

Influencer Marketing: How Generation Z is Sparking a Fashion Marketing Revolution

Kelsy Letko

University of South Florida

April 2019

Abstract

In today's society centered around social media, the use of influencer marketing in the fashion industry has become a popular trend and is evolving both the marketing and fashion disciplines with each and every post. Specifically, Generation Z is a growing fashion consumer segment that is driving this change in fashion marketing and causing fashion businesses to redesign their marketing efforts in order to maximize profits. This study examines the buying behavior and preferences of Generation Z consumers through the use of both surveys and interviews of online brands, with the recent efforts of online fashion boutiques to adhere to this influencer marketing trend. The insights that this research provides suggest that influencer marketing programs are a lower-cost, effective marketing tactic that can allow fashion businesses to dramatically increase their online exposure and drive both awareness and sales with the rise of Generation Z buying power.

Introduction

Influencer marketing in the fashion industry, especially for Generation Z consumers (born 1996 and later), has exploded in the past years with the rise of social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Most companies today have some form of social media account for their customers to follow in order to share photos, deals, and information. The use of Instagram influencers has become a common way for clothing lines and boutiques to advertise and reach new consumers in Generation Z. Influencers have a strong online following and are thought of as role models with trusted opinions, which is why they can be very effective in winning over consumers.

Despite the overwhelming benefits of influencer marketing, this sector of fashion marketing also comes with high risks in terms of ethics and consumer values and beliefs. “Sweatshop” issues due to outsourcing, the misrepresentation of influencer/employer relations, and a discord between consumer values and company marketing can act as threats to an otherwise successful influencer marketing strategy.

Studying all of these connections is a key element in shaping the fashion marketing environment because social media marketing has become an integral part of the fashion world, as many people (especially in Generation Z) shop online regularly, saving time and effort. My research will also be very beneficial to fashion businesses, especially online boutiques, because it will provide data on influencers that businesses can utilize in order to refine their influencer marketing strategies and attract new Generation Z consumers.

Background

Young or old, social media users are constantly being exposed to a variety of products and services every day by way of social media marketing on sites such as Instagram. As opposed

to the more traditional, print methods of advertising that were commonly used by brands in previous years, social media marketing allows for constant change, updates, and trends in fashion, a shift discussed by Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010) in their research.

Marketing within fashion is a very creative and fast-paced activity, with younger consumers from Generation Z (born 1996 and later) acting as an important target market for fashion brands. Generation Z is also commonly referred to as the iGeneration. Generation Z buying patterns are of great importance since the generation makes up a large portion of recent sales in fashion, and a study published by Mintel (2018) highlights some of the values and marketing preferences of this generation. These younger consumers are constantly communicating online, using social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat daily. Most companies today have some form of social media account for their customers to follow in order to share photos, deals, and information. The use of Instagram influencers has become a common way for clothing lines and boutiques to advertise and reach new consumers in light of this technical shift.

Influencer marketing is a revolutionary marketing concept that is shaping the way that fashion is shared and interpreted worldwide, with over one million influencers identified. Consumers think of social media influencers as opinion leaders, as they are trusted social media users who partner with different brands to promote products and services to their large followings. Social media influencers achieve popularity online by developing a large, organic following in areas such as fashion, fitness, or food. Influencers post photos in their areas of expertise and attract more followers by promoting their posts and submitting their posts to be featured on popular accounts. Brands then reach out to social media influencers that they think will act as a positive advocate for the brand by way of direct message or email. The brands then

offer contracts/agreements to the influencer that include payment details and posting guidelines. Influencers can be very effective at winning over consumers due to their large followings in a niche market. Influencers are typically paid an average of \$1,000 per every 100,000 followers. Compared to a traditional marketing budget or campaign, employing influencers per post is very affordable for fashion brands. Along with a lower price tag for marketing, influencers typically have the ability to reach a large number of consumers on just one post alone. This is due to the fact that one Instagram post can be seen by many users, regardless of whether or not the user follows the account that initially posted the photo.

A higher sense of authenticity and credibility regarding the products/services being promoted are two more reasons why influencers have become so popular in fashion as well as a variety of other industries such as fitness. In the *International Journal of Advertising*, researchers explain that messages delivered by influencers come across as more authentic and credible, since they come from a fellow consumer rather than an advertiser or business (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 800). Although consumers are aware that the influencer is being employed by the brand, the fact that one of their role models/icons uses that product or service creates somewhat of a “stamp of approval” in the mind of the consumer.

Influencers have many different focuses and audiences. Micro-influencers have more of a niche market and a smaller audience (about 10,000-100,000 followers) and work especially well for marketing because they have both industry experience and a loyal following. The Instagram user @mikaela.wightman is a great example of a fashion micro-influencer, with 22.3 thousand followers and a history of collaborations with fashion brands like Macy’s and H&M. Mikaela developed a following in fashion industry by posting high-quality fashion content, attracting more and more new followers. On the other hand, celebrity influencers are influencers that are

extremely popular online and have millions of followers. An example of a revolutionary celebrity influencer in the 2018 fashion world is Kylie Jenner. Kylie Jenner currently has 119 million Instagram followers and is paid about \$1 million per post when collaborating with a brand such as Fashion Nova. Celebrity influencers tend to be much more well-known because of their celebrity status in businesses such as acting, singing, or modeling, which is why their payout is extremely high.

Engagement and reach determine a large portion of an influencer's success while working with brands. An influencer whose followers often interact with his or her posts (whether it be through likes, comments, or shares) is one that has a high level of engagement on their platform. Reach refers to the number of users who see an influencer's post, regardless of whether or not they physically like or comment on the post or even follow the influencer. For example, an Instagram user who may see Kylie Jenner's post appear on his or her "Explore" page on Instagram would be a part of Kylie's reach. The Instagram app provides analytics for users to determine their weekly engagement, reach, activity, and audience breakdowns. This is a very helpful feature for both influencers and their employers to use in order to make posting decisions and to determine if an influencer and fashion brand would be successful in collaborating.

Social Activism

As the popularity of influencer marketing has risen dramatically over the past few years, the generational shifts of fashion marketing have been a key focus of research studies. Studies including Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010) and Sharma and Albus (2018) explain the shifts from traditional fashion marketing to a more millennial, online form of marketing based upon demographic and sociocultural changes. Due to all of the different events like the Parkland shooting and social changes like LGBTQ+ equality that Generation Z has lived through, many

feel strongly about acting as the face of change for issues such as gun control and gender equality on a local, national, and even global scale (Mintel 2018). Members of this generation not only care about these issues but also base their shopping habits and brand loyalty around companies that do the same. Compared to 55% being the average percentage of individuals vouching for corporate social responsibility, 67% of Generation Z members “expect brands to be a force for positive change” (Mintel 2018). It is evident that brands and the influencers that they choose to employ need to cater to this important demographic and their demands.

This demand for activism is especially strong among fashion consumers. An example of this shift in generational demands can be seen through Rihanna’s recent fashion line. Savage x Fenty is a new lingerie label that places a strong focus on female empowerment, body positivity, and diversity. Models and influencers of the brand are women of all shapes and sizes, from a variety of backgrounds. The brand has been very popular with younger shoppers, especially in Generation Z, because of this high level of inclusivity for all women. Aerie (a brand line of American Eagle) is another brand that has made fashion headway for choosing models of all body sizes and ethnicities, along with adhering to a policy to not retouch any images of models used in their advertisements and promotions.

Ethical Issues/Fast Fashion

Although influencer marketing and affordable online boutiques do have many benefits and advantages from both the business and consumer standpoint, there are a few ethical dilemmas that come into play regarding these topics. A lot of popular online boutiques such as Fashion Nova and Pretty Little Thing have both a wide range of product offerings as well as very affordable pricing and constant sales and discounts. These online boutiques rely on influencer

marketing to stay profitable in the cutthroat fashion industry and are continuously employing influencers to act as brand ambassadors and post frequently in order to maintain a fresh image.

Fast fashion is a hot topic in the fashion world today, especially related to influencer marketing and online boutiques. Fast fashion is essentially cheaper, quickly made clothing inspired by catwalk and runway styles, available for purchase at the click of a button. Fashion consumers demand a much broader range of designs and styles in terms of clothing, leading the life cycles of fashion products to become accelerated, which led to the creation of fast fashion (Lindenmeier, Lwin, Andersch, Phau, & Seemann 2017). In order to meet consumer demands for these products, online fashion businesses have had to outsource the production of these fashion items to foreign, developing countries, in which the “sweatshop issue” has become a growing, ethical problem (Lindenmeier et al.). As the importance of social activism to Generation Z consumers was discussed earlier, ethical sourcing and treatment of employees is especially important to these fashion consumers. This proves to be one important issue related to influencer marketing, as some of the main companies that use this marketing practice engage in this unethical behavior.

The misrepresentation of influencer and employer relations is another ethical issue that has been surfacing in the news recently. Since influencers are paid by brands to promote products, it is necessary in the contract for influencers to explicitly state that they are partnering or “collaborating” with the brand whenever they post on behalf of the company. I think that the direction that Bridge (2018) takes in his article is extremely interesting, as he goes into detail on the ethical and legal issues of certain Instagram influencers and posts. For example, Bridge discusses the issue of misrepresentation of sponsorship and payment by the influencer. Instagram has certain rules in place that influencers must follow when posting for a brand, such as

disclosing if a brand is paying them to post or if the post is an ad for the company. Recently, I have noticed that popular influencers are using phrases such as “#ad,” “paid partnership,” or are including information on whether or not they are partnering with the company which they are posting about. In recent times, many famous celebrity influencers such as Rita Ora have not adhered to these standards, which Bridge details in this article. This poses a legal issue, as consumers need to be fully aware of whether or not an influencer is being paid to promote a product when they go to purchase that product. Companies do not want to be accused of “blindsiding” consumers in this way by getting influencers to give off the image that they are voluntarily promoting the product just because they really like it or the brand.



Figure 1: Example of a paid partnership disclosure from an Instagram fashion influencer

Problem

As influencer marketing continues to grow and evolve with the expansion of social media, it is necessary for fashion brands to grow and adjust with these changes. Fashion companies need to develop strong influencer marketing plans in order to successfully target new and infrequent consumers and gain the highest return on their investment. Along with issues such as Generation Z’s connection to social activism and ethical dilemmas present in the “fast

fashion” online retailer world, brands must center their influencer marketing strategies around two activities. These activities involve choosing influencers that align best with the company’s mission and values as well as ensuring that all business practices adhere to common ethical practices such as ethical sourcing and legal contract representation.

Methodology

I designed a behavioral and lifestyle survey as part of my research methodology by using the Qualtrics software provided by the University of South Florida. This survey is composed of 21 questions including multiple choice questions, free response questions, and matrix table questions. The purpose of this survey was to collect data on social media influencer marketing from the fashion consumer’s point of view. My goal was to identify consumer purchasing patterns, budgeting habits related to fashion, and social media influencer familiarity and preferences. I targeted USF students and other students in the Tampa Bay area so that my research would be applicable to local businesses and target a younger audience. Since my research revolves around Generation Z behavior I also aimed the survey at any fashion consumer in this age bracket, in order to get feedback and data on the generation overall.

I shared my survey with fellow students and members of Generation Z that I personally know by email and text. In addition, I posted the survey link on my personal Instagram and Facebook pages in order to reach a large number of Generation Z students. I also posted the link to my survey in each of the USF class Facebook pages in order to maximize my number of USF respondents. I shared the survey in various group chats for the organizations I am involved with on campus such as Relay for Life and sent it to each of my coworkers at Red Bull. Qualtrics automatically collects all of the survey responses and provides a data analysis for each question, which I used to further analyze the information. Overall, I ended up collecting 141 survey

responses, providing me with a valuable basis for analyzing data on influencer marketing from the eyes of Generation Z itself.

Results

Social media is definitely a large part of everyday life in today's society, as evidenced by my Qualtrics survey responses. 97% of my survey respondents reported that they use social media every single day. This result really shows that social media is integrated into society and is a huge opportunity for businesses to take advantage of. In addition, 91% of all my Qualtrics survey respondents have shopped at an online boutique/clothing store at least once, showing that the world of fashion has shifted towards more of an online marketplace.

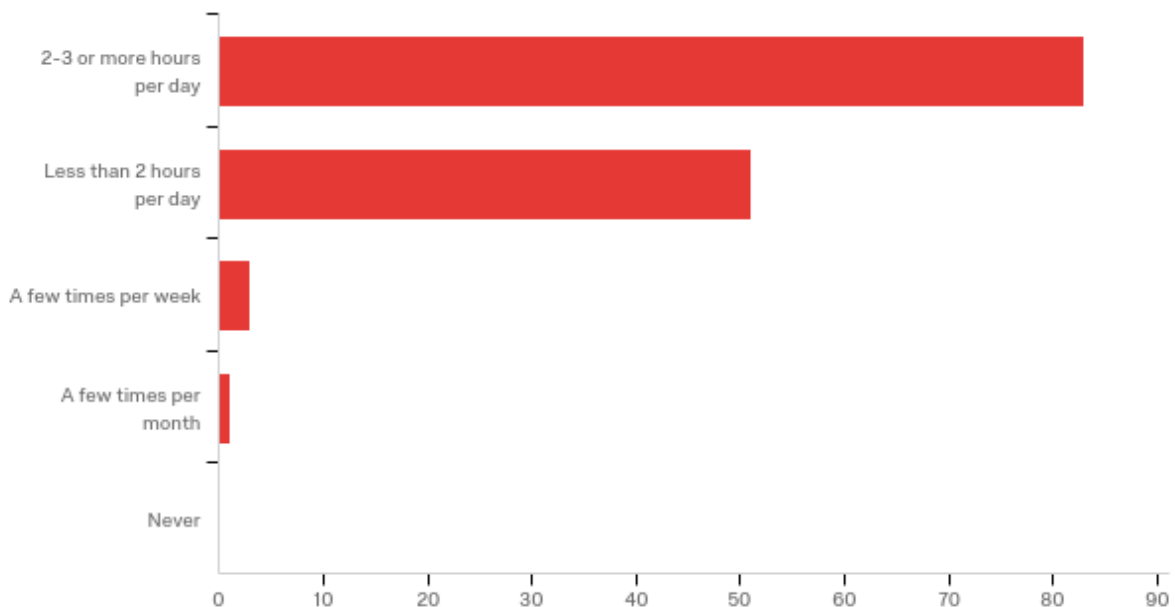


Table 1: How often do you use social media?

Generation Z fashion consumers and social media influencers have a strong correlation, as indicated by my survey results. I created a cross-tabulation of the age of survey respondents and whether or not the respondents follow fashion influencers online and my results show that 74% of Generation Z consumers follow fashion influencers while only 24% of consumers aged

40 and up follow any influencers. Of those that follow fashion influencers, 65% of my respondents follow only a few favorite influencers (1-5) while 12% of my respondents follow a large number of influencers (16+). Generation Z members also reported that they budget fashion items into their yearly purchases, with 59% of Generation Z consumers spending at least \$300 per year on fashion and 27% of members spending over \$1,000 per year in the fashion realm.

Celebrity influencers are shown to be more popular for fashion consumers to follow for clothing and shopping advice, as opposed to micro-influencers. Out of all of my survey respondents, 61% claim that they follow more celebrity fashion influencers while 39% of my respondents follow more micro-influencers. This shows that, although authenticity is less common when it comes to celebrity influencers, consumers still feel as though a product is validated and approved if celebrities endorse and model these brands and products. Despite the striking popularity of celebrity influencers, micro-influencers are still a top choice for many Instagram users. Some of the favorite fashion influencers listed by respondents seem to be a mix of celebrity influencers such as Kendall Jenner, Khloe Kardashian, Chantel Jeffries, and Hailey Bieber, as well as micro-influencers like Hillary Bowles and Maggie Nikolaeva.

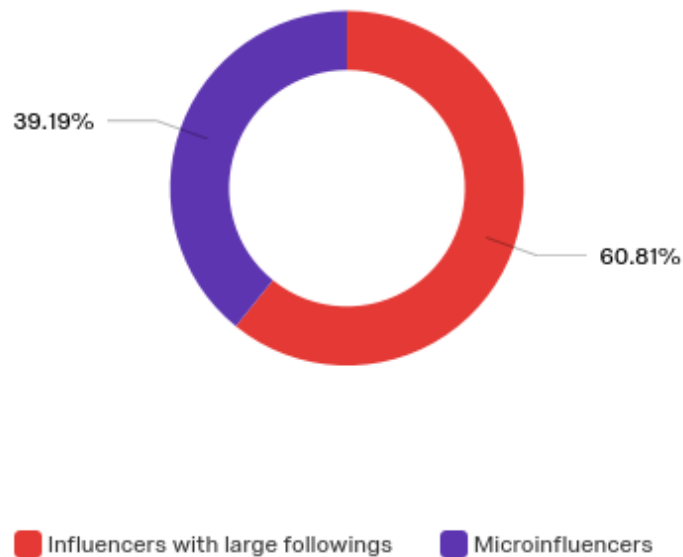


Table 2: A social media influencer is defined as a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry. Do you follow any fashion influencers on social media sites?

Large department stores are shown to be favorite places to shop for fashion, as well as online boutiques and retailers. About 15% of respondents listed Macy’s as one of their top places to shop for fashion and 12% of respondents shop frequently at Forever 21. Fashion Nova and Pretty Little Thing are two online boutiques that I examined closely in my research that are listed as favorite places to shop, which was exciting for me to see. Other brands geared towards younger consumers such as Urban Outfitters and Charlotte Russe are also listed by respondents as go-to stores for fashion needs.

Siempre Golden

Siempre Golden is an online swimwear and fashion boutique based out of Los Angeles, California and founded by a young, female entrepreneur named Sophia. The brand is most popular on Instagram, with a following of 108,000 users. Sophia started designing swimwear at a

young age and successfully built an online following for her brand, attributing much of her success to Instagram influencers who helped her promote her bikinis and brand image to girls all around the world. I interviewed Sophia to hear her story and ask for her opinions on influencer marketing, as she has been in the field for multiple years now. A huge portion of Siempre Golden's success points to influencer marketing: the number one way that the boutique markets its products online and gains new customers.

Sophia implemented both an influencer marketing program as well as a brand ambassador program. Girls who are interested in becoming a brand ambassador for Siempre Golden can fill out an application on the company's website, sharing information about their personal social media accounts as well as their reasoning for wanting to become a brand ambassador. Brand ambassadors enjoy perks such as deals on products, exclusive sales, social media exposure, and personalized discount codes to share with friends and family. Sophia states that "brand ambassadors receive 50% off all products and can earn points from posting and engaging with the brand's account, which can be redeemed for additional discounts and free merchandise." In addition to this program, Siempre Golden also employs paid influencers such as Sierra Egan (@sierraaaskyee) in order to show off new bikini sets and spread the word about the brand. Sophia stated that Siempre Golden's Instagram account itself receives multiple direct messages per day from new followers and customers, claiming that they found out about the brand by viewing sponsored posts from the influencers that they follow. These new followers often ask about purchasing specific swimwear sets that they saw influencers promoting and even request certain sizes to be restocked so that they can purchase swimwear from Siempre Golden as soon as possible.

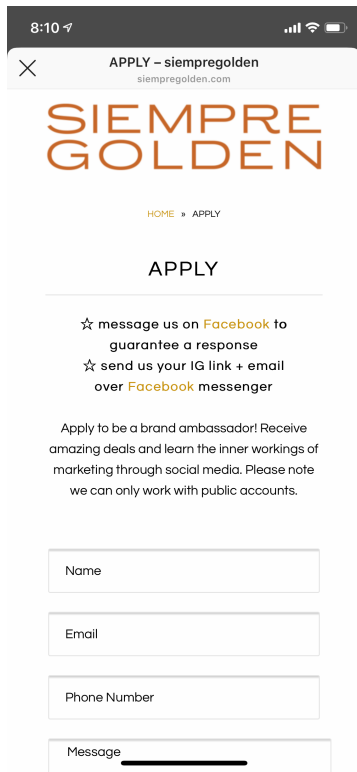


Figure 2: Siempre Golden’s brand ambassador application

By utilizing these marketing programs, Sophia has managed to lift her brand to new heights, landing recent exposure from famous celebrities such as Gigi Hadid, Shay Mitchell, and Jen Selter. These celebrities model Siempre Golden’s bikini and festival tops at major events such as Coachella. Siempre Golden has also been featured in magazines such as Vogue, Cosmopolitan, and Seventeen. Most impressively, models in the 2018 Sports Illustrated Swim magazine were wearing Siempre Golden bikinis. Sophia states that “working with top fashion influencers as well as my amazing team of Siempre brand ambassadors has contributed more to the success of Siempre Golden than I could ever imagine.”

VITAE APPAREL

A fitness and swim brand based out of Vancouver, VITAE APPAREL is an online boutique with an Instagram following of 81,000 users and a “VITAE Aqua Babe” army set on growing the brand even more through the use of influencer marketing. Along with being a

boutique, VITAE APPAREL is also a healthy lifestyle brand, promoting fitness and wellness to girls around the globe. VITAE APPAREL is very similar to Siempre Golden in that both brands utilize an influencer marketing program and a brand ambassador program. The brand employs famous Instagram influencers such as Lulu Salvadori (@lululus) and Alexis Bumgarner (@alexisbumgarner) in order to model bikini and workout sets to their huge online followings. VITAE APPAREL's brand ambassador program provides benefits to ambassadors similar to those of Siempre Golden's and is one reason why the brand has grown in both exposure and reach in the past year. To recruit new ambassadors and influencers, the brand utilizes the Instagram "Explore" page to identify users who fit their target profile and direct message these users to inquire about partnering together.

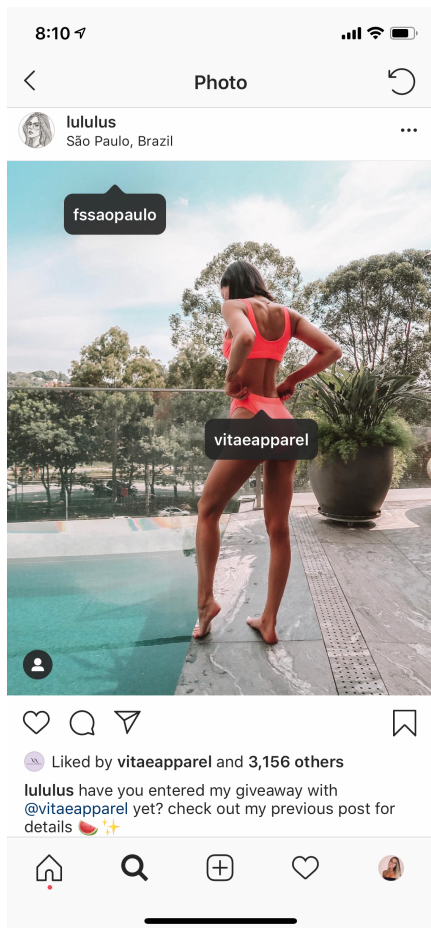


Figure 3: Lulu Salvadori's paid post for VITAE APPAREL

By interviewing the owner of VITAE APPAREL, I found similar trends to Siempre Golden's approach, in that both brands find that their follower count and engagement goes up dramatically within the short period of time after just one single influencer post regarding the brand. The owners of VITAE APPAREL also shared with me that they use influencer marketing because it is a much cheaper and viable option for marketing and "has proven to be successful since day one of its implementation." VITAE APPAREL has become a fairly popular brand today, with features in Vogue, Condé Nast, and Daily Mail.

Recommendations

Based upon all of these findings, it is evident that fashion businesses need to align their influencer marketing program with their company mission and values. Businesses must choose to employ influencers that do not conflict with their beliefs. For example, it would be a marketing disaster for a company that constantly promotes body positivity and diversity to create a contract with an influencer and then see that influencer post offensive content related to racism or fat-shaming.

In terms of ethical behavior, fashion brands need to pay close attention to ensure that all of their business practices are both legal and moral. Fashion is an industry that can be very unethical, solely due to the fact that many fashion brands outsource and create factories in other countries in order to obtain cheap labor and materials that lead to a maximization of profits. Many of the large online fashion brands that rely on influencer marketing have been involved in scandals related to these topics.

Legal contracts are a very important part of influencer marketing agreements. Brands need to ensure that they state the terms and agreements of the partnership in writing in order to avoid any backlash or issues later on. In addition, brands and influencers need to be under the

same agreement in which the influencer will blatantly state that they are employed by or “partnering with” the brand. This allows the influencer to disclose to their followers that they are in a paid agreement to post on behalf of the brand, in order to avoid lawsuits from any other brands or customers.

Based upon my Qualtrics survey results, it is evident that influencer marketing plays a huge part in the fashion shopping habits of Generation Z consumers. The combination of social media and celebrity/micro-influencers leads brands to be able to promote their fashion lines in a fairly cheap and simple manner. Based upon the size and marketing budget of the brand, a company can choose to employ either celebrity or micro-influencers, or a combination of the two. For larger fashion labels such as Fashion Nova or Pretty Little Thing, celebrity influencers work best as they are the most expensive influencers to hire and therefore have the highest reach and engagement levels. Fashion brands that are smaller and do not have the budget to afford to partner with celebrity influencers can still successfully establish a micro-influencer or ambassador program in order to reach new consumers and develop a larger following at a very minimal cost. If a brand has a large enough budget they can employ a mix of both celebrity and micro-influencers in order to have an optimal marketing strategy, targeting a variety of different consumers from a wide range of backgrounds and countries.

Interviews with Siempre Golden and VITAE APPAREL have confirmed firsthand that influencer marketing does work exceptionally well and is worthwhile for companies to put the effort and budget towards. Building their brand around influencer marketing, these two owners have grown their followings and increased their profits dramatically. Instagram has become a dominant marketplace in the fashion world and new fashion businesses are always entering the sphere and competing with existing brands for market share. Influencer marketing has the power

to change the lives of fashion entrepreneurs in an amazing way, with a well-thought-out influencer marketing plan being the necessary means in order for new fashion labels to grow their followings and reach new and infrequent consumers on a daily basis.

References

Bhardwaj, V., & Fairhurst, A. (2010). Fast fashion: response to changes in the fashion industry. *INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF RETAIL DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMER RESEARCH*, (1), 165.

Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbl&AN=RN269669936&site=eds-live>

Bridge, M. (2018). Influencers of Instagram face inquiry on paid endorsements. *The Times (London, England)*.

Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.550500360&site=eds-live>

De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising: The Review of Marketing Communications*, 36(5), 798-828. doi:10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035

Retrieved from [https://www.tandfonline-](https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035)

[com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035](https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035)

Hughes, A. (2018). Fashion Nova's Rising Star: HOW A RELATIVELY UNKNOWN WOMEN'S APPAREL COMPANY BECAME ONE OF THE MOST GOOGLED FASHION BRANDS. *WWD: Women's Wear Daily*, 1–19.

Retrieved from

<http://ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=131670411&site=eds-live>

Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 69, 5753–5760.

Retrieved from <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.171>

Lindenmeier, J., Lwin, M., Andersch, H., Phau, I., & Seemann, A.-K. (2017). Anticipated Consumer Guilt. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 37(4), 444–459.

Retrieved from <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/10.1177/0276146717723964>

M., S., & K., S. (2017). Impact of Influencers in Consumer Decision Process: the Fashion Industry. *SCMS Journal of Indian Management*, 14(3), 14-30.

Retrieved from

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=22&sid=0db64c56-3cce-4610-a81a-113213da41d8%40pdc-v-sessmgr04>

Mintel. (2018, May). *Marketing to the iGeneration – US – May 2018*.

Retrieved September 3, 2018 from

<http://academic.mintel.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/display/894943/?highlight>

Sharma, S., & Albus, T. (2018). Influencer Marketing Strategies for Indie, Mass and Luxury Brands: How to drive conversion among the frivolous millennials and tech savvy boomers. *Global Cosmetic Industry*, 186(7), DE11-DE14.

Retrieved from

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=467914b1-0a66-40f9-ba99-fb5b211c7862%40pdc-v-sessmgr02>