BOOK REVIEW

Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Their Followers

Watkins, B. (Ed.). 2021. *Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Their Followers.* Lexington Books. ISBN 978-1-7936-1364-6. 235pp.

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R*esearch Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Their Followers*, edited by Brandi Watkins, is a collection of journal articles aimed at broadening our research understanding of the relationship between social media influencers (SMIs) and their followers. In the introduction, editor Brandi Watkins uses the story of one SMI, Caroline Calloway, to demonstrate that very often the lengths someone will go to in order to maintain their status as an influencer are astonishing, as are the many pitfalls that are associated with the pressures of being an SMI. Watkins states that the goal of the book is not only to provide practitioners and researchers with a broader understanding of the dynamic of SMIs and their followers, but also to direct a first effort at putting together scholarly articles related to this relationship and direct future research.

Each of the eleven chapters of the book make note at some point in their respective space about the serious lack of relevant literature related to their identified topic. In fact, the first chapter draws a sample of literature from seven well-respected academic journals that would, or should, have content related to research articles on social media influencers. The author found, however, that in a six-year review of these seven journals, only eighteen total articles could be identified on social media influencers. This lack of

developed research is drawn not only on literature related to SMIs and their followers in any broad sense, but also within any other framework, which is well represented and presented throughout the chapters of this book. Within it, there is a different flavor of research related to SMIs and what their impact is in vastly different contexts, such as fitness and weight loss, marketing brands, churches, health, academia, crisis management, and ethics. Given the dearth of literature on the topic, it is an impressive collection of studies that are related enough as to maintain the content necessary for what the book aims to achieve, while also demonstrating how broad-based the concept of social media influencing can be and how it can be applied to so many different areas.

The book also presents a wide range of theoretical frameworks and methodologies. McGuire's communication-persuasion matrix of five classes of input variables is offers a way to understand and analyze persuasion in influencer contexts. It is also aligned with source credibility theory, uses and gratifications theory, and the two-step flow model. Regarding dialogic communication theory, one author posits that true digital dialogic communication is not achieved with the relationship of SMIs and brand organization due to lack of empathy and commitment between the two. Symbolic convergence theory is mentioned in the context of when an SMI, who was made into a certain image by her reputation and her content—that of an observant, traditional Muslim woman who wanted to promote hijab wearing as fashionable and beautiful—was vilified and slandered by her once loyal followers for choosing to no longer wear a head covering. It is this collective group consciousness in which a shared rhetorical vision of what they believed a proper Muslim woman is and should be was torpedoed by her behavior; namely, not behaving the way they believed a Muslim woman should. Image repair theory, which the author cites has been used to examine crisis management responses from organizations, athletes, and entertainers, is used in the context of social media outrages such as the college admissions scam perpetrated by wealthy parents and tweet controversies that are regularly created by celebrities online. The tools presented in effective crisis management can be used in the framework of an SMI controversy, although the specific SMIs mentioned in this article were viewed as ineffective at conducting such management skills.

This is a natural segue into another main point of this book: how are SMIs to behave when they have no rule book, no code of ethics, and no training for what is essentially a

high-paying and extremely influential job? One author recommends that SMIs should be regarded as quasi-journalists, meaning that while they have a right to earn money and make a living off social media, they also have a duty to be transparent in their posts so as not to deceive their potentially naïve audience, to disclose relevant information, and to maintain a modicum of professional honesty. Normative ethical theory communitarianism is called upon as a philosophical theory that SMIs should be held accountable to; mainly, that decisions made will benefit the community as a whole. SMIs have incredibly large and diverse communities, some of whom hang on every word and gesture of their beloved figureheads. It is a natural extension of that idolatry that SMIs then have a certain level of responsibility to the communities they are serving with their content and posts.

Overall, despite some rhetoric of situations involving backlash and controversy, the opinion of the collected chapters of this book is a positive one. Social media influencers, while wielding tremendous power of their followers, largely exhibit prosocial and mutually beneficial behaviors. It is, perhaps, a given that social media and its influencers are here to stay, and that they have earned a place in the academic literature, where more studies should be aimed at SMIs and their followers and the complicated relationships that are formed as a result.

This book represents a good collection of varied studies that are targeted at social media influencers. However, if an SMI were to pick up the book hoping for tips on how best to grow her or his social media presence/brand, she or he would be bitterly disappointed. I would not recommend this book as one for practitioners of social media. It is a strictly academic compilation, and would be a very useful tool for researchers who are or would like to direct future study at the ever-growing field of social media.