

MONETIZING A LIFESTYLE: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS TRANSFORM
THEIR HOBBIES INTO A CAREER

by

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Honors Thesis

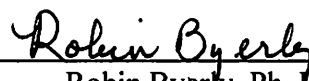
Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Walker College of Business Department of Management
and The Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

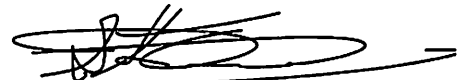
Bachelor of Science in Business Administration

May, 2021

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Abstract

The introduction of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook allowed individuals to create an online presence of their own. A group of content creators referred to as Social Media Influencers (SMI) use different strategies to profit off of their social media content through monetization. Successful SMI rely on three main groups in order to have the flexibility to work on their content creation as a full-time career: their brand, their audience, and the companies they collaborate with. The purpose of this study is to explore the career of SMI using a triangular approach to gather data from influencer-generated content, administration of a survey, and articles to view the perspective of each group. Results revealed the importance of audience engagement and creation of niche content for the influencer's career and brand deal offerings to continue long-term. Tailoring social media content towards the audience of the SMI is crucial in making a profit.

Acknowledgements

The completion of my honors thesis would not be possible without the mention of a few people in my life who supported me through my academic journey. First of all, my family, who have been my biggest supporters from the beginning of time and the ones who inspire me to pursue opportunities that allow me to explore my passions. Secondly, my committee members who guided me through this process and provided me with advice along the way. I would like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Robin Byerly, my director, for her patience and involvement through our countless meetings. Also Dr. Emory Daniel for your advice in the beginning of the process and for joining me in this journey. I would also like to acknowledge the Appalachian State Honors College for providing me with a community of intelligent and inspiring individuals, some whom which have become some of my closest friends. Along with the University Honors Program I would like to thank Dr. Lori Medders and the Walker College of Business Departmental Honors Program and faculty for their support. Finally, my peers who have been by my side through my honors academic journey from the beginning and for partaking in my survey data collection.

Thank you all for your endless support.

Introduction

To begin, I have been fascinated with social influencers since I was 11 years old. In 2011, I was introduced to a video platform called YouTube by a close friend of mine. I had always loved experimenting with make up for dance recitals and special occasions but was determined to master the perfect makeup look to wear on a daily basis, since I was entering middle school in the Fall. I downloaded the YouTube app on my iPod Touch and found myself among hundreds of videos made by other middle schoolers showing how they accomplish their everyday look after plugging “Everyday Makeup Tutorial” into the search bar. I would spend hours with my iPod Touch screen propped up against my vanity mirror practicing simultaneously with the videos and would beg my parents to drive me to the nearest CVS to purchase the blue eyeliner featured over and over again in my favorite videos. I continued the following of these users such as “beautyliciousinsider” and “macbaby11,” and to other platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Over time, these accounts started to grow in popularity while the individuals on the other side of the screen grew up alongside their loyal audience. What once was a hobby for them when they got home from school became a lifestyle influence and job in their everyday lives. These individuals came to be known as Social Media Influencers (SMI) as their hobbies transformed into their full-time career. Today, macbaby11 is now 27-year-old Alisha Marie, proud owner of the handle @alisha on Instagram with 3.5M followers as well as 8.17M subscribers on YouTube and co-host of a popular podcast called “Pretty Basic.” Alisha now creates monetized content primarily on Instagram, YouTube, and through podcasts and considers being a SMI her full-time career. Her finances support her lavish lifestyle of dressing in designer clothing and accessories, living in a multimillion-dollar

house in Los Angeles with her sister, another SMI, creating content for her accounts, and attending sponsored events and trips. Alisha is one of many whose hobby transformed into a full-time career (McDonal, 00:09:35 – 00:11:47).

Brooke Miccio, a 23-year-old graduate of the University of Georgia, quit her 9-5 office position she started right after graduation and moved to New York City to fully pursue her SMI career (Miccio, *Quitting My Job*). Her reasoning for doing so? The financial benefit of being a full-time SMI significantly outweighed her 9-5 job compensation, even while simultaneously working in the position and creating content on the side. Anyone can make an account on social media platforms; in fact, many already find themselves scrolling mindlessly for hours a day and continuously editing and posting their own content to share with their own followers. However, monetizing an individual's content to the point of financial stability involves a variety of factors and key players in the process that many people are not even aware of. In fact, the very individuals who participate in the consumption of SMI content are the primary contributors to the SMI financial success, even without direct financial contributions.

This research project aims to explore social influencers and their impact specifically with three general questions. What makes social influencers successful? What impact do social influencers have on their audience? How do companies view social influencers? These general questions are explored in more depth in an attempt to learn more about the influencer, consumer, and company perspectives. The research will explore the reality of maintaining a social media career as an influencer and needed skills for developing a successful brand through content creation. Anyone can post content on social media, but how

does one create content that is valuable enough to monetize and attract an audience needed for the longevity and success of the career?

In my literature review, I describe who social influencers are and how they operate; I also provide examples of influencers and their impact. To answer my research questions, I used a triangulation method that involved a survey of consumers, a review of primary publicly disclosed information from social media influencers through produced content, and a qualitative analysis of secondary published information on companies. This method allowed for a triangular perspective of the SMI lifestyle from the consumers, companies, and the SMI themselves. The data and analysis provide a better understanding of the behind-the-scenes features of these SMI that lead up to the execution of content that I (and many others) consume on a daily basis.

Literature Review

With the development of the internet and multiple social media platforms, individuals have been able to share their hobbies with the public. Over time, popular individuals have been labeled as “influencers” and hold the ability to monetize their passion through ads, hashtags, views, and influencer marketing strategies. Successful influencers have multiple streams of income and are led to quit their corporate careers as the monetary value of making a career out of their original hobby is greater. The literature review identifies social media influencers, content that is created, different platforms these influencers are using, and streams of income influencers have. Along with academic works, this literature review also includes information from business news articles and video content.

Terminology

The development and rise of social media influencers is a modern day concept. Because of this, it is important to address terms associated with this career path that will be referenced repeatedly in explaining the background needed to understand the research of this study. A **blog** is a regular feature appearing as part of an online publication that typically relates to a particular topic and consists of articles and personal commentary by one or more authors (Merriam-Webster). A **vlog**, a combination of a video and blog, is a record of your thoughts, opinions, or experiences that you film and publish on the internet (Cambridge University Press, 2020). A **Youtuber** is a person who creates and uploads videos on the YouTube online video sharing service (Merriam-Webster). YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok are all social media platforms where content can be created, and influencers can communicate with their followers.

What are Influencers?

Influencers use various forms of social media to share vlogs, blogs, tweets, Instagram posts, and other social media content with an audience on the internet. Influencers typically, but not always, have a following in a distinct niche, with whom he or she actively engages. The size of the following depends on the size of his/her topic of the niche. Influencers are individuals who have the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of their authority, knowledge, position, or relationship (BusinessDictionary.com-influencer). Influencers usually base their success off of the amount of engagement, followers, likes, and profile views, depending on what the influencers' goal is for their brand. If an influencer is successful and able to monetize their content, they can make more than even a top corporate position.

Influencer Marketing

Influencers can be highly influential on the decisions that their audience makes. Brands see this influence as an opportunity to promote their product to a specified audience through the influencers' recommendation. This technique is called influencer marketing. Influencer marketing became so common that technology has been created to track the content that an influencer puts out and calculate likes, followers, comments, hits, and shares to evaluate the relevance an influencer has to a brand (Glucksman, 2017). Companies send PR packages of free products to influencers to entice them into trying the product. When the influencer feels like the product would be of interest to their audience, companies will work out a "brand deal" with the influencer and specify a number of posts or mentions in a video to get preapproved in exchange for a set monetary amount. Influencer marketing operates on

the idea that it is easier to influence people who are already influenced by someone or something else.

Categories

Influencers are categorized into mega, macro, micro, and nano influencers (Ismail, 2018). Mega influencers have over 1 million followers and are usually household names. Celebrities are considered mega influencers because they have a large reach and acquire millions of followers through their social media platforms. Cristiano Ronaldo is the most followed account on Instagram with over 205 million followers. Other celebrities with high followings include Ariana Grande, Kylie Jenner, Paris Hilton, Dwayne Johnson, and Selena Gomez. Macro influencers are categorized below mega influencers and hold follower counts between 100,000 and 1 million followers. These influencers build a career as they create content and usually gain fame from their content creations on the internet. Micro influencers have between 1,000 and 100,000 followers. Both macro and micro influencers hold tight relationships with their audience, meaning that the trust is greater and influence stronger than a mega influencer would experience. Nano influencers are those with social media accounts of under 1,000 followers. Nano influencers are typically active members in their community and have an influence on a smaller group of people (Ismail, 2018).

Becoming an Influencer

Becoming an influencer may seem impossible at first glance, but many social media influencers developed their hobbies into a career over time and by building an audience. There is not one single formula to follow in order to have a successful career on the internet. There are, however, a few guidelines that a beginner can follow in order to grow their

following and gain attention from brands so they can begin monetizing their accounts. These steps include: selecting a niche, optimizing social media profiles, understanding your audience, creating and posting relevant content, engaging with your audience, and being open to collaborate with brands ("How to Become an Influencer: 7 Steps to Becoming a Social Media Influencer", 2020). Selecting a niche allows the influencer to have specific interests to create content that will draw an audience of similar interests. A niche can include anything from playing video games, to working out, to completing DIY projects at home. Starting out with a niche helps influencers know what kind of content to create and allows for accounts of the same niche to collaborate on their content.

Optimizing a social media account is essential in transitioning an account from a personal to a business account. This can include turning on the business account feature, creating a profile picture, cultivating a bio that represents your brand, and even deciding on a theme for the content posted on your accounts. Having a professional looking account that expresses your brand allows you to stand out among other accounts in your niche. An audience is essential to the success of an influencer as many brand deals are reliant on a certain number of views or followers. Knowing your audience as an influencer allows you to reach out to similar groups with the same demographics as your current audience and produce content relevant to the demographic. For example, an influencer in the niche of lifestyle vlogging is Remi Ashten (MissRemiAshten). Remi is in her mid-twenties and recently moved into a house, so she made a series of vlogs of her moving process since her audience could possibly be moving/buying a house around the same time (MissRemiAshten).

Creating content that is relevant to what the audience wants and the influencers' niche is important to keep an audience. Content should be posted consistently whether it is through

videos, blog posts, podcasts, or pictures. Many YouTubers and podcasts post their content on specific days allowing their audience to anticipate the content. Having consistency adds value to content and strengthens trust between the influencer and audience. Many social media platforms have the ability for users to comment on the content that is posted, creating a window of opportunity for creators to communicate with their audience. Influencers who interact with their audience often hold a better following and attract new followers because interacting with an influencer is an attractive aspect. The last six steps, although effective, do not bring income to the influencer because anyone can create an account on these social media platforms. Influencers can monetize their content and work with brands to create promotional deals. For brands, using influencers to promote their products is called influencer marketing. As an influencer, it is beneficial to reach out to brands offering to promote their products for a specific price or commission on sales from their promotion. With enough popularity, influencers have managers to handle brand deals for them.

Turning Influence into Cash

In the early days of YouTube (*circum.* 2005-2008), individuals would create videos of their interests and everyday lives as a hobby and post them to the website for others to enjoy. There were no ads in between vlogs and brand deals among these YouTubers were nonexistent; they simply posted this content for pleasure. Today, many different ad programs can be utilized by influencers to make money. The motivation behind making a profit off of content is to make it so that they don't have to rely on anyone but themselves (Forbes, 2017). One of these programs is Google AdSense. Google AdSense allows blogs and websites to choose where they would make ad space available on their website for companies to purchase in an auction (Google, 2020). The highest paying company for each space is able to

promote and, in turn, the influencer receives a check. Google owns YouTube which has its own program called “YouTube ads” that allows companies to advertise while a video on YouTube is played.

Brand partnerships between a brand and creator are attainable for both large and small YouTube channels to make money. YouTubers can incorporate products from a brand in their videos and follow a script to highlight key points the brand wants to mention. Brand deals can range from short shout out integrations or fully dedicated videos (YouTube Creators, 2018). It is common to hear the phrase, “this video is sponsored by...” in a video that includes a brand deal. Laws protect consumers from being misled by influencers by requiring creators to disclose if they are being paid or given promotional products from a brand. The Federal Trade Commission’s Endorsement Guide states, “if there is a “material connection” between an endorser and an advertiser – in other words, a connection that might affect the weight or credibility that consumers give the endorsement – that connection should be clearly and conspicuously disclosed, unless it is already clear from the context of the communication” (Federal Trade Commission, 2017, para. 3). Mentioning a sponsorship to a viewer allows them to make their own purchasing decisions with the knowledge that a creator was paid by a brand to shout a product out. Otherwise, influencers could easily take advantage of their audience and profit off of commissions without viewers knowing.

Examples of Influencers

In order to understand the influencer world, it helps to look at several examples of successful influencers and how they distribute content for their niche. Felix Kjellberg is a Swedish YouTuber under the screen name of Pewdiepie on YouTube and has 103 Million

Subscribers. He makes YouTube videos around video games and has been doing so since 2010 (Munday, 2019). Pewdiepie is known for his obscene language and has been controversial in the past due to racial slurs. According to Forbes (2019), Pewdiepie has made over \$13 million from his YouTube channel despite the controversies. David Dobrik is a popular YouTube star who originally had his start on the application Vine. Vine was created in 2013 and allowed users to create 6 second videos. David Dobrik became very popular on the app and when Vine ended in 2016, he had to find another way to make videos. Dobrik moved into the YouTube world and has attracted 16.5 million followers with his 4 minutes and 20 seconds videos. Dobrik also has a podcast called “VIEWS With David Dobrik and Jason Nash” that he uses to give his audience more content outside of his videos (Ward, 2019). Charli D’Amelio is an up and coming 15-year-old influencer who launched her career from TikTok. Known mostly for her dance videos, Charli has climbed her way to starring in a 2020 Super Bowl commercial with former NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason for Sabra, a Pepsico brand (Swant, 2020). Charli also danced on stage at the halftime show with Jennifer Lopez, being the first TikTok star to perform in the Super Bowl. Charli has 43.6 million followers on TikTok as of March 2020 and continues to climb as TikTok’s popularity and her brand deals increase (@charlidamelio).

Summary

Since the rise of social media, people do not have to be celebrities or born into fame to gain a following. With content creation and audience engagement, influencers have been able to make a career off of their social media. Brands are likely to reach out to influencers that have interests similar to their product and offer cash in exchange for promotion. In fact, several influencers such as Brooke Miccio, Katy Bellotte, Natalie Barbu have gone into a

typical 9-5 job and ended up quitting after a few months to be an influencer full-time as it would pay off more, quite literally. Not to mention, these influencers live in cities with high costs of living like Boston, MA and New York City, NY. In order for these influencers to continue to make a living, their followers need to continuously engage with brands they promote. If viewers knew how much their favorite influencer was being paid to sell them a product, would they still trust the recommendation of the influencer or lose trust knowing the large paycheck behind that recommendation? These are some of the questions this research seeks to explore. How many different streams of income do these influencers need in order to get to the point of being financially supported? What exactly is the impact that influencers have on their audience? Should brands use influencer marketing more than other strategies? Why would followers choose to purchase items because an influencer suggests it? What is the motivation behind clicking the “follow” button even though followers do not personally know the influencer?

Research Questions

Originally the purpose of my research was to explore how Social Media Influencers are able to live comfortably financially through content creation. Throughout the data collection process, I realized there were many more factors that contribute to the overall success of SMI. The contribution both the audience and businesses have are just as important as the SMI for their success. To allow for further investigation, my research questions were broken up into 3 sections to focus on SMI, general social media users, and the use of SMI for businesses. Listed below are the questions that were researched and explored throughout the process.

1. What makes social influencers successful? *(Please note that success is viewed as an influencer that is making an income and has a significant audience.)*
 - A. How do Influencers monetize their content? What role does the audience have in the monetization process?
 - B. What motivates influencers to pursue this career choice?
 - C. What are ways to maintain and grow audience engagement? What impact does the influencer's audience have on their success?
 - D. How is an influencers' life affected by their career path?

(Answers to the above sought through surveys and podcasts)

2. How are influencers perceived by general social media users? *(It is recognized that social media users represent a wide range of diversity, nonetheless, most generally fall into certain groups.)*

- A. What are consumers' general awareness of, and opinions about, social influencers?
- B. What would lead a consumer to purchase a product because an influencer suggested it?

(Answers to #2 sought through survey of millennial consumers)

3. How do companies view social media influencers?

- A. What is the relationship between influencers and brands? What do brands look for when choosing influencers to work with?
- B. How do management companies contribute to the influencer's success?

(Answers to #3 sought through secondary research)

Multimethod Design

A triangular approach was used to collect data to analyze the perspectives of the SMI, consumers, and businesses. The first research question sought answers to what makes SMI successful. Answers were sought primarily through a review of five publicly available podcasts and a detailed YouTube video produced by SMI, and to some extent also, from a survey administered to consumers. SMI who produced this content have been in the SMI space for multiple years as well as make an income off of their content production. In this case, influencer generated content featuring interviews of SMI by SMI, as well as voluntarily generated information videos, were analyzed and used to collect primary data and a perceptive on the lives of the SMI themselves. Answers to the second set of questions collected insight on the influence that SMI have on their audience as a survey of consumers was distributed first-hand. The third set of questions sought information on the attitudes toward social influence and use of SMI by businesses and was achieved through a qualitative review of available secondary sources. Secondary data through articles and publications provided the perspective companies had of SMI marketing tools and the benefits of using SMI to promote their products.

Influencer Generated Content

SMI generate content in a variety of forms on different platforms. The rise of the “influencer lifestyle” sparks interest with SMI audiences. As a result, SMI occasionally create YouTube videos and podcast episodes disclosing information related to streams of income, advertising deals, account engagement, and other crucial factors in order to have a successful online career. Directly accessing SMI with large followings can be difficult and time consuming. Many have restrictions on what they can and cannot disclose when it comes

to finances and legal contracts. SMI who put out content addressing the specifics behind their career tend to be more transparent and descriptive with information they share in an organized fashion. Many SMI provide details about their streams of income and some will even share a ballpark of monetary amounts for different brand deals. Due to the broad access and copious amount of information already online, qualitative data was collected and content analyzed from the SMI perspective through content produced in the form of videos and podcasts on the SMI accounts.

Analysis

A textual analysis of SMI stories provided a better understanding of what SMIs consider success. Content also provided information about income streams, advertising strategies, engagement activity, audience retention, and other factors that lead to a SMI profitability of their content. SMI provided in-depth information of specific numbers from personal accounts as well as tips to creating value out of their space in the market. Ideas such as paying attention to thumbnail design, analytics, deciding on which brands to work with, length of content, and consistency are communicated through SMI to grow and retain an audience. Some SMI have gone on to create businesses both related and unrelated to the social media fields, highlighting the idea of launching an idea quickly and adjusting along the way. Those looking to get into the SMI business can learn valuable information from direct advice coming from SMI who have been successful in the space and monetized their content in customizing their career. A qualitative analysis of this rich information provided answers to questions about what makes influencers successful.

Survey

In order to seek information related to the second set of questions regarding how influencers are perceived by users, a survey was created and targeted to consumers to collect data, adhering to IRB standards, and generated with Qualtrics through the university. The survey consisted of a mixture of interest questions, questions answered using a 7-point Likert scale, and short-answer questions. From the survey responses, insight was sought on the impact SMI have on their audience to learn more about the consumers' general awareness of, and opinions about, SMI. Also, the questions were to explore why a consumer would purchase a product because an influencer suggested it.

Using a mixed set of question types as part of the survey allowed me to investigate my research questions. Specifically, I was interested in seeing how aware participants are of their purchasing habits concerning SMI; how SMI present facts about specific brands; and how many SMI are given specific instructions when promoting a product and sometimes even a script. Asking participants about the social media platforms they use can provide more information of the kind of influencer content they are experiencing and the different types of monetization available on those specific platforms (Appendix A). Open ended questions allowed participants to share in more depth their own experience with SMI, any bad experiences they had from a product recommendation, or how much they question the transparency of the influencer experience overall.

Participants

SMI are accessible by consumers of all ages, however, my target audience for this research in particular looked towards individuals who grew up in the Digital Age and are at least 18 years old and below the age of 50, although all ages were invited to participate in the

survey. I wanted to use social media platforms as a main channel of distribution for the survey as those who use social media already are most likely familiar with who SMI are and can relate to the survey questions with accurate responses. I distributed the link to the survey and a brief description of the purpose of research on personal Facebook and Instagram profiles and made the posts public so that my followers can share with their own followers and reach as many people as possible. I also contacted professors with whom I had a personal connection and asked for them to distribute the survey via email while giving a verbal description of the purpose of the survey and study along with the link to my peers to cultivate a personal connection to answering the survey.

The survey received a total of 243 responses and collected data from May 1st, 2020 to September 28th, 2020. A majority of the individuals were around 20 years old but data from participants in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s were also collected. A majority of the participants identified as female and were employed or students full-time which was my target demographic. These groups were made up of individuals who followed specific influencer podcasts and served the purpose of cultivating a community for like-minded conversation. I chose these groups to reach out to because they were made up of individuals who already had familiarity with SMI and also met my ideal demographic. I believe that the data collected reflected the opinions of all different genders, ages, and employment statuses which reflects the different demographics that have access to SMI on a daily basis. Materials used included Social Media Platforms (Facebook, Instagram), Involvement of Classmates (Email), Survey via Qualtrics, Phone or Laptop/Desktop.

Procedure

Initially, posts were presented on social media accounts as shown in the example below:

“Hello! I am an honors student in the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. I am working on a thesis studying social media SMI and their ability to monetize their content to make it into a career. Part of my research includes studying the influence that they have on their followers’ consumer behavior. I am conducting a survey to investigate the impact SMI have on those who use social media. If you are willing to help me on this study the survey is linked below. Responses are anonymous and will be analyzed and used as quantitative data in my thesis. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Thank you for your help in advance and do not hesitate to reach out to me about any questions.”

The social media audience members were provided with a link that directed them to the survey should they chose to participate. Please see Appendix A for the questionnaire used to collect participant responses.

Secondary Data

Today, companies use influencer marketing techniques in a variety of ways to promote their products on social media platforms. Companies go through agencies to offer contracts to SMI offering a financial value in exchange for a combination of different social media content. There are many laws surrounding the disclosure of advertisements to the audience and other laws protecting the audience from deceitful marketing strategies. Published articles and company perspectives were analyzed to gain a better understanding as

to why companies would use SMI in their marketing strategy and the costs and benefits SMI have on the company's reputation and success.

Results

What makes social influencers successful?

Social media platforms allow users to create accounts and post different pictures, texts, and other forms of content to share with their followers. Some social media accounts gain copious amounts of followers that regularly absorbed and engaged with content. Social Media Influencers (SMI) run these popular accounts and choose to continue by posting content for their growing audience. When asked what the “secret to influence” is by “The Skinny Confidential” podcast guest Brittany Krystle, Michael Bosstick stated, “It’s providing value that actually influences the way people live” (Bosstick and Krystle, 00:72:25-00:72:33). By providing information of value, an audience receives something from the SMI through their content that they can in turn use in their own life. Answers to this group of questions were gained in some part through surveys and more largely through a qualitative analysis of podcast content.

There is no core measurement to the audience size that dictates a social media account owner as a SMI. Brooke Miccio mentions in her podcast “Gals on the Go” that accounts with as little as 5,000 followers are receiving brand deals and gaining monetary success from their accounts. Miccio attributes the SMI success to taking the job seriously and having a consistent audience. Motivation is also of large importance when it comes to being a successful SMI. Julie Solomon, host of “The Influencer Podcast,” believes that an influencer should be passionate about what they are creating for their audience (Solomon, ep. 30). If an influencer is not excited and passionate about what they are doing, the audience will not be excited to follow or engage with the account (Solomon, ep. 30). When asked about his own podcast content creation by Brittany Krystle, Michael Bosstick from “The Skinny

Confidential Him and Her Podcast” says, “I would do this whole thing for free because we’re having interesting and genuine conversations. When you find a medium that you want to produce that you feel that way about, you genuinely enjoy it.” (Bosstick and Krystle, 00:54:33-00:54:43)

A common misconception about SMI is that they receive large audiences through luck when an object of their content experiences virality (Solomon and Casazza). While this is the case in some circumstances, virality can be achieved by carefully curating content in a strategic way through dedication and hard work (Solomon and Casazza). Allie Casazza, mommy blogger, made it a goal at the beginning of her career to create a blog post that experiences virality and grows her audience quickly (Solomon and Casazza). She made analytical adjustments such as making the blog post able to skim and bolding specific parts of the content so it would be appealing to an audience (Solomon and Casazza).

How to Influencers monetize their content? What role does the audience have in the monetization process?

As previously mentioned, social media accounts such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook are free for anyone to create and post content on. In the event creators gain a sizeable and engaging audience, several options come up in order to monetize the content while keeping it free for the audience. Brooke Miccio, Social Media Influencer and cohost of the “Gals on the Go Podcast” created a video titled *How to Make \$100,000+ on YouTube (without millions of subscribers)* where she revealed how she has the income she gets from her various accounts on Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and other platforms (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). The Google AdSense program, brand deals, and affiliated links are all ways SMI can make a monetary income off of their content.

In order to apply and be accepted into the AdSense program, an influencer must follow all monetization policies, live in a country where the program is available, have over 4,000 public watch hours in the last 12 months, have more than 1,000 subscribers, and have a linked AdSense account (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Google AdSense uses a CPM rate which is usually around \$1-10 per 1000 views (Carolan and Miccio). Videos with topics in specific niches such as beauty and business can charge a higher CPM rate because those spaces are more competitive for advertisers (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Depending on the video length, ads can be placed in specific areas or are automatically placed by the program (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Videos over 8 minutes long can hold multiple advertisements, but it's important to be considerate of the audience when placing more than one advertisement in long videos, but longer videos can make more money this way (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Miccio shared her earnings from 28 days prior to November 9th, 2020 in a video titled "How to Make \$100,000+ on YouTube (without millions of subscribers)". SMI need to keep in mind that CPM rates are seasonal and the income of SMI can vary depending on the time of year (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). The estimated revenue was \$12,392.78 for the month, totaling up to over \$144,000 as a yearly income (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). In the video Miccio stated, "As of the past few months, I would be able to just do YouTube as a full-time job. I have been making videos for 10 years" (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+, 00:01:16-00:01:42).

Brand deals are another means of income SMI use to monetize their content on various platforms. Brand deals occur when a brand approaches a SMI or their managers to send the influencer free product and if the influencer likes the product, they promote it in their content for a specified amount of money (Carolan and Miccio). The SMI creates the

content that was agreed upon, sends it back to the company for approval, and the company can request more edits twice before approving the content and paying the SMI. Danielle Carolan, co-host of “Gals on the Go Podcast” remembers when she was in high school in 2015 with her YouTube account after reaching 100,000 subscribers, which was uncommon for those times (Carolan and Miccio). Carolan got multiple brand deals through Studio71, a global management company, and by the time she was old enough to have a typical job at 16, she was making more money through the brand deals (Carolan and Miccio). Brooke Miccio had a similar experience. As her audience grew, subscribers would come into the yogurt shop she worked in in Long Island and brand deals continued to roll in (Carolan and Miccio). Miccio decided to quit her yogurt shop job and pursue her YouTube channel through high school and while attending college at the University of Georgia (Carolan and Miccio).

It is crucial for content creators to not focus on the monetization side of being a SMI. Brands with a smaller yet highly dedicated audience where the creator is passionate about their job have no problem attracting brand partnerships (Bosstick and Krystle). Some SMI sell out time for ads on their content too fast and to brands that don't match their niche (Bosstick and Krystle). It's hard to build a long-term brand this way as the audience will not stick around with the brand if the ad content is valuable to them as well (Bosstick and Krystle).

Some SMI provide premium content at a price curated towards their audience's affordability. Julie Solomon, host of *The Influencer Podcast* stresses the creation of free content to learn the kinds of content that an audience would consider worth being charged for (Solomon and Casazza). Affiliate links for an audience to find and purchase products

recommended by SMI are also a way of making some extra income from an audience (Carolan and Miccio).

What motivates influencers to pursue this career choice?

Several motivating factors, including financial success, play into making the decision to pursue a career in content creation as a SMI. Moments where SMI can connect with their audience, paid for brand experiences, connections that are made, and passion for their career drive the decision to pursue SMI full-time. Danielle Carolan attended the University of Georgia as a fashion merchandising major and worked as an unpaid intern for a company in New York City (Carolan and Miccio). Carolan was able to continue creating content as a SMI to fund her expenses and realized that working for herself as a SMI was more engaging and exciting than the internship position (Carolan and Miccio).

SMI are brought opportunities to host meet-and-greets in order to meet their audience in person. Danielle Carolan traveled to three different cities in the summer of 2018 giving her 500,000 subscribers the opportunity to meet her in person (Carolan and Miccio). She described the experience as surreal as 300+ subscribers screamed her name and genuinely enjoys the experience of meeting her audience, motivating her work to grow an even larger audience (Carolan and Miccio). SMI can also provide their audience with personalized services to share their expertise on their own time in exchange for a cost (Solomon and Casazza). Allie Casazza, guest on *The Influencer Podcast* to share her tips to earning six figures, claimed she has a heart for helping others and can use her coaching to do just that (Solomon and Casazza).

Brand deals between SMI and brands can involve paid for brand trips and different conventions SMI influencers can attend (Carolan and Miccio). The International Makeup

Artist Trade Show (IMATS), BeautyCon, StyleCon, and Playlist Live are all events Danielle Carolan, Brooke Miccio, and other SMI in their niches attended as creators (Carolan and Miccio). At these events, SMI were able to meet their audiences through meet-and-greets as well as hang out with each other, sometimes in person for the first time (Carolan and Miccio). Other brands offer trips to luxurious locations such as Mexico and different music festivals like Coachella (Carolan and Miccio). Both Carolan and Miccio agree that they enjoy having other SMI friends in their industry as they can support one another and relate to different situations that friends in other areas might not relate to (Carolan and Miccio).

Lauryn Evarts Bosstick runs her blog *The Skinny Confidential* and is the wife of Michael Bosstick, owner of Dear Media Productions and co-host of *The Skinny Confidential: His and Her Podcast*. The couple started the *His and Her Podcast* due to a high demand for more content production on their social media sites and decided to create additional content in a podcast format because they were passionate about the medium and able to do it effortlessly (Bosstick and Krystle). Podcast episodes allow for an audience to consume content while doing other activities like getting ready in the morning, doing chores, working out, driving, and much more (Bosstick and Krystle). Bosstick's passion and education for podcast production contributed to the creation of *Dear Media Productions* which is a network to assist other SMI in content creation through podcasts as well (Bosstick and Krystle).

Passion drove SMI into their content creation well before they gained a large audience and monetization capabilities. The following quotes were recorded that represent the influencer's motivation and drive to continue in their position.

“I want moms everywhere to stop whining and complaining and realize the incredible power they have over their life and their days. I want them to take ownership of their time and their space and create the beautiful abundant motherhood they always dreamed about. Laundry and dishes are a part of life, yes, but they shouldn’t be keeping you from your life”

Allie Casazza, mommy blogger (Solomon and Casazza, 00:39:51-00:41:16)

“You have to get really honest about what you want and most importantly you have to get really honest about how hard you are willing to work for it. How many hours of research are you willing to do? How much are you willing to invest in yourself or invest in a mentor or coach or program to make that happen.”

Julie Solomon, host of *The Influencer Podcast*

(Solomon and Casazza, How to Go Viral, 00:20:08-00:20:28)

“...you can do it too. If I can do it anyone can do it truly, I say that with confidence. I have to breath because it’s like crazy, this was always a dream of mine to be able to do this all and for so long I thought it wasn’t attainable, but it truly, truly is.”

Brooke Miccio, lifestyle, fashion, and wellness SMI

(Miccio, How I Make 100,000+, 00:02:23-00:02:40)

What are ways to maintain and grow audience engagement? What impact does the influencer's audience have on their success?

Today, audience engagement carries more weight in the SMI success than recorded number of followers on social media platforms. There are tactics SMI use to attract and grow audience engagement and maintain their audience for a long-term period.

In order to attract an audience, SMI should know the content they are creating and seek out an audience by putting their content in front of them (Bosstick and Krystle). The SMI should determine the niche that their content should be in and have a unique viewpoint that brings content of value to an audience interested in that niche (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Popular niches SMI fall in include comedy, lifestyle, wellness, gaming, business, entrepreneurial, cooking, and other kinds of shows (Bosstick and Krystle). Live events that bring a different form of content to a SMI audience can give them a different kind of engagement and are other opportunities to grow (Bosstick and Krystle). Bringing on guests into SMI content provide a new perspective to an established audience and can be used to grow both the SMI and guest's audiences (Bosstick and Krystle).

SMI can receive valuable feedback from their audience from comments and analytics that assist with growth. Analytics let content creators know who is listening, when they're listening, and when they stop listening or fast forward (Bosstick and Krystle). It's important to keep in mind that different platforms control their own algorithms, so take the changing algorithms into consideration when analyzing analytics (Bosstick and Krystle). Launching a brand or channel quickly and listening to the audience to figure out the kinds of content desired by an audience can guide a SMI through next steps and save time and energy (Bosstick and Krystle). Popular SMI who refuse to interact with their audience are not as

successful as they could be in the long run as the audience are the individuals who gave them a platform in the first place (Bosstick and Krystle). Listening to an audience when they feel taken advantage of or don't respond well to content that is put out is crucial to keeping the trust of an audience and requires customer service attention in order to mend the situation (Bosstick and Krystle; Solomon and Casazza).

SMI find the most success when they know their audience and the best content, they can create to serve the audience that still falls under the SMI niche (Solomon and Casazza). Allie Casazza streams live on Instagram because her audience enjoys knowing they can receive exclusive content if they watch at the same time (Solomon and Casazza). Casazza also recognizes that her audience responds best when she is authentic and transparent about her struggles in her everyday life, and how her life is not as perfect as the bits and pieces appear on her social media (Solomon and Casazza). SMI often times receive criticism from individuals who do not resonate with what their content stands for. In these cases, the SMI should repel these individuals and refocus on serving the audience they do resonate most with (Solomon and Casazza).

Taking time to engage with an audience can be simple and does not require much more time and work on top of content creation (Solomon, ep. 30). Julie Solomon sets aside just 10 minutes a day to connect and listen to her audience on a variety of social media platforms (Solomon, ep. 30). Using captions for images on Instagram that prompt the audience to comment their own response is a simple way to grow audience participation on content (Solomon, ep. 29). Consistency in posting content keeps an audience interested in SMI accounts on all different kinds of platforms (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). SMI can imagine viewing their content through the eyes of their audience and make sure that their

content looks visually appealing to engage with (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). An example of this is making a thumbnail on YouTube eye-catching along with the video's title and description so that anyone scrolling by might stop and click on the video if they're remotely interested in what the SMI has to say (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Attracting, growing, and maintaining audience engagement is close to the most important aspect to a SMI success and should be a major focal point for longevity and growth (Bosstick and Krystle).

“People get married to the macro, right? You see someone that says, ‘that person has got a million followers.’ That doesn’t matter. It’s who actually gives a shit about what you’re saying and producing. You could be somebody with 30 million followers but if people are just kind of passively watching, that’s fine that’s their type of content. But engagement is what we care about.”

Michael Bosstick, Founder of Dear Media Productions

(Bosstick and Krystle, 00:47:31-00:47:55)

How is an Influencer’s life affected by their career path?

For many SMI, there is a fine line between their personal lives and their job as a content creator. YouTubers like Danielle Carolan and Brooke Miccio vlog their daily life as their content and are oftentimes met with challenges when it comes to filming with their friends outside of the YouTube space or showing significant others and romantic relationships online (Carolan and Miccio). Miccio outlined an experience with her friends from high school who asked her to take her videos down because they viewed Brooke’s hobby as “uncool” at the time and did not want to be associated with her channel (Carolan and Miccio). Some SMI are married couples who are both business partners and romantic

partners. Michael and Lauryn Bosstick share a passion for the content they create but have to set boundaries around their work and personal lives (Bosstick and Krystle). They recognize that talk about their work comes up in casual conversation and make sure that these conversations do not add stress to their personal lives (Bosstick and Krystle).

Full-time SMI can work wherever and whenever they choose, bringing flexibility when it comes to other activities in their personal lives. Allie Casazza revealed on *The Influencer Podcast* her ability to homeschool her children allowing them to travel and be in school at the same time (Solomon and Casazza). SMI make an effort to show their audience that the way they're living is real and provide insight to how the audience can live that way as well (Solomon and Casazza). Without showing all sides of the SMI daily life, an audience will turn away if their lives appear unattainable and too perfect (Solomon and Casazza). The flexibility SMI have in their career can also allow them to attend college or work other jobs on the side while creating content (Carolan and Miccio). The SMI can build their career and personal life around one another to curate it to their working style and make changes as needed to achieve their goals (Solomon and Casazza).

SMI who grew popularity through middle and high school are commonly asked on their decision to receive a college education or not. Danielle Carolan and Brook Miccio had the means and made the choice to receive a college education at the University of Georgia while continuing their SMI career (Carolan and Miccio). They were able to have a college experience, joined Kappa Delta Sorority, participated in extracurricular activities, and grew in their personal lives through their decision (Carolan and Miccio). Other SMI like Allie Casazza dropped out of college to pursue her SMI full-time and has no regret as well as immense success from that decision (Solomon and Casazza). The SMI does not inhibit

creators from experiencing college and other experiences available but provides the flexibility to be pursued full-time with providing financial support (Solomon and Casazza).

“I’m definitely pro-college... for YouTubers who opt not to I think it is definitely a risk but for some people it definitely pays off. I look at some of the bigger YouTubers who are out in LA that don’t have a college education at all and they’re killin’ it, but I guess it will just be what happens after YouTube success is over.”

Brooke Miccio, lifestyle, fashion, and wellness SMI

(Carolan and Miccio, 00:24:55-00:25:34)

How are Influencers perceived by general social media users?

Answers to this research question involved the distribution of a survey through personal social media sites as well as email. The survey was open from May 1st, 2020 and closed on October 12th, 2020. The data of 245 respondents between the ages of 18-81 was collected and exported into an excel file through the Qualtrics platform after closing. Of the 245 participants, only 185 completed the survey in its entirety, with some questions continuing to be left blank due to respondent’s choice. The data of those 185 participants was organized into tables of 4 categories: demographics, social media participation, influencer awareness, and perceptions of influencers (Table 1, 3, 5, and 7). Incomplete questionnaires were not considered. Questions involving the Likert scale were condensed into Agree, Neutral, and Disagree since there was no strong differentiation between the strength of either. Throughout analyzing survey data, it became apparent that the 18–24 year-old age group are primary users of social media as 97% had an Instagram account, one of the more popular platforms for influencers to create content on (Table 4). Additional tables were also made of

the same four categories using data only from the 110 respondents who fit in the 18-24-year-old age range in order to assess the opinions of the majority age group of social media users (Table 2, 4, 6, and 8).

What are consumers' general awareness of, and opinions about, social influencers?

When asked how respondents became aware of SMI, 81% of the total respondents mentioned their own use of social media with 6% gaining awareness from family members and 5% becoming aware in an educational environment (Table 5). Over 95% of survey participants were aware that influencers could make commission from promotions leading to purchases (Table 7). In terms of using influencers to make their own purchasing decisions, 41% of the 18–24-year-old age group agreed to using influencers in their own decision-making process (Table 8). Of the total respondent pool, 24% of participants claim to have been harmed or disappointed by influencers (Table 5). When survey respondents who have full-time jobs were asked if they considered being a SMI as a full-time career, 1/3 of the participants agreed, 1/3 disagreed, and 1/3 felt neutral (Table 1 and 7). A majority of survey participants showed a preference in specific influencers based on familiarity and trust, totaling at 74% (Table 7).

Survey participants were asked what they think of when they hear the word “influencer” and the responses collected contained exact names of SMI in a variety of niches and popularity as well as physical descriptions of how their stereotypical SMI appears. Common answers included mention of members of the Kardashian/Jenner family as well noting SMI as having larger followings and reputations on social media. Examples of specific SMI named included: James Charles, Gretchen Geraghty, Dave Portnoy, Danielle Carolan, Charli D’Amelio, Ashley Terkeurst Hodges, Chloe Ting, Chrissy Teigen,

PewDiePie, Laura Beverlin, and more. Other respondents defined “influencer” in their own words calling them “pretentious lifestyle bloggers,” “chicks with hair straightening products,” “someone knowledge & experience about something; persuasive,” and “Someone, news sources, groups, etc., whose main objective is to influence or persuade a reader or listener, child, adult, student, etc. to buy a product, change a belief or attitude, change your focus or lead you in a certain direction (Positive or negative).” Stronger opinions arose as shown through the quote, “Already-affluent white girls with decent looks capitalizing off of others while providing nothing new, novel, or interesting.” The variety of opinions and comments made it clear to see that an “influencer” to the general population is not perceived as a singular person or being but can be a variety of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

When prompted for additional comments at the end of the survey, participants elaborated on their strong positive or negative opinions. One survey participant compared SMI and their promotion of brand products to other marketing tactics on the web. Many mentioned that influencers should be more transparent about their ability to make money off of their content. It is clear through some responses that survey participants preferred influencers who present themselves in a genuine state on their platforms. One respondent commented, “The influencers I follow are like vegan moms -- not famous people similar to Addison Rae.” Another participant mentioned, “I like when they are real about the products they push. I prefer when they aren’t retouching every aspect of their photos and have a sense of humor.”

Additional comments suggested how the actions and platform SMI have can contribute to a harmful impact on their audience in the environment. One participant commented, “Recent events of influencers posing for pictures at protests and then leaving

without any participation was in very poor taste. It is ok to promote things, but to utilize fake sincerity is unethical and would be frowned upon in any business.” Another commented, “They live off of consumerism which is not something we should continue to glorify. I wish these Instagram models would use their platforms to spread more positivity, and global awareness instead of sharing stupid products. Period. Get a real job, stop using tits to sell whitening strips.” One participant attributed to the transformation of YouTuber influencer content specifically, “Influencers are disappointing particularly on YouTube. Their original content usually would keep me interested, but the more “successful” they become the more their channel becomes diluted with sales material and a once good channel turns into an infomercial. The more sales codes and sponsored content, the less likely I am to trust the individual.” Regardless of the perception of SMI by survey participants, 63% of respondents chose the option “No” when asked if they would like to be a SMI (Table 5). Only, 21% of survey participants showed interest in pursuing a SMI career (Table 5).

What would lead a consumer to purchase a product because an influencer suggested it?

Purchases of promoted product contribute to the financial success of SMI so survey participants were asked if they would be more inclined to purchase a product that would improve their quality of life if given a discount code for that product. Of the survey participants, 66% agreed that they would be more inclined to purchase a product presented in this way (Table 7). One survey participant mentioned that they recognize the use of SMI in advertising brand products as, “... a very interesting form of advertising and marketing because it creates a sense of trust with the consumers seeing ‘people just like us’ using these products, while at the same time everyone knows that their lives are kinda fake.” When asked

about awareness that survey participants had in the commission SMI can make off of their own purchase, 95% of respondents agreed that they were aware (Table 7).

A survey respondent commented regarding their personal use and relationship regarding SMI, “I am very selective about influencers I follow, and I personally focus on ones who are honest and are upfront about when their posts are ads/sponsored. Like, they recommend products and show things they generally like/dislike but tell you when they are being paid to promote something. The example that comes to mind is skincare by Hiram. He is very forward about when a video is sponsored, and he has made it clear he won’t accept sponsorships from companies whose products he doesn’t truly believe in or don’t live up to his high standards.” The respondent displayed a sense of trust regarding Hiram’s opinion and advice but held awareness in the relationship between Hiram and the brands he promotes. Another participant outlined the role SMI have in their purchasing process, “They are helpful in learning about many different types of products and fashion styles, but ultimately other reviews and price influence my purchase.” Despite the contribution of SMI to the decision-making process, 69% of survey participants prefer to ask and trust friends over influencers for product recommendations (Table 3). This shows an overall preference for friends even if the SMI has more knowledge and background in the product that is in question.

SMI are accessible and present on a variety of platforms. The top three social media platforms used by survey participants include Instagram with 93% participation, Facebook with 72% participation, and YouTube with 65% participation (Table 3). All of these percentages were higher in the 18–24-year-old age group, meaning a larger portion of that population had accounts on social media platforms (Table 4). A fourth popular platform that the 18-24-year-old category held accounts on was TikTok, used by 62% of the respondents in

that age group (Table 4). The impact that SMI have on product purchases by their audience depends on the relationship between the audience and the SMI themselves. The overall awareness and opinions about SMI vary regardless of the demographics and participation in social media platforms survey respondents had.

How do companies view social media influencers?

Answers to this group of questions were achieved through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources relevant to companies' perceptions.

What is the relationship between influencers and brands? What do brands look for when choosing influencers to work with?

Businesses who offer products can use SMI in their advertising and to grow brand awareness (Ludwig). Companies whose products fit in specific niches can use SMI to reach an already interested audience through brand deals with the SMI (Bosstick and Krystle). From the SMI point of view, it's important to build a brand as a content creator so that you can attract brands in the same niche as well as have the flexibility to approach brands the influencer wants to work with (Bosstick and Krystle). In order to be successful, the relationship between the brand and SMI should be cohesive as possible with what the brand desires and what the SMI content looks like (Carolan and Miccio). What's on brand for the influencer is not always what's on brand for the company (Carolan and Miccio). In some cases, an influencer might have something they do often in their videos that a brand requests to take out of the video because it doesn't fit the brand (Carolan and Miccio). Communication in these circumstances between the influencer and company is crucial (Carolan and Miccio). If the SMI changes the style of their content, the audience will view

the content as inauthentic and in exchange the brand deal would not be as effective for the business.

Podcast networks like *Dear Media Productions* act as a middleman between SMI and brands to ensure the protection of both parties (Bosstick and Krystle). The company connects brands with specific podcasts based on the niches of the company and content (Bosstick and Krystle). Brands save money by choosing SMI who already capture the target audience and might already use the product (Hawley). Each individual podcast has the freedom to say “yes” or “no” to brand deals that get offered (Bosstick and Krystle). Maximizing the influencer strategy can be done by making sure there’s valuable content provided that adds to the influencers’ social media presence as well as benefits the brand (Hawley). The production company values complete autonomy for the podcasts and does not have the power to pressure SMI into accepting a brand deal (Bosstick and Krystle). They also serve a purpose in communicating with the companies for understanding that if they are only looking to purchase advertising space without genuine connection to the SMI and their audience, they should look elsewhere (Bosstick and Krystle).

Brands should put trust in the SMI to deliver premium and curated content towards their audience (Carolan and Miccio). Brands sometimes give pitchy, scripted callouts to influencers that in turn sound like an infomercial (Carolan and Miccio). Influencers who accept brand deals typically accept deals of products they already know and love and do not need a script to passionately promote the products (Carolan and Miccio). TRIBE is a company that enables brands, start-ups and small businesses to connect with customers that already use and love their products and are willing to do marketing for the brand (Whiteley). TRIBE prides itself on being built on social media and not socialite media (Whiteley). They

connect brands and micro-influencers who have been proven to generate 60% more engagement than larger SMI (Whiteley). Micro-influencers create examples of content they would use for advertising and sign over the rights for the content in exchange for a specified monetary amount (Whiteley).

Leesa Mattress Company used SMI to market their mattresses by providing them with the product to try out first and use in their content creation (Ludwig). In terms of contract lengths, 37% of influencers use long-term contracts with brands as opposed to one-time campaigns that boosts both the brand awareness as well as the SMI resume (Hawley). As of June 25th, 2020, 40% of marketers are dedicating a budget for influencer marketing with 80% of those revealing that the marketing strategy is effective (Whiteley). 85% of Millennial and Generation Z individuals use social media to learn about new products (Hawley). MVMT Social created their marketing strategy to use SMI in their “two-prong approach” (Ludwig). The company pays popular Instagram SMI to showcase their watches as well as customer-generated content when customers used their hashtag that’s been used over 150,000 times, #jointhemvmt (Ludwig). Emily Weiss, founder of Glossier, uses customers who have already purchased makeup products of the company and get permission granted to use already posted and curated content to use as advertising material (Ludwig). Through continuous use of SMI to market product, companies and SMI are able to figure out what works for them and how they can improve on gaining even more positive responses through their relationship with one another (Foster).

“The focus has shifted towards authentic, passionate content creators with small but loyal followings- everyday people who product beautiful content and personally engage with their audience.”

Dave Whiteley, TRIBE Group (*Whiteley, para. 4*)

How do management companies contribute to the influencer’s success?

Management companies exist to guide and assist SMI on specifics in their career, leaving them with more time to work on creating content. Managers find opportunities for SMI to gain insight on how to grow their audience and increase views (Carolan and Miccio). Managers negotiate a percentage they can take out from brand deals, however, are not involved in taking a percentage of SMI Google AdSense revenue (Carolan and Miccio). Decisions that the influencers make regarding brands that reach out to them are required to go through their managers (Carolan and Miccio). The relationship between SMI and managers is typically casual and most work can be done over text and video call without having to partake in constant formal meetings (Carolan and Miccio).

When it comes to coordinating brand trips, managers work directly with a brand and with the SMI schedule to work out travel details leaving as little on the SMI plate as possible (Carolan and Miccio). Managers are skilled at reaching out to brands if the SMI find brands they wish to work with through friends in the space or having the goal of working with a brand for other reasons (Carolan and Miccio). Managers also take over the emails of influencers and only sends them important emails they need to look at (Carolan and Miccio). Influencers who don’t have managers have to sypher through emails themselves as well as negotiate with brands for themselves (Carolan and Miccio). It is considered impressive when

an influencer can do this him or herself but having a manager frees up a lot of time for the influencer (Carolan and Miccio).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of the study was to explore the career of SMI using a triangular approach to gather data from influencer-generated content, administration of a survey, and articles to view the perspective of each group. The success of SMI is largely due to the valuable information found in their content to improve audience's life (Bosstick and Krystle). Consistency in social media postings and motivation of the SMI are crucial in determining the profitability of SMI content (Carolan and Miccio). While overnight fame into the influencer spotlight is possible, content can be carefully curated through analytical adjustments to give the content a higher chance of gaining popularity (Solomon and Casazza).

Influencers monetize their content through advertisement placements using programs like Google AdSense (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). Collaborating with companies through brand deals required the brand to agree on a monetary value in exchange for content creation with the SMI and, after approval, posting of the content so the audience can discover the brand (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). SMI with less than 1 million subscribers can make over \$144,000 a year by using ads, brand deals, and affiliate links as their monetization strategies (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). It's important for the monetized content to still represent the SMI brand and appeal to their niche, as failure to do so results in the loss of their audience (Bosstick and Krystle).

The massive financial success SMI can have is just one of many motivating factors to pursue content creation as a full-time career. Brands often invite influencers of the same niche on all-inclusive brand trips to luxurious locations or conventions in exchange for posting about the trip on their social media (Carolan and Miccio). SMI recognize that they

are inspiring their audience every day and make sure that their content is valuable in consumption and work hard to be transparent and relatable to their viewers.

Audience engagement plays an important role when weighing a SMI success. Posting content that an audience is inclined to like, comment, or share measures the interactions the influencer gets with their content and can also find valuable feedback to help improve (Bosstick and Krystle). Consistency in posting content on all platforms keeps valuable content in front of the audience and encourages interaction (Miccio, How I Make \$100,000+). The personal life of a SMI is impacted by their career as they typical SMI creates content on events throughout their day, overlapping their work and personal day (Carolan and Miccio). If a SMI is passionate about what they are producing and can set boundaries, they are able to navigate through any conflict that arises (Bosstick and Krystle).

A majority of social media users involved in the survey data collection become aware of specific influencers through their own use of social media applications (Table 5). The recognition that SMI can make a profit off of their content is high and less than a quarter of participants have been disappointed or harmed by SMI (Table 7, Table 5). The general audience prefers social influencers who are genuine, realistic, and provide transparency in the funds they can make off of their career and the role the audience plays in that (Appendix C). SMI who provide a discount code along with the promotion of a product can motivate their audience to purchase that product with a discount (Table 7). Overall, a high preference of honesty and transparency arises when social media users decide what SMI, if any, they would like to follow.

Companies use SMI to promote their product and carefully choose who they work with based on the audience the SMI attracts (Carolan and Miccio). The relationship between

the company and influencer is important so that each is represented in an authentic and appealing way. Specific organizations exist for the sole purpose of facilitating communication between brands and SMI. Networks and management companies help facilitate conversation and negotiations between the brand and the SMI and handle a majority of the administrative work (Carolan and Miccio). Data has shown that the use of SMI for promoting products is effective and can eliminate the need for target market research (Whiteley).

Social media continues to be on the rise as more and more platforms gain popularity. The process into social media influencing does not require a job application or any previous experience. With motivation, understanding each party's role, and a passion for content creation, anyone can begin their journey into SMI. Gaining an audience can be achieved through analytical adjustments over long periods of time as well as patience and taking feedback into consideration.

Limitations

There are several limitations involved in this study. The distribution of the survey on limited social media platforms and email lowered the chances of reaching a diverse population, as survey respondents were close in demographic to the author. The amount of survey respondents was adequate but facilitating the survey with 1000+ participants might show more of a preference through answers. A larger sample with a wider demographic would provide a more generalizable sample. Influencer and related terms have many interpretations, so defining influencer at the beginning of the study might have added clarity in the answering abilities of participants. Almost all participants were English speaking Americans. Studying individuals in different cultures and of different nationalities has the

potential to lead into stronger results in one way or another. Accessibility to SMI on a one-on-one basis is preferable but requires funding that was not provided.

Future Research

The career of SMI continues to grow and change with the development of new platforms and trends among popular social media users. The longevity of the SMI career continues to be in question as popular social media platforms for posting content have only been around for less than 15 years. Applications such as TikTok, Twitch, Discord, Clubhouse, and Dispo have gained popularity throughout the past year with the increase of social media users due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their unique algorithms and strategically placed content have both helped and harmed SMI in gaining exposure to specific audiences. Different SMI have taken a more educational approach through their niche content to appeal to a wide audience at different levels of expertise. Further exploration in the levels of attraction influencers can gain from these niche topics can help an individual interested in pursuing the SMI career path determine what they want to base their content around.

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Appendices/Tables

Appendix A

CONSENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of the Project: How Social Media Influencers Turn Their Hobby into a Career

Principal Investigator: Sophia Lang, Student, Appalachian State University

Faculty Advisor(s): Robin Byerly, Professor, Appalachian State University

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years or older. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. The purpose of the study is to investigate consumer opinions on influencers who promote brands through brand deals and content creation. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to fill out this survey to the best of your ability at your earliest convenience. This will take approximately 5-15 minutes.

We plan to publish the results of this study but will not have access to nor include any information that could directly identify you. Nevertheless, participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

By proceeding with our survey, you are agreeing to be in this study. If you have questions about this research, you may contact [Sophia Lang, langsp@appstate.edu, 704-989-5890 and Robin Byerly, byerlyrt@appstate.edu, 828-262-6227].

How old are you?

What is your gender identity?

Male

Female

Other

What is your employment status?

Employed, full-time

Employed, part-time

Unemployed

Self-employed

Full-time student

Have you participated in social influencing either as influencer or as consumer?

Yes,

If yes, then as influencer, and/or

Consumer?

No

Please check each of the sites listed below that you are either subscribed to, or use to follow celebrities, or to follow popular accounts.

Instagram

Facebook

Twitter

TikTok

YouTube

Blogs

Other

Would you rather go to friends, influencers, or other sources for recommendations and reviews?

Influencers

Friends

Other

Neither

When you hear the word “influencer” who do you think of?

Short, open answer:

How much do you agree with the following statements?

Options are: Agree Strongly, Agree Slightly, Neutral, Disagree Slightly, Disagree Strongly

I use influencers to make my own purchasing decisions.

I use influencers to market my products/services.

I consider myself to be an influencer.

Influencers have my best interest.

I prefer certain influencers, based on trust or familiarity.

I am a business owner, or an employee with direct marketing/sales responsibilities.

I consider being an influencer equivalent to having a full-time career.

If an influencer introduced me to a product that would improve my quality of life and offered a discount code, I would purchase the item.

If I knew my favorite influencer was paid to promote a brand, my opinion wouldn't change.

I often find myself purchasing items while browsing online that I had not previously intended to purchase.

I am aware that “recommendations” made by influencers are often scripted by the brand more than the individual.

I am aware that social media influencers can make commissions based directly on my purchase.

Short, open ended answers:

How did you become aware of influencers?

Would you like to become an influencer?

Have you directly benefited from influencers as marketing tools?

Have you been harmed or disappointed by following influencers?

Do you have any other comments about influencers you would like to share?

Appendix B**Responses to the Survey Question
“When you hear the word “influencer” who do you think of?”**

Someone who inspires others

The Kardashians

Annoying

Milabu

emma chamberlain

Youtubers

Instagram influencers

Youth, millennials, different form of advertising

A person (either celebrity or someone with an engaging personality) with a lot of followers who often promotes ideas or items and makes money off of them

Erin Schrader- Living in Yellow

Trump

A lot of stars who started on Vine

Katy Belotte

Youtuber/ instagram model

Danielle Carolan

Instagram

Instagram influence who puts their lifestyle on Instagram and promotes different products

Charlie D'melio

Either Tik Tok creators like Charlie D'Amelio or celebrities such as Millie Bobbie Brown

Zoë Sugg

the Kardashians

famous people

David Dobrik

Celebrity

Instagram models

Alisha Marie

Kylie Jenner and Stassie

youtubers, people who started on reality shows such as the bachelor franchise

Instagram

Kim K

Social media, Instagram, YouTube, brand deals, sponsorships

Youtubers, sponsorships, instagram posts, etc

Kim K

Social media famous

People like aspyn ovard

popular social media people

Kylie Jenner

I think of a typically young person with a large following on social media that uses their platform to endorse products that they use personally

Hannah Meloche

Kim Kardashian

skinny white girls on instagram

no one i can name off hand

A top figure on a social media platform

Young affluent females

Famous social media people, mainly girls, that have that "perfect" life.

The whole Bachelor franchise, and youtubers

Danielle Carolan, the Kardashians, anyone famous basically

James Charles, Emma Chamberlain, Gay youtubers like Shannon Beveridge

Someone who makes money to show off products and recommendations

Sophia Lang

Molly Mae

Individuals who promote a product or idea

Cassandra Bankson (skincare youtuber)

Beautiful people

David Dobrik

People who influence others in good or bad ways.

Anyone who has a large following on social media platforms

Girls on Instagram

When I first hear influencer, I think of someone being paid to market a product or lifestyle.

Beauty gurus

Knowledge

Instagram

Celebrities endorsing a company or specific products/lifestyles

Someone that makes something happen

Famous

Danielle Carolan

Dave Portnoy

Instagram models and girls who are brand ambassadors.

Kylee Jenner

Charli D'Amelio

Fitness enthusiasts

Emma Chamberlain

Casey Holmes, Desi Perkins, Tati Westbrook, etc.

Someone with codes to certain companies, large following

Social media

Logan Paul

Instagram and YouTube people mostly along with major celebrities

The Kardashians

Someone's with high social media following

Someone paid to promote a product

Danielle Carolan

Someone who spreads trends within society

Advertisements

David Dobrik

Remi Cruz

Instagram girls who think they're famous

Instagram baddies

David Dobrik

Carefully curated photo feeds and brand sponsorships

Youtubers

Someone with a lot of followers on social media that posts trendy pictures meant to

"influence" consumers

Followers

David Dobrik

Pretty, skinny, white girls.

any beauty guru on youtube

Ashley Terkeurst Hodges

Instagram

Personality

Molly Mae Hague

I don't really key in on influencers

Kim Kardashian

Multi level marketing companies

Someone who has a relatively large following of people and is able to easily and instantly connect with them via social media

NikkiTutorials

Hannah Ann Sluss

Chloe Ting

Someone who uses their social media presence to promote product

"Instagram famous people", people on Instagram or YouTube with a high following

Kristen Johns, Gretchen Geraghty, Tori Sterling

A good looking person who takes a lot of pictures, usually women

Already-affluent white girls with decent looks capitalizing off of others while providing nothing new, novel, or interesting

A group or person trying to influence the opinion of others; usually getting someone to purchase a product.

Chrissy Teigen

Kayla Itsines, Addison Rae, Hannah Brown

No one in particular— mostly Instagram

People who think they're so famous that they can make money off of aiding in the selling of products. Honestly have a low opinion.

The Bachelor contestants

Savanah labrant

Large following

James Charles

The Kardashians, Addison Rae

Someone who has a large following on social media and can promote products

Addison Rae

Kylie Jenner

PewDiePie

Someone with a lot of followers who then partners with brands to "influence" the following. a young (35 and under) woman who is very pretty and outgoing

Kylie Jenner

Someone who influences the decisions of others

Instagram famous people

Dani Austin, Emily Herron, Jen Adams

Lindsay Reagan Thorne

Bloggers

People that I follow on Instagram

Club Promoters

instagram vloggers

Allison Holker and Twitch

Laura Godfrey

Sazan Hendrix #fave (NOT the Kardashians! Ugh!)

Honestly, I think of pretentious lifestyle bloggers

Jordan Page

Mostly The Muse, Temptalia, Kylie Jenner, Carly

Negative connotation

Young person with a carefully crafted social media presence. No one in particular a person that can sway the way people think and behave

Salespeople

Oprah

Kardashians

LaurDIY

Kardashians

Millennials

Advertisements

Chicks with hair straightening products

Bloggers

Kim kardashian

Kim Kardashian

Jeffery Starr

A person who has a respected opinion

Young entrepreneur

Someone who promotes

Someone that influences the sale of products or services

Advertising

Kim kardashion

The. Media

Kim Kardashian

Bloggers, websites

Yelp,Google

Someone trying to convince me

Celebrities

Kendall jenner

Some one who has specialized knowledge in a particular field.

Successful business

Young, opportunist

Billy Graham

Car salesmen

Someone, news sources, groups, etc., whose main objective is to influence or persuade a reader or listener, child, adult, student,etc. to buy a product, change a belief or attitude, change your focus or lead you in a certain direction. (Positive or negative)

someone who needs power

Appendix C

Comments in Response to the Survey Question

“Do you have any other comments about influencers you would like to share?”

“I don't think influencers are any worse than any other kind of marketing on the web (advertising, paid-for Amazon reviews, etc.) except that they're less transparent about their funders. I'm not sure if it's common knowledge that they're basically bought-and-sold advertising services, not normal people sharing stuff they like.”

“I know some influencers have better intentions than others, and I try to follow/listen to those I perceive as honest and trustworthy”

“They inspire me to keep following what I love”

“It seems like a pretty easy and high paying job”

“I get inspired by their posts more than anything. Even though I know it's the prettiest version of their life, it helps me to reach for my potential pretty life.”

“They get a bad rep sometimes but they work SO hard!”

“I like when they are real about the products they push. I prefer when they aren't retouching every aspect of their photos and have a sense of humor.”

“Underrated job, but also have seen it take a lot of work and pay off and little work and pay off”

“I find them disingenuous. They are the modern-day version of a used car salesman.”

“They live off of consumerism which is not something we should continue to glorify. I wish these Instagram models would use their platforms to spread more positivity, and global awareness instead of sharing stupid products. Peridot. Get a real job, stop using tits to sell whitening strips.”

“Recent events of influencers posing for pictures at protests and then leaving without any participation Was in very poor taste. It is ok to promote things, but to utilize fake sincerity is unethical and would be frowned upon in any business.”

“The influencers I follow are like vegan moms not famous people similar Addison Rae”

“They should be more open about how they are paid”

“I have personally never been a fan of influencers on Instagram, but I understand that it is a job. I am just not a fan of a sales personality, it seems pushy to me.”

“Influencers are disappointing particularly on YouTube. Their original content usually would keep me interested, but the more “successful” they become the more their channel becomes diluted with sales material and a once good channel turns into an infomercial. The more sales codes and sponsored content, the less likely I am to trust the individual”

“I think that you need to be media literate to interact with influencers in a healthy way (i.e. knowing when a product they promote is paid content, knowing they edit their photos to look better, etc)”

“I think influencers need to be held more accountable in their social/moral views, casual racism is so present in the industry and everyone is allowed to get away with it.”

“NEED TO BE MORE AWARE HOW WASTEFUL THEIR LINE OF WORK IS.”

“I am very selective about influencers I follow and I personally focus on ones who are honest and are upfront about when their posts are ads/sponsored. like, they recommend products and show things they generally like/dislike but tell you when they are being paid to promote something. the example that comes to mind is skincare by Hiram. he is very forward about when a video is sponsored, and he has made it clear he won't accept sponsorships from companies whose products he doesn't truly believe in or don't live up to his high standards.”

“They are helpful in learning about many different types of products and fashion styles but ultimately other reviews and price influence my purchase.”

“Hear a lot of ads on podcasts which I think I would be more likely to buy what they say because feel like I have built more of a relationship or know them better by listening to their podcast. They also include a discount code.”

“I buy LOTS more things than I need or ever intended to buy!”

“Influencers have more power the more they use a product versus being able to tell it's an ad”

“I think it’s a very interesting form of advertising and marketing because it creates a sense of trust with the consumers seeing ‘people just like us’ using these products, while at the same time everyone knows that their lives are kinda fake.”

Table 1

Demographics		
Gender	Female	86%
	Male	14%
Age	18-24	59%
	25-31	5%
	32-38	3%
	39-45	3%
	46-52	10%
	53+	9%
	Chose not to respond	10%
Employment	Employed, full-time	26%
	Employed, part-time	30%
	Full-time student	27%
	Self-employed	3%
	Unemployed	14%

Table 2

Demographics (18-24)		
Gender	Female	85%
	Male	15%
Employment	Employed, full-time	9%
	Employed, part-time	37%
	Full-time student	40%
	Self-employed	0%
	Unemployed	14%

Table 3

Social Media Participation		
Social Media Sites Used	Instagram	93%
	Facebook	72%
	Twitter	45%
	TikTok	47%
	YouTube	65%
	Blogs	15%
	Other	5%
Where to Go for Product Recommendations	Friends	69%
	Influencers	15%
	Other	6%
	Neither	3%
	Both (From Other)	5%

Table 4

Social Media Participation (18-24)		
Social Media Sites Used	Instagram	97%
	Facebook	64%
	Twitter	53%
	TikTok	62%
	YouTube	75%
	Blogs	14%
	Other	7%
Where to Go for Product Recommendations	Friends	71%
	Influencers	15%
	Other	12%
	Neither	3%
	Both (From Other)	0%

Table 5

Influencer Awareness		
How did you become aware of SMI?	Mentioned through own use of social media	81%
	Through children/family members	6%
	Through educational classes/ online journals, articles	5%
Would you like to become an influencer?	Yes	21%
	No	63%
	Maybe	7%
Have you directly benefited from an influencer as marketing tools?	Yes	25%
	No	62%
Have you been harmed or disappointed by influencers?	Yes	24%
	No	65%

Table 6

Influencer Awareness (18-24)		
How did you become aware of SMI?	Mentioned through own use of social media	92%
	Through children/family members	0%
	Through educational classes/online journals, articles	5%
Would you like to become an influencer?	Yes	27%
	No	62%
	Maybe	9%
Have you directly benefited from an influencer as marketing tools?	Yes	25%
	No	62%
Have you been harmed or disappointed by influencers?	Yes	24%
	No	65%

Table 7

Perceptions of Influencers			
Questions	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I use influencers to make my own purchasing decisions.	37%	30%	33%
I use influencers to market my products/services.	10%	26%	64%
I consider myself to be an influencer.	4%	8%	88%
Influencers have my best interest.	12%	27%	61%
I prefer certain influencers, based on trust or familiarity.	74%	9%	16%
I am a business owner, or employee with direct marketing/sales	16%	11%	72%
I consider being an influencer equivalent to having a full-time career.	41%	22%	37%
If an influencer introduced me to a product that would improve my quality of life and offered a discount code, I would be more likely to purchase the item.	66%	23%	10%
If I knew my favorite influencer was paid to promote a brand, my opinion wouldn't change.	28%	24%	48%
I often find myself purchasing items while browsing online that I had not previously intended to purchase.	53%	10%	37%
I am aware that "recommendations" made by influencers are often scripted by the brand more than the individual.	92%	4%	4%
I am aware that social media influencers can make commissions based directly on my purchase.	95%	2%	4%

Table 8

Perceptions of Influencers (18-24)			
Questions	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I use influencers to make my own purchasing decisions.	41%	31%	28%
I use influencers to market my products/services.	13%	25%	63%
I consider myself to be an influencer.	3%	7%	90%
Influencers have my best interest.	14%	27%	59%
I prefer certain influencers, based on trust or familiarity.	85%	5%	11%
I am a business owner, or employee with direct marketing/sales	14%	12%	75%
I consider being an influencer equivalent to having a full-time career.	46%	20%	34%
If an influencer introduced me to a product that would improve my quality of life and offered a discount code, I would be more likely to purchase the item.	71%	20%	9%
If I knew my favorite influencer was paid to promote a brand, my opinion wouldn't change.	27%	32%	41%
I often find myself purchasing items while browsing online that I had not previously intended to purchase.	47%	11%	42%
I am aware that "recommendations" made by influencers are often scripted by the brand more than the individual.	93%	3%	5%
I am aware that social media influencers can make commissions based directly on my purchase.	95%	0%	5%