Improving Brand Attitudes through Influencer Marketing

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Extended Abstract

Influencer marketing evolved from celebrities' product endorsement, leveraging the popularity of "micro-celebrities" on social media. Influencers are these "micro-celebrities" who are ordinary individuals yet gathered sizable followers in social media and consistently endorse a set of brands or products from one category they claim expertise on. In this form of marketing campaigns, product endorsement becomes subtle. Brands would collaborate with popular social media figures, to give them their products for free, in return for reviewing them in their social media accounts. However, the caveat for influencer marketing is the lack of brands' control over these influencers. As a result, it is important to assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing, and to achieve this goal, we focus on the congruence between influencers' posts and followers' posts.

Recently, Instagram has become the primary platform for influencer marketing for fashion brands for its affordances for exchanging photos and videos. On this platform, we choose to use the activewear fashion brand, Lululemon, which has proactively employed influencer marketing and obtained substantial success especially in terms of creating and maintaining a large group of loyal customers without spending on mass media advertising. Based on the source-congruence approach and electronic word of mouth literature, we hypothesize that when the congruence between influencers' and followers' posts is higher, the followers will be more likely to like the influencers' posts; as a result, the followers' attitudes towards the brand will improve.

First, we collected a list of Lululemon brand ambassadors from the brand's official website, and we randomly selected 30 profiles from the list for further analysis. For each influencer, we obtained 50 images posted on their Instagram account. Further, we selected 60 followers per influencer and a half of these 60 followers have never liked any of the influencers' posts (non-likers), and the other half have (likers). 50 images per follower were downloaded for the analysis. The next step is to manually code 300 images as training data. The two brand-related themes that were given to two human coders were physical activity (1=active; 0= non-active) and clothing style (1= active wear/athletic clothing; 0= other styles), and the Cohen's Kappa were acceptable rates of .88 (style) and .73 (activity). Then, to characterize the features and content in Instagram images, we applied the Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) method to automatically classify images. The final machine learning model has an accuracy rate of 83.5%.

To measure the similarity of the posts between the influencers and their followers, we used the cosine similarity score. First, we compared the similarity score between the likers and the non-likers via independent T-test. The test result indicates that on average, the likers (Mean = 0.88, SD = 0.25) have a significantly higher similarity score with the influencers they follow than the non-likers (Mean =0.84, SD = 0.30), with $t(1798) = 3.14$, $p = 0.0017$). Thus, in general, likers' posts are more congruent with the ones from influencers. Moreover, within the likers, we investigated the relationship between the number of times they liked the influencers' posts and their similarity with the influencers, using a Poisson mixed model with the similarity score as the independent variable and a random intercept. The estimated coefficient for the similarity score is 0.20 (*s.e.* = 0.05, $p < 0.001$), which shows that the similarity score has a significant positive relationship with the number of likes from the likers. Thus, our hypothesis is supported.