BOOK REVIEW

Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Brand Communication

Review by Megan Benson, Binghampton University

In November 2020, Charles Taylor called for more research on social media influencers (SMIs) in his article in the *International Journal of Advertising*. Editor Brandi Watkins answers this call with her March 2021 work, *Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Brand Communication*. Watkins' book claims to "provide readers with an overview of the current research into SMI as brand communicators and their integration into brand communication strategies" (xv). Social Media Influencers are not a new phenomenon, but the relationship between SMIs and companies is, and continues to evolve. This work uses data and case studies to present the history and current research of Western SMIs and brands.

This book has several strengths, the first being the definitions and brief history of social media and SMIs. This is important because the scholarship of SMIs is relatively nascent, with a bulk of the publications coming between 2016 - 2020. These definitions and overview provide the theoretical framework to better understand the methodical approaches for studying SMIs. The case studies included present concrete evidence as opposed to anecdotal and unsubstantiated claims. Those wishing to become macro-influencers (those with over 500,000 subscribers) will find the five major approaches detailed by Alexa Landsburger and Amanda Martinez in Chapter 2 informative. Perhaps the strongest chapter is Lisa Harrison's research in Chapter 3, which provides a

methodology to research micro-SMIs. There is some debate about how many followers defines a micro-influencer, but it is generally agreed that it is less than 500,000, and could be as low as 1,000. Because these SMIs have fewer followers and tend to be niche communities, there is less data to analyze. Harrison's use of interviews to supplement the data analysis adds depth and understanding, particularly for those interested in becoming a micro-influencer or those studying them. Harrison does an excellent job explaining how to replicate their research on micro-influencers in Australia and elsewhere. Ronda Mariani posits best practices for brands working with SMIs, as well as detailed questions and risks brands should consider in Chapter 4. The use of other established theories such as social impact theory, social networking theory, and media ecology theory identify several avenues of research surrounding brands and SMIs and demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of this research. The unexpected use of SMIs in college admissions is creative and inspirational; we are likely to see more institutions of higher education use SMIs in their communication strategies. Additionally, the work has several explanations of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulations surrounding SMIs, which is helpful to understand their history, but also indicate what the FTC might regulate in the future.

This work could have been improved with some editing for spelling / capitalization consistencies and updating of information, although it was likely impossible to update some of the recent developments before publication. For example, Lush UK continues to have a decentralized social media strategy; however, they revitalized their Instagram account on September 28, 2020. Becca Cosmetics also announced on February 24, 2021, that they are going out of business. This development does not diminish the use of Becca Cosmetics as a case study due to it being a good example of collaborating with an SMI, but it is interesting to note the company will cease operations in September 2021. The history of SMIs leaves out the fact that Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012, presenting the platforms as single entities, without recognizing the changes and impact to Instagram when it was bought by Facebook. The acquisition of Instagram by Facebook was one of the first indicators of the growing homogeneity of social media platforms. The work ends abruptly, without a concluding chapter to tie the previous chapters together and identify possible futures for brand and SMI collaboration.

There are several opportunities for further research. There is an emphasis on early adopters of social media and while these SMIs provide the most data, it does not recognize the changing landscape of social media. The book does not discuss the impact Gen Z SMIs have made on social media, nor does it address the newer social media platforms of Tik Tok, Discord, Twitch, Clubhouse, etc. and how brands might work with SMIs on those platforms. Additionally, there are research opportunities surrounding "cancel culture", accountability, and a combination of the two, particularly related to early adopting SMIs such as Shane Dawson and James Charles who have experienced several scandals throughout their careers. Research could also be done on SMIs who decide to leave social media and the impact their departure has on the brands they worked with. Most research on SMIs was published in the last five years and there were several calls for even more research in late 2020. The changes that brands and SMIs experienced during that tumultuous year, including the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. presidential election, social justice movements, and the unionization of SMIs are opportunities to be explored. Finally, this book was published in March 2021, but there is a sense that it was originally due to be published in 2020. There are not many references from 2020. While publishing and researching were disrupted due to the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps an acknowledgement could have been made to make that clear one way or another.

This book contains some industry jargon, and is best suited for those with some familiarity with the subject matter. If a brand was looking to make changes to their social media strategy, this book provides them with the pros and cons of working with SMIs. People interested in becoming SMIs and looking for scholarly research to support their endeavor would do well to read this book. This book certainly answers the call for more research and provides the foundation for even more.

Taylor, C. R. (2020). The urgent need for more research on influencer marketing. *International Journal of Advertising, 39*(7), 889–891. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1822104