

How Important is Paid Disclosure by Social Media Influencers?

Influencer-Follower-Trust Synergy

Author: Zoe Hurley

Abstract

This study considered issues of trust surrounding social media influencers and their disclosure of paid content. The qualitative research took place at a university in Abu Dhabi involving 50 female Gulf-Arab participants, aged 18 – 24, over a 6-month period. The participants were students at Zayed University studying in the College of Communication and Media Sciences. It explored the attitudes of Generation Z participants (Gen-Z) and discusses them within the nexus of Web 2.0 technology and emerging definitions of trust within this digital landscape including affective, cognitive and semiotic aspects. The study proposes that although issues of trust are still important to Gen-Z, what constitutes trust within social media landscape is changing. Therefore, whilst disclosure is important it is not paramount as Gen-Z view influencers as brand embodiments and their endorsements of brands are a seal of approval or trust endorsement. This indicates, that the participants invest a level of trust in the influencers themselves that goes beyond the level of paid disclosure in the form of hashtags or sponsorship logos. The ability of influencers to evoke trust in their followers depends on their level of authenticity of ability to be discerning about who sponsors them. If it perceived that the influencer is not discerning about sponsorship this undermines their level of benevolence and integrity. If this is the case it is unlikely they will be trusted.

Focus Group Findings

It emerged from the focus groups that the participants were highly aware that many influencers promote content/brands they are paid for. However, participants suggested that influencers are more likely to disclose paid and managed content on Instagram. Nevertheless, Snapchat is linked to their Instagram and although displaying different content, due its temporary quality, provides the vehicle for the influencer's 'authentic' and trustworthy persona. This implies an influencer also undermines their ability to evoke trustworthiness if they are over exposed. An over exposed influencer campaign was perceived by the participants as mercenary rather than benevolent and this detracted from their integrity and trustworthiness. When this over exposure did occur, participants indicated there could be a potential backlash against the influencer who invoked a nausea in the audience due to being

rapacious in their efforts to over sell and marketize themselves and the brands they were being sponsored by. The majority of respondents indicated that it is not important for an influencer to be 'trustworthy,' suggesting the hypothesis of the importance of trust is undermined. This has important ramifications for market research and academic studies, who within advertising and social media have placed emphasis on trust as an overt category. It could imply that Gen-Z do consider trustworthiness as a viable category of value on social media but their perceptions of trustworthiness vary to traditional definitions of the term. This is hardly surprising considering the current climate of fake news and alternative facts in what is increasingly becoming a post-trust world.

Conclusions

For the Gen-Z'ers in this study being trustworthy doesn't necessarily mean that paid content must be disclosed, or that influencers need to reveal their secrets or even be natural. A sense of the authentic self does not seem to exist and instead is a curated, performance that depends on a series of consumer choices to be shared benevolently, creatively and with integrity. These factors, aided by an appropriate imaginative delivery of strong contact and close social distance, create the ability to evoke trust.

Paid content disclosure has recently become an obligation in the UAE and disclosure of sponsored content will have to include: "Paid partnership with" tag to "more clearly communicate when a commercial relationship exists between a creator and a business." This being the case, advertisers will have to consider the implications of the influencer-follower-trust synergy to predict the future 'authenticity' value of influencer branding and methods to sustain this. Strategies should build on current and upcoming social media marketing trends and include: allowing influencers to create content; 'behind the scenes' storytelling; aligning influencers with key social conversations; capitalizing on the immediacy and transient feature of Instagram Stories. Overall, a focus on storytelling and imaginative content to build the influencer-follower-trust synergy is central and more important than a focus on any particular platform. Finally, this suggests that there is a strong impulse or desire amongst Gen-Z to access content and influencers who are motivated by more than commercialism and self-gain. At the same time, Gen-Z seem resigned to promotion of the branded or neoliberal subject who is paradoxically both a commercial and an imaginatively 'authentic' self. Perhaps the main appeal of the influencer is someone who can navigate this precarious balance?