers are identified, a larger sample of influencers should be identified in future research. Further, this study focused on “lifestyle” influencers who include a broad set of product categories. Thus, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other topic categories of YouTuber influencers.

Future research can either add to the lifestyle category or focus on individual product categories to examine a particular brand-influencer match-up hypothesis. In addition, it is encouraged to examine other influencers and content characteristics that could affect the success of brand-influencer relationships such as production features, authenticity, and trustiness of influencer characteristics. This study further encourages the inclusion of quantitative data and metrics (e.g., revenue, return on investments) to measure the effectiveness of brand-sponsored lifestyle influencers. In future, researchers may also include additional groups of influencers, such as nano-influencers or expand this research to other video content-based platforms (e.g., TikTok, Twitch).

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