

How Influential Are Influencers?

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

A specific marketing strategy known as influencer marketing is a relatively new concept in the realm of social media and has seen a surge in popularity. The purpose of this study is to investigate this new form of marketing in order to discover what the value of influencer marketing is as told from the perspective of influencers and those who work with/hire them. A better sense of the value that influencers provide can be found by learning more about what tactics influencers use, what they can offer brands, and the results of their efforts. By looking into what factors influence the success of influencer marketing and whether or not influencers increase brand awareness and sales, companies can get a better idea as to whether or not they should invest in this new marketing strategy.

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I would also like to thank my parents for encouraging me throughout my time in the Honors College. They have helped me realize my abilities and gain the confidence needed to take on this project, which has been the biggest task of my college career.

Process Analysis Statement

Research for this project has been ongoing throughout my studies of public relations as influencers are used for public relations tactics and marketing strategies. However, the research for this specific project began when I learned in one of my media analytics classes that an influencer with two million followers was unable to sell 36 shirts. That made me wonder for the first time whether or not influencers should be used so heavily in public relations/marketing. I began reading articles and getting more interested in the idea that influencers might not produce the results that I always assumed they did.

I decided to meet with Dr. McDonald, who taught many of my public relations courses and is an expert in the industry. I knew she could help me narrow my ideas and apply it to the discipline well. Originally, I wanted to focus on influencers' ROI (return of investment) by looking into analytics from influencer campaigns. However, because that is proprietary information, I knew I needed a new angle. I realized that by going directly to the source by talking to influencers, I could get a unique perspective of influencers' value. I decided to also interview a couple of people who work with/hire influencers to supplement the information I got from influencers. By doing so, I could learn more about why brands hire influencers and what results they get. This would help me understand that value influencers provide for brands even more.

I knew I needed to review academic literature about influencers before I could decide what questions to ask. By doing a literature review, I was able to get more background knowledge and write informed questions for influencers and those who hire/work with them. I conducted the interviews by reaching out to the participants via

social media. I found all of the influencers on Instagram. I began noticing themes in the participants answers. After I completed the interviews, I listened to and analyzed the interviews while collecting quotes from every participant for every question. I included quotes that stood out in the thesis and recorded when multiple participants gave the same answers. From there, I was able to look through my results and pinpoint what I learned from the process and what the key takeaways are.

Through this project, I learned that I am more capable than I knew and that I can tackle big tasks that seem daunting. I was surprised by how much relevant, new information I was able to obtain from my research. I discovered far more about influencer marketing than I anticipated; my research didn't only answer the question about influencers' value. I learned that I have a fairly methodical way of learning. I went through each interview and compiled all of the responses in order to find the most common answers. The whole process was very detail-oriented and required a lot of attention. I now feel confident in my ability to conduct independent research and find meaningful results. I believe this skill, as well as the insights gleaned from this study, will be an asset to my future career. The thesis means that I will be able to know how to best employ a public relations tactic that is becoming more and more used in marketing.

Introduction

Influencer marketing over social media and blogs hasn't been around for long. It wasn't until 2017 that the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) provided guidelines for online influencers so that they properly disclosed their relationship with the companies they promote (Fair, 2017). As a result, hashtags such as #ad and #sponsored started appearing all over social media. The first record of a modern influencer occurred in 2007 and was defined as "people who carry authority in social media" (Vangelov, 2019). The first use of a modern influencer began with the use of Santa Claus being used in Coca-Cola's ads. The result was using Santa's "influence and values to connect to [an] audience in a way that hadn't been done before," (Carlier, 2018). This campaign allowed the marketing work to realize the "power of people," (Carlier, 2018). Influencer marketing is a strategy that "connects online personas with brands or services that target audiences trust and engage with regularly" (Childers et al, 2019). For the purpose of this study, an influencer is someone who is getting paid or receiving incentives from a brand or company to endorse a product or service over social media posts and/or blog posts.

Because influencer marketing over social media is relatively new, it can be hard to know whether or not it is a good marketing strategy. In fact, sometimes it has been proven not to be a good strategy. The basis of this study was created based on a case study of an influencer named Arie who has over two million followers yet couldn't sell thirty-six shirts (Pearl, 2019). As a result of cases like this, the research question this study explores is: what is the value of influencer marketing and what factors determine

influencers' success? The value of influencer marketing will be determined by the perception of influencers and those who hire/work with them.

One way to explore this question is to go directly to the source: influencers. This study will focus exclusively on influencers who have had paid experience promoting beauty products and will be college students in their 20s. In-depth interviews with influencers will be done to find out how they perceive the value of their work based on their experience and their evaluation of their own success as an influencer. To supplement this, in-depth interviews with those who work with and/or hire influencers will be done to get insight from their experience with and evaluation of the success of influencer marketing.

While not a criterion, most of the influencers interviewed are not full-time influencers. Influencers with these characteristics are typically referred to as micro-influencers. Micro-influencers typically have a range of 1,000 to 10,000 social media followers and are used by brands to get exposure within "niche" audiences (Bernazzani, 2019). However, micro-influencers are those who have any amount of followers below 100,000 (McCulloch, 2018). Micro-influencers are trusted and known within a specific "area of interest" and generate plenty of engagement (Bernazzani, 2019). They are essentially opinion leaders to their specific audience of followers. While this study isn't exclusively limited to micro-influencers, it is an important distinction in the realm of influencer marketing. Because of the design and criteria that the influencer participants must meet, it is likely that many will be micro-influencers.

Beauty products were among the first category of goods to use modern influencers and began with YouTube (Carrier, 2018). YouTubers with large followings

were used for product reviews and tutorials. This laid the foundation for what we know as influencer marketing today. Two major beauty brands that relied on influencer marketing to generate popularity and status were Anastasia Beverly Hills and Colourpop (Carlier, 2018). Of the top 100 most popular beauty brands, 66% mention other users (influencers) compared to 49% of top fashion brands (McCulloch, 2018). This means that the beauty industry uses influencers at an extremely high rate, which is why beauty influencers are the focus of this study. Other types of influencers include, but are not limited to: fashion, lifestyle, fitness, and travel.

Why is influencer marketing so popular?

About “75% of marketers” use influencer marketing because “consumers are increasingly relying on peer-to-peer communications” (Hughes et al, 2019). The Internet has given everyone more ability to communicate with a larger audience. As such, people are relying on those they trust, or opinion leaders, to tell them what products they should be using. Marketers have capitalized on influencers because they are able to spread product recommendations to their own, usually large, audiences and generate “word of mouth” advertising (Hughes et al, 2019).

Influencer marketing has become a viable and popular marketing strategy because of the continual rise of social media. With two billion social network users, which includes 90% of millennials, our world is more connected than ever (Woods, 2016). Inevitably, what we consume influences us in some capacity. In fact, 74% of consumers look to social media to inform their purchasing decisions (Woods, 2016). As

more people are turning to influencers for recommendations on social media, it makes sense that marketers would tap into this phenomenon as a viable strategy.

Micro-influencers allow marketers to have access to the “specific audiences” and “niche industr[ies]” of micro-influencers, of which they have “power” over (McCulloch, 2018). When influencers have an engaged audience, their recommendations are taken to heart by followers. Influencers are able to endorse products in a way that comes across as word-of-mouth while sounding more like a friend than a sponsored ad. This is because they are trusted almost as much as a friend (Swant, 2016). This is seen as desirable to marketers and advertisers because influencers can give a more “genuine endorsement” than any advertisement could (Woods, 2016). Influencers’ appeal comes from their ability to generate relationships and trust with their engaged community of followers. However, with the new rules by the FTC, influencers now have to disclose partnerships, which could lead to their posts coming off more like an advertisement than they did previously.

When influencers disclose sponsorship, advertisements, or incentives in social media posts, which they are now required to do, the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and intentions to purchase products or services lower for the users that view the message (International Communication Association, 2018). This is potentially one reason why influencers are sometimes unable to increase purchases of the products they are promoting. However, despite this, marketers use influencers in part because their sponsored social media posts don’t look like traditional advertisements. Consumers have grown accustomed to “conspicuous product placements” that traditional ads provide, which is why marketers have turned to marketing tactics such as

influencers and native advertisements, which are ads that are disguised as actual content. Influencer marketing provides a new way to actually reach a brand's target audience and "generat[e] increased engagement," (International Communication Association, 2018). Part of the reason influencer marketing is so popular is because their posts don't always look like traditional advertisements. As a result, these sponsored posts seem more natural and genuine, which allow them to resonate more with audiences and drive engagement.

Despite its popularity among marketers, influencer marketing isn't always successful. This becomes obvious when you look at cases like Arie's, who couldn't sell thirty-six shirts despite her millions of followers. It becomes clear that vanity metrics alone, like the number of followers an influencer has, doesn't automatically translate to a successful campaign. And Arie isn't alone. Influencers who use Facebook average an engagement rate of ".37%" for every post; on Twitter, that number decreases to ".05%" (Hughes et al, 2019). So, it is important to establish what factors differentiate successful influencer campaigns from unsuccessful campaigns.

What makes influencers successful?

There are many factors that go into an influencer's campaign, which includes the personality and characteristics of the influencer (what is usually referred to as their "brand"), what they post, where they post it and their goals. When influencers refer to their brand, they are utilizing personal branding. Personal branding "is a planned process in which people make efforts to market themselves" and is very common on social media (Khedher, 2014). Different influencer campaigns have different goals,

which can be to increase awareness of a product or service or to increase trial/use. The first key variable is the platform the influencer uses. When a blogger knows more about a subject and is considered an expert or opinion leader, they are “more effective when the advertising intent is to raise awareness versus increase trial” (Hughes et al, 2019). According to Hughes, users are more involved on blogs because they only get information from those they follow.

However, expertise “fails to drive engagement” for sponsored posts on Facebook. When it comes to Facebook, posts with a lot of “hedonic content are more effective” when the goal of the campaign is to “increase trial versus raise awareness” (Hughes et al, 2019). Clearly, platform and influencer characteristics matter depending on what your campaign goal is. According to Hughes, Facebook users are less involved because they see information from more people than just who they follow. They see content from those who share or repost on their timeline as well.

The key strategy for beauty brands using influencer marketing is to establish a target audience and goals. It’s important to monitor those goals through measurement such as analytics tools and social media insights. How you use influencers depends on what goals you have. If your goal is to increase purchases, use a small amount of “high-quality, long-term influencer relationships that are conversion heavy” (Carlier, 2018). But, according to Carlier, if you want to increase brand awareness, it is more beneficial to use more micro-influencers of average quality.

The success of an influencer campaign also depends on choosing the right influencers for the brand and selecting the right platform based on the product category. The characteristics that are most important for influencer selection includes “location,

compatibility with your brand, previous work quality, audience size, and the type of audience the influencer reaches” (Carlier, 2018). The platform used depends on the type of product category or service being promoted. In the case of beauty products, according to Carlier, Instagram, YouTube, and blogs are the platforms that beauty influencers use and where consumers look for recommendations or reviews.

In marketing, there are four different types of media. There’s paid, earned, owned, and shared. Paid media is exposure that the brand pays for or incentivizes, such as social media ads, “sponsored content and email marketing,” (Dietrich, 2020). Earned media is publicity that is given by choice by the media, usually as a result of tactics such as media relations. Shared media comes from social media and is user-generated. Owned media is created and controlled by the organization, such as a company website or blog. Paid and shared media is generally used for gaining consumers’ attention and awareness, yet typically isn’t the best way to drive purchases as well as earned and owned media (Thabit, 2015). When influencers are getting paid or are getting free products to share things on social media, they are acting as paid and shared media sources. Therefore, it makes sense that they would be used more for driving awareness than purchases.

Influencer marketing can also be considered earned media, which comes across as being more genuine because coverage was given by choice. Influencer marketing can be considered earned media because it utilizes word-of-mouth (WOM) and because influencers have “control over the ultimate message of the advertisement” (Hughes et al, 2019). While the WOM isn’t “organically generated” because this WOM is paid, these factors still allow influencer marketing to be considered earned (Hughes et al, 2019). As

a result, influencer marketing encompasses many types of media, which makes it unique and attractive to marketers.

Methodology

The perspective of influencers and those who hire/work with them will give more information into the value of influencer marketing. Participants (influencers and those who hire/work with them) will be recruited via social media, email, and the internet in general. Virtual in-depth interviews will be conducted either over the phone, Skype, or Instagram's audio call feature with participants. In total, there will be ten respondents. Influencers will be interviewed in order to get a better idea of how they view the value they provide to their employers. The perspective of those who hire/work with influencers will be used to get informed opinions on the value of influencer marketing based on their personal experience with influencers and the results they get from them. The interviews last anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes depending on the length of the responses received. I will be looking for anecdotes during these interviews to see if influencers' posts on social media drive either purchases or an increase of awareness for the companies they are promoting.

Consent forms were sent via email to all participants before the virtual interview took place. At the beginning of every interview, the participant was asked if they had reviewed the consent form. If they had, they were asked to verbally give consent to the interview by either saying "yes, I consent" or "no, I don't consent."

The following questions were asked of influencers:

1. How did you become an influencer?

2. What is your interaction with the product you are promoting typically like?
3. What are the rules from your employer that you have to follow with your posts?
4. Do you get any guidance from your employer or do you come up with messaging yourself?
5. What do you receive for your posts? Money or free product?
6. What is the goal of your posts specifically? Is it awareness or purchase/trial driven?
7. Do you reach these goals? If so, how often? Do you measure your results?
8. What factors allow you to be more or less successful in reaching your goals?
9. Do you use any marketing/advertising/communication strategies when you create your content?
10. Do you think you provide a meaningful return on investment/value for your employer?

The following questions were asked of those who work with and/or hire influencers:

1. What do you think about influencers in general?
2. Why do you think they're so popular?
3. Have you ever used an influencer? If so, for what and on what medium?
4. Was the influencer/campaign successful?

5. Do you think influencers provide a good ROI? Why or why not? In other words, is it a good marketing strategy?
6. How do you measure the ROI of an influencer?
7. How do you think influencers can be used in the future?
8. What form of media do you think is most beneficial (provides the best ROI): paid, owned, or earned?
9. Are there any additional resources that you think would be helpful?

Results

Influencers' perception of their value

How did you become an influencer?

Participants usually started gaining exposure and followers in various ways before becoming a sponsored influencer. Brands take notice and want to work with influencers once they have developed a following. "It takes awhile to happen," (Participant #6). "You start to build up your following and once you get to a certain following, that's when brands start reaching out to you." Some paths to becoming an influencer include modeling (Participant #1), blogging (Participant #3, 4, 10), posting videos (Participant #6), and collaborating with other people (Participant #6). Once influencer did an "ambassador program" for a shopping app that allowed "networking with people that were influencers," (Participant #9).

Another way to become an influencer is to be contacted by an agency or brand (Participant #7, 8). One influencer was approached by an agency and got a contract to get access to "brands that collaborate with smaller influencers that are kind of just

starting out,” (Participant #7). Another influencer got a start when a local brand reached out to her around the time she had “about four thousand” followers,” (Participant #8). Bigger brands started reaching out when the influencer got “six thousand followers” and eventually, a blog (Participant #8). In the beginning, one participant found their posts being “more of like a hobby than anything else. And so once I started to get consistent with posting, which is always the key to everything, I started to get brands reaching out to me,” (Participant 3).

Blogging is one of the most common entry points into becoming an influencer. Common things that influencers blogged about include outfits, vacations, and restaurants. Essentially, influencers started blogging about their everyday life and “things that I enjoyed doing and I would naturally post anyway,” (Participant #4). One influencer has been blogging “since 2010,” (Participant #10). “I enjoyed writing and it was about beauty stuff.” In the beginning, “it wasn’t anything serious,” (Participant #10). However, through blogging, the influencer “was able to work with a couple bigger brands right off the jump.”

What is the interaction with the product you are promoting typically like?

All participants said that they make sure that they have used the product(s) that brands send and like them before they agree to promote anything. Other factors influencers consider when deciding whether or not to promote the product is whether or not it is “worth posting,” (Participant #1). “I make sure that [the brand] actually aligns with myself and my integrity and who I am. If it’s something I’m never going to wear or

it's something that I don't like, then I don't like promoting it because I know it's going to come off as inauthentic," (Participant #3).

Another influencer agrees that "if it's a jewelry or clothing item, I definitely make sure that it's something I would wear," (Participant #8). One influencer only promotes things she uses regularly. "There's not anything that I've actually promoted that I don't personally use or believe in," (Participant #9). "Part of my brand is staying true to the things I actually use in my daily life and would recommend to anybody," (Participant #10). Another influencer doesn't "share what I feel about a product until I have fully tried it for the amount of time" it takes to test it out (Participant #10). "I usually let brands know that I don't get the product and post right away."

It's important to be honest about products so that you don't "stop people from trusting you in the future," (Participant #7). "I do give my very honest review." Influencers must "make sure I have used the product myself and actually like it," (Participant #4). If an influencer tries a product and doesn't like it, they don't promote it. "I was supposed to do a post and giveaway," (Participant #8). "I ended up trying out the product" and when it didn't work like it was supposed to, "I said 'hey listen, I cannot promote this,'" (Participant #8). "It wouldn't be truthful."

Sometimes when influencers get products from brands, they will unbox those products on their Instagram stories (Participant #7, 10). "When I receive a product, I'll do a package story post or I'll kinda tell my followers that a feed post is coming at some point," (Participant #7). This is done to give followers "a little preview" followed by an actual post of the content "within the week," (Participant #7). A feed post is posted to an influencer's Instagram account and their followers' news feeds while an Instagram story

is only up for 24 hours. Another influencer makes sure to show every product on her Instagram story. "Usually when I get [products] in the mail, I still always post them on my story," (Participant #10). "Even if down the road I don't like the product and I don't end up posting it, they still got something for sending me a free product." If a product is "interactive" one influencer also does "a YouTube video on it as well," (Participant #7).

What are the rules from your employer that you have to follow with your posts?

Brands may provide some guidelines for influencers, such as a hashtag or product feature to mention in the post (Participant #3, 8, 10). "[Brands] give me guidelines. And from there I'm able to be creative and have the freedom to write what I want or whatever aligns best with my brand," (Participant #3). They may also ask that a picture be done in a certain way. For example, a "flat lay" is when the photo includes "just the product," (Participant #1). They may ask that the picture be of the influencer using the product or that it include both the influencer and the product (Participant #1). Brands will also give influencers "a special discount code," which some brands want to be "incorporated" in posts," (Participant #9). These codes are mentioned by influencers in their posts so that their followers can use the code if they purchase the product that is being promoted in order to get some kind of discount or promotion.

Guidelines can depend on the type of post and the brand. Other guidelines can include the way the content is shared. Some brands "require" the influencer "to post a story" or "an actual feed post," (Participant #9). Other brands don't. Another influencer agrees that guidelines "depends from brand to brand," (Participant #10). Some brands "don't care" where something is posted or even if it gets posted at all (Participant #10).

“Some companies just send you a product and hope that you’ll post about it.” While other companies send “an exact guideline of what they’re expecting,” (Participant #10). “A lot of the times, they don’t pay you until two weeks after you post just to make sure it’s up, you followed all of the guidelines” and “that you didn’t upload the post and delete it a day later.” However, “for the most part,” brands “want one feed post,” (Participant #10).

While the amount of guidelines depends on the brand, sometimes there are no guidelines. “There’s no specific guidelines or anything that you really have to follow,” (Participant #7). “It’s very freeing. You can be yourself. If you wanted to kind of add your own personality into what you do, then you can do that.” There are also ongoing relationships like “brand sponsorship[s],” which is “a program type situation. So you’re posting over time and doing different postings.” Some influencers use influencer platforms, which is “where brands will post campaigns and you can apply to be part of them,” (Participant #4). These platforms “give a lot more stricter guidelines as to what they’re looking for,” (Participant #4).

Some brands work with influencers to reach an agreement (Participant #6, 8). Brands send guidelines as a “concept brief” which details “what they’re looking for, and how my concept idea that I’m pitching to them should align with their brief,” (Participant #6). Once the brief is received, “then you send in your concept and then they approve or they don’t approve,” (Participant #6). They may also make edits or suggestions to the concept. Brands will reach out over email and “come up with an agreement,” (Participant #8). “Sometimes it’s a post for a product or an [Instagram] story.” Expectations from “most” brands include “post[ing] the product a certain number of

times,” (Participant #8). “And usually I try to do unboxing for them.” Even though this isn’t required, it helps with “relationships and going that extra mile,” (Participant #8).

Do you get any guidance from your employer or do you come up with messaging yourself?

All influencers said that they come up with the messaging of their posts themselves. “The wording is always natural and the wording is always based on what I feel,” (Participant #3). “You know, because that’s the only way I can actually reach my audience because the brand manager doesn’t know my audience. You know, I do. So at the end of the day, it’s always going to be more helpful if I’m the one that speaks to them directly.”

Brands, and influencers, want the messaging of promoted posts to be authentic. Brands “want it to be as natural the content as possible,” (Participant #4). “All of the messaging I come up with myself.” One influencer tells “the brand straight up that I want to be able to give my honest feedback,” (Participant #10). “I like to be as authentic as I possibly can be.” It’s also important that an influencer’s personality comes through in their messaging. “It’s learning how to sell what the company is, their brand, but then there’s also ‘how do I fit my brand in’?” (Participant #6). “It’s collaborating my brand of being funny but also showcasing the product.”

Again, a brand may ask that a certain hashtag or feature is included in a post’s caption/messaging. Sometimes they ask for a certain “hashtag” or even for the influencer to “share a personal experience,” (Participant #8). Other brands will give you “the freedom to do whatever. It just depends, but I’ve never been given a word-for-word

script.” The only time one influencer was sent “things I needed to say” was done “in order to recruit people” as “a brand ambassador,” (Participant #9). Other than that, “usually it’s up to your own discretion” which “is nice because even if they do send you a product, you can be as honest as you want.”

What do you receive for your posts? Money or free product?

Usually when an influencer hasn’t had much experience, they will start out by only receiving free product in exchange for promotion. “I started off with brands sending me free product instead of money,” (Participant #3). As their experience grows, they begin receiving both free product and compensation (Participant #1, 3, 7). “I mostly received just gifted stuff, but more recently I’ve started to get paid for it as well,” (Participant #7). Influencers will also promote brands in exchange for only receiving free product. “It’s mostly free stuff except the occasional payment,” (Participant #8). Many brands only give free product in exchange for promotion. “It’s more common for people just to send you the free product and not pay you,” (Participant #10). “That’s because everybody is basically an Instagram influencer” and they “don’t do it for an income.” So, brands aren’t as likely to offer compensation when there are “other people that would do it for free,” (Participant #10).

Whether or not an influencer gets paid instead of only receiving free product depends on the amount of followers an influencer has. “I really don’t have that many followers,” (Participant #9). “A lot of big brands look for people that have at least twenty thousand followers.” This influencer has gotten paid for “recruiting people” and has also

gotten paid “depending on how many people [I] got to buy their products” as a “brand ambassador” for another company (Participant #9).

Whether or not influencers get compensated also depends on the brand (Participant #4, 7, 8, 10). “It varies. It depends on the company,” (Participant #7). Surprisingly, bigger brands are less likely to pay (Participant #7, 10). “The bigger the company, the more chance you’re not going to get paid,” (Participant #7). This happens with influencers have “less followers than what they would usually give out to,” (Participant #7). Another influencer thinks this is the case because “they are a bigger company and can kind of get away with that,” (Participant #10). However, “smaller brands that want to use my profile and my outreach to kind of give their business more likes usually offer a payment.” Another influencer agrees that brands offer compensation. “Some brands will offer to pay me,” (Participant #8). “So, they’ll send the product for free and once the story or post comes out, they’ll Paypal me. Some will just Paypal me upfront.” Essentially, “sometimes it’s paid, sometimes it’s not,” (Participant #10).

Many influencers get both compensation and free product, but “it just depends,” (Participant #4). Influencer platforms have “monetary value attached to them” but working directly with brands usually means that posts are “in exchange for gifted products,” (Participant #4). Sometimes, compensation happens “each time they wanted me to post,” (Participant #1). It also depends on “what it is that [the brand] wants from me,” (Participant #3). “Like if they want more than one post then, you know, I usually am the one to say like ‘hey, I definitely want compensation for this’.”

Some influencers aim to get compensated. “Usually it’s for compensation,” (Participant #6). “I got something once for free and really loved it so then I reached out to the brand and was like ‘here are some of my ideas, do you have any social media budget for your quarter?’” So it can be a two-way street of negotiation where “brands reach out to me but I reach out to brands too,” (Participant #6).

What is the goal of your posts specifically? Is it awareness or purchase/trial driven?

Influencers tend to focus on increasing awareness more than driving purchases of the products they are promoting (Participant #1, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10). “For most brands, their goal is awareness,” (Participant #3). “It’s funny because most people think it’s for money. But, brands mainly care about as long as their brand is getting out there and there’s engagement.” Smaller brands specifically are more focused on broadening their reach. For “smaller companies that are more locally based” the goal “is to get their name out there” and “maybe not initially make sales right off the jump but,” (Participant #10). “A lot of the times I would say it’s more so for brand awareness.”

Influencers also tend to try not to push sales directly on their followers (Participant 1, 4, 10). One influencer does this by making posts “about something authentic” and looks like “a normal post you would see on anybody’s feed,” (Participant #10). “I don’t want to look like I’m just trying to sell you things.” The posts are about her life, and the product is mentioned at the end. Generating awareness can also lead to purchases. “I think in the end they want people to buy it but I think it’s for awareness,” (Participant #6). “If they see Birchbox on my feed and then two minutes later another

person with Birchbox, they might think to themselves 'oh, maybe I should try it'. I think that's how advertising works."

While influencer campaigns are mostly focused on increasing brand awareness, there is some strategy to increase purchases by giving influencers a promotional (or discount) code (Participant #3, 8, 10). Discount codes are used to "track how many sales the influencer or the person they gave the free product or are paying is making them," (Participant #10). They are always used to track an influencers' sales. "Anytime they give me discount codes and all that, that's when they track purchases," (Participant #3). Promotional codes also provide a purchase incentive for influencers' followers. "If [the brand] gives me a discount code, [the goal is] one hundred percent to purchase the product," (Participant #8). "They're offering that discount that they want me to include in my stories and posts." Companies give promotional code to influencers in order to sell product. "Some companies reach out to me and they're like 'hey we're trying to sell this product' and they'll give me a discount code," (Participant #10).

Some influencers works to both increase awareness of products and encourage purchases (Participant #7, 9). "Not only is it to get the company purchases, but also to shed light on what that product can do for you," (Participant #7). The goals are "both" to increase awareness and purchases. "Awareness, I think, is really important," (Participant #9). "Just because I feel like a lot of my stuff is wellness related, I would want the people to end up buying the stuff." So, it's "a mixture of both for sure," (Participant #9).

Do you reach these goals? If so, how often? Do you measure your results?

Influencers typically measure their results through checking Instagram insights (Participant 1, 3, 4, 9, 10) or how many times a post is saved (Participant #1, 4). There are other strategies, such as looking into “how many people clicked on the tag of the company, and how many people sent that post to another person,” (Participant #1). Additionally, “direct messages” with “people asking questions” is another good way to gauge how promoted content is doing (Participant #4). “So sometimes I don’t actually give as much detail as I should.” Another key to success is having followers who “trust my judgement,” (Participant #7). Another influencer looks at “how many people read” her blog posts,” (Participant #9). One influencer waits “two weeks” for the post to reach “the highest amount of engagement that it’s going to get,” (Participant #10). Then she “breaks down all of [her] analytics” including “how many stories [she] posted, how many people clicked on [the brand’s] name from my story, how many people visited [the brand’s] profile” in combination with likes and comments and sends it to the brand.

Sometimes feedback shows that people want more details. “People are constantly messaging me or texting me on the side that I personally know questions about these brands,” (Participant #9). Even though one influencer means what they say, they are met with skepticism. One friend told an influencer ““I don’t know if you ever actually mean what you’re saying because these brands are sponsoring you’,”(Participant #9). “I guess sometimes it comes off as disingenuous when it’s really not.” This relates to the amount of feedback this influencer gets. “Usually I’ve noticed that if I do post about a specific brand, I don’t get as much feedback on it and I think it’s people think I’m coming off as disingenuous,” (Participant #9). However, the influencer

does “content surveys” to see what her followers want her to blog about, and “get[s] a lot of feedback through that.”

Another influencer gauges their success through an “influencer brand connection agency,” (Participant #8). They save “awareness” information on the influencer’s website as well as “stats and how many people those posts, combined, reached.” Getting positive results can take time as influencers grow their following. “Now that I feel like I have grown engagement and following, I definitely am hitting the goals a lot more,” (Participant #3). “Whereas before when I had lower amounts of engagement I wasn’t hitting it as much as I wanted to. And brands can track that.”

Most of the measurement of how influencers are doing is done by the brands (Participant #3, 6, 7, 8, 9). “I’m not exactly sure how much I deliver to them just because I can’t see their sales or anything like that,” (Participant #9). Brands are “checking the engagement and checking how posts are doing, and also through the analytics of the post itself,” (Participant #3). “So that’s the backend, you know, just screenshots of how the stories are doing, and the link clicks, and all of the things that come into that.” Influencers know how they’re doing based on feedback from the brands. “If [brands] see that you hit the goals and you’re on top of your game and posted what they felt, you know, really aligned with their purpose and their goals, then they’re definitely going to want to work with you again,” (Participant #3). “So I’ve had that happen with a lot of brands recently where they do want to continue working with me. And that’s usually my sign that you’re doing well.”

Promotional codes are sometimes the only way that an influencer can learn how successful they were (Participant #6, 7, 8). They are also used as a purchase incentive.

One influencer estimates that the goals for their posts are reached “about fifty percent of the time,” (Participant #7). “I wouldn’t know for sure how many people actually bought something through me. I mean, a lot of companies do give me a code. So, when people buy with that code I get a notification from the company and I get five to ten percent of that sale.” Brand awareness “is hard to track” because people can decide to buy things later on because of brand awareness provided by an influencer without “mention[ing]” their “name,” (Participant #10).

Another influencer agrees. “With my podcast, we have the ads and we have codes. You can see how many times people use the code,” (Participant #6). “So in that way, you can measure it.” However, beyond that, measurement is left up to the brand. “For my Instagram, without a code, I think that’s more on the brand’s side.” Brands share results with influencers. “If the discount code is used, a lot of times the company will let me know and some companies give me commission off of that,” (Participant #8).

What factors allow you to be more or less successful in reaching your goals?

Influencers have different tactics when it comes to what they find receives the most engagement on social media. Several influencers find that being in the photo helps the post perform better (Participant #1, 7, 9). One influencer makes sure to “always involv[e] myself personally in the post” and “post across other platforms as well as on my Instagram story,” (Participant #1). Another influencer “learned early on that you being in [the photo] is the best thing,” (Participant #7). “I always get more engagement on pictures of just me,” (Participant #9). Which is also “definitely” true when she’s “not promoting products.” The way you look and the lifestyle that surrounds

you in that photo” or the “scenery” impacts how the post does and how many people “pay attention to it,” (Participant #7).

Another influencer finds that it is helpful to share audiences with other influencers. “I feel like through working and collaborating with other influencers, you gain engagement,” (Participant #3). “If I’m working with another influencer, I get to switch audiences with her.” Stories can also be a vital tool to influencers. One influencer claims that “using the story feature” because “a lot of people don’t even like posts anymore,” (Participant #8). So, stories can be used to “promote posts.” Hashtags also help posts. “I don’t think my posts would do as well without hashtags,” (Participant #8).

It’s also important that the relationship between brand and influencer is authentic. “The more natural the sort of partnership, or paid partnership, appears to be or is, the more engagement,” (Participant #4). “Sometimes those posts can look a little bit staged and then that’s when you don’t get as much engagement.” What happens, then, is that “it’s quite difficult sometimes when there’s so much of it out there for people to necessarily like believe you,” (Participant #4). “So, that’s why I think it’s important as much as possible for influencers to only engage with products they actually like.”

It is not only important to have a natural partnership with brands, it is also important that the images and content are also natural. “I think the more natural the post, and it just looks like it’s part of your everyday life, without sort of maybe a product positioning, often gets the most engagement,” (Participant #4). It is also important that the content of the post is natural. “All of my branded posts have a comedic tone because that’s my page,” (Participant #6). “I think for me, with the brand incorporated, is being very natural.” It’s also important that the post doesn’t look overtly like an ad. “My

audience, in general, they don't really want to see ads," (Participant #10). "I like to post photos that don't look" like ads. "Most [brands] are pretty understanding of the way I want to post," (Participant #10). This influencer makes posts about her life and followers have to "get through the whole post" to know that it featured a sponsored product. This approach "works for the brands a little bit better because people actually genuinely read my posts" instead of "scrolling right past it" like they might if it "[looked] like an ad," (Participant #10).

Do you use any marketing/advertising/communication strategies when you create your content?

Influencers use many different strategies to create content. When brands put more money into influencer campaigns, influencers are able to do more with their posts. For example, if given money by the brand to do so, one influencer will "promote [the post] through Instagram or Facebook ads, but that's not very common," (Participant #1). One influencer also avoids lengthy details and maintains a conversational tone. "I don't go into nit-picky details but I kind of just tell you an overall idea of what the product is," (Participant #6). "The way I approach trying to sell brands on my page is as if your best friend was telling you about a product." Another influencer highlighted the importance of "being consistent," (Participant #9). "Posting daily is really important for Instagram" for "all their guidelines and putting you on discover pages." Insights are also key. "[Read] into your insights and seeing how much your followers engage with specific posts" to "[make] sure there's an awareness there," (Participant #9).

Look consistency and themes are another key strategy (Participant #7, 8). “I try to keep the look consistent,” (Participant #7). This look can depend on the weather and is “very seasonal.” The look in posts can also center around “themes” based on holidays,” (Participant #7). It also depends on what kinds of products the influencer is promoting at that time. For example “this past week I’ve done a lot of skincare, so a lot of my photos have been no makeup,” (Participant #8). Sometimes, influencers make sure their entire feed has a theme. “I try and make my pictures so they fit in with the general theme of my feed,” (Participant #8). “I don’t think it looks as good when it’s mismatched.” There are also influencers that “don’t go out of [their] way to market” posts,” (Participant #10).

Do you think you provide a meaningful return on investment/value for your employer?

All influencers said that they provide some sort of value to brands. There are several different ways that influencers provide value. One influencer found that “they gain quite a few followers from my posts. Most of the time, people will follow them and purchase their products in the future. It’s basically word-of-mouth,” (Participant #1). It also requires the right campaign and the right influencer to be a success. “If a campaign is executed properly, and it’s the right influencer and, you know, ensuring that there are people that would genuinely love that product or that service in the first place, I think it can work really well,” (Participant #4). Another influencer agrees that influencers should be matched to the brands “target market,” (Participant #8). “I think that some brands just don’t really know exactly what they’re looking for and aren’t really targeting the right influencers.” An influencer’s audience is the key to their value. Posts can go over “really

well with [an] audience” or it could “flop with your audience” even if it’s “your best post ever,” (Participant #10). So, it’s important to consider “the best way to convey the product to [your] audience.”

Influencer marketing is a good strategy because “people love referrals,” (Participant #4). “We’re more inclined to trust an opinion of someone who is a real, normal person like us as opposed to a celebrity.” Influencers are seen as this real person by their audience, but “some of these influencers have now themselves become celebrities,” (Participant #4). “So, sometimes it slightly defeats the point. I think what’s happened is the influencers around the middle ground are often doing more in terms of the actual exposure as opposed to someone who’s got, like, three million followers.” This is because “a lot more people are seeing that as an ad as opposed to someone that’s just incorporating [products] into their day-to-day lives,” (Participant #4).

Influencers provide value by having an engaged audience that they have a relationship with and sharing their audience with brands. “What we do as influencers, no matter how big or small the audience is or the people that are following you, you really spend a lot of time connecting with your followers,” (Participant #6). “You kind of build these little relationships with people.” The value can be described as “having a group of friends” and “introducing [brands] to them, but in a very natural way.” Influencers provide awareness of brands to their audience. “Any brand awareness to a specific target market is important,” (Participant #9).

Part of an influencers value comes from the quality of content they provide, the post’s reach, and the influencer’s audience. “How the photo looks is mainly the priority,” (Participant #7). “Like, how I’ve presented [the product]. Like the fact that I don’t take

photos on my phone I take photos on my Nikon camera and I use high-quality editing apps.” It’s also important to expose as many followers as possible to the message. “I make sure that I post at a certain time so that it reaches the most of my followers when most people are online,” (Participant #7). When influencers have their audience in mind, they help brands. “I have told a few brands that there’s no point in sending me the stuff they want to send me because I know that that’s just not my age bracket,” (Participant #7). “It won’t target them.”

Professionals who work with/hire influencers’ view of the industry

What are professionals’ view of influencers in general?

One of the first important things to note is how professionals who work with and hire influencers view Influencers in general. In marketing, they are highly valued. “[Influencers] are currently a critical part of marketing in general,” (Participant #2). Additionally, many people can be considered influencers. “I think what people think about influencers, they tend to think about people with a huge Twitter following or famous athletes or, you know, pop culture icons,” (Participant #5). “In reality, a lot of the influencing that happens day to day happens within peoples’ direct social circles.”

Micro-influencers might not be looked at in the same way as celebrities. “In terms of how this works and what the value is in a message coming from an influencer, I think that a lot of what people would consider micro-influencers, are not held to the same value standards that someone more famous might be,” (Participant #5). However, micro-influencers may have more source credibility, and therefore more value, because of their closer relationship with their audience. “The big value prop[osition] in influencer

marketing, at least from my perspective, the value proposition is in source credibility,” (Participant #5). “To me, the highest level of credibility is someone you know and trust, not necessarily a famous person. So that’s kind of what I’m getting at when I’m talking about more micro-influencers.” Micro-influencers have value because they have “influence on their specific audience,” (Participant #5).

Why is influencer marketing so popular?

One response is that influencer marketing is accessible and reaches new audiences. “It is such an emerging market for marketing,” (Participant #2). “Because anybody can be an influencer, brands can reach audiences that they couldn’t otherwise reach.” For example, “by employing an influencer on a college campus, [brands] are able to hit that market in a way that they couldn’t otherwise,” (Participant #2). “The main popularity of [influencers] is their reach.” There is also “an accessibility factor to influencer marketing,” (Participant #2). Becoming an influencer is accessible as is the access that brands have to influencer’s audiences. However, while there are many influencers, each one is unique. One participant thinks influencers and celebrities are popular because their audience considers them to be special. “Usually they’re influential because there’s something about them or something that they’ve done that is remarkable,” (Participant #5).

What are influencers used for and on what medium?

Influencers are heavily used in the beauty industry. “The beauty market is really competitive and saturated with influencers,” (Participant #2). “Basically, if you’re a

beauty brand that isn't working with influencers, people aren't really coming to you. Because so many consumers are getting their beauty recommendations from influencers now, probably more than any other market that I've worked for in the influencer world." This is because "beauty is a very influencer and opinion-based place," (Participant #2). "The more you see out there of influencers posting products, the more that people are going to recognize that as a quality brand." One awareness is achieved, people will "hopefully buy products," (Participant #2).

Influencers are also used for social marketing and marketing campaigns. Employers of influencers are typically looking for them to post on blogs and on Instagram "on their feeds and stories," (Participant #2). "That's what I recommend for most brands." Blogs are helpful for many reasons. "Blogs help with website traffic and the more influencers out there that brands are working with that post on blogs, the more that brand's name gets bumped up in Google, rankings, and search engines in general. We use blogs and a lot of keywords for that," (Participant #2). Instagram is recommended because "that's kind of where the main hub I think is for influencers right now. It's usually trackable with hashtags," (Participant #2). "You can tell a better story I think on Instagram with photos and such." Influencers were also asked "to post stuff on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest if they had those platforms," (Participant #2).

Influencers can be found through networks or could consist of a company's pre-existing audience. "We used an influencer network, basically, to find not Kim Kardashian level influencers but people who were influential, kind of taste-makers in the fashion space," (Participant #5). A company's audience and employees can also be used to spread influence. "I think most of the work that we would consider influencer

work that we did with our larger clients had to do with leveraging internal audiences as influencers,” (Participant #5). “It’s being able to leverage the audience of your audience.” As a result, micro-influencers are often the answer to reaching audiences. “We kind of looked at influence in that more kind of micro-influencer way in most cases than going to market with a big famous influencer,” (Participant #5).

Are campaigns that use influencers successful?

Based on participant responses, awareness is usually the goal of influencer marketing. Influencers are typically successful in raising brand awareness, but aren’t as successful with increasing sales. “What I’ve noticed with campaigns as I’ve worked on them and reported on them is that we get the brand awareness; so we hit that goal pretty well. Almost every time,” (Participant #2). While “way more people know about the brand” at the end of an influencer campaign, the same isn’t true of sales. “I don’t always think I get the sales,” (Participant #2). They track sales with codes and links, but “the numbers are pretty low.”

Micro-influencers, in particular, are found to get successful results. “We’ve had pretty good success with what I would consider this micro-influencer category,” (Participant #5). While awareness is usually the focus, goals can depend on the type of company or client. “It really depends on the client, as to what their goals are. In a lot of cases, it has to do with raising awareness,” (Participant #5). “If it’s, you know, an e-comm[er]ce company or an online retailer, those organizations are typically more focused on what’s going to drive sales.”

Do influencers provide a good ROI? Are influencers a good marketing strategy?

Influencers are generally a good marketing strategy when it comes to generating awareness for a product or service. Influencers are good at reaching niche audiences and “presenting products to audiences that brands might not otherwise have access to,” (Participant #2). The best way to get a financial return on investment from influencers is to combine social ads with influencer marketing and to give influencers resources to boost their posts (Participant #2). Influencer marketing “is so specific to a brand and a campaign,” (Participant #2). “[brands’] audiences” and “what they’re trying to accomplish” are all different. As a result, it’s important to have the right influencer for each brand in order for the campaign to be successful.

While influencers can generate awareness, they may not be as useful for increasing sales. In terms of the amount of purchases generated, “the return on investment is pretty low for the amount of money we’re paying to run influencer campaigns,” (Participant #2). “I don’t necessarily think that influencers have as great of a return on investment as many people probably think they do. But, as far as brand awareness goes and variety of content, I think they are great with supporting that,” (Participant #2). It can be hard to know whether or not influencers provide a direct, monetary ROI because measuring influencers’ success can be a challenge itself. “I wouldn’t say that influencer marketing doesn’t drive conversions,” (Participant #5). “But, we’ve never really been able to build a case for it one way or another just because it was difficult to measure.”

How do you measure campaigns with influencers?

Metrics that are measured in an influencer campaign includes: “the number of posts a campaign produces, the engagements, the impressions” as well as results of “whatever the call-to-action is” and “top posts,” (Participant #2). Promotional/discount codes are used to track whether or not influencers’ posts resulted in purchases. “We do track [sales] and we’ll give influencers codes or links for specific things to make sure we’re tracking how many sales each influencer generates,” (Participant #2).

Awareness can be measured by looking at “mentions” both “before and after the campaign” in order to “see if there is an increase in volume around the topic,” (Participant #5). Additionally, “search query volume,” which is whether “more people were looking for information after the campaign or during the campaign versus before” can be used to gauge changes in awareness level.

What is the future of influencer marketing?

“I think the future of influencer marketing is definitely micro-influencers,” (Participant #2). “The idea of the mega influencer and the celebrity influencer will probably always stay around. But, I don’t recommend and I don’t think brands are going to invest” the amount of money “it takes to work with those kinds of influencers.” Micro-influencers who “maybe only have five thousand followers” have a high level of trust from their audience and a “really highly engaged audience” consisting of “people they may even know” or have connections to (Participant #2). So, micro-influencers offer “a different level of trust” and “a very narrowed down target audience” than “someone who has five hundred thousand followers.”

As measurement abilities continue to develop, influencers' conversion rates will be better understood, which could lead to more profit for influencers. "The more sophisticated marketers get about measuring attribution, the better decisions they'll be able to make about which influencers, what kind of content, how those partnerships are going to look, and most likely how [influencers] are going to get remunerated from the brands," (Participant #5). "I think you'll see a lot more performance-based pricing once people can really understand how influencers are contributing to the purchase."

What form of media do you think is most beneficial (provides the best ROI): paid, owned, or earned?

When it comes to increasing purchases, "usually social media ads" provides ROI, especially when combined with influencers (Participant #2). "There have been collaborations where we actually use influencers with ads," (Participant #2). "When you combine social ads with influencer marketing, that's probably where the biggest return on investment is." This is done when influencers "boost their post to their audience" with money from the brand and results in "even more traffic" even though it takes "more coordination," (Participant #2). You can "optimize them for conversions" so "the ad would only be served to people who are the most likely to click and actually buy the product."

"In general, an investment in owned media is a little bit different than an investment that you would make in paid or earned media," (Participant #5). "In most cases, you're developing an asset that can be used over time and generate audience." Paid media is "renting eyeballs" and earned media offers "source credibility,"

(Participant #5). As a result, paid and earned media are more “short-term investments,”
(Participant #5).

Discussion

There are many key takeaways from this study. We now know more about how influencers and those who hire/work with them perceive the value of influencer marketing. The main findings include:

1. It is common for influencers to get into influencer marketing through blogging. It is also common for a brand or agency to reach out to potential influencers.
2. All influencer participants personally try the products they are sent by brands and must like the product before they promote it. A main reason for this is that influencers want to be honest and authentic.
3. Brands typically do give influencers guidelines for their posts. Guidelines can include how the picture is done, what is included in the photo, how the post is shared, or a product feature or hashtag to include in the post’s caption. Brands are also willing to work with influencers to come to an agreement on guidelines.
4. All influencer participants said that they come up with their captions/messaging about the products they promote on their own. Brands don’t tell influencers what to say beyond product features or hashtags to include. Again, a main reason for this is that influencers want to be honest and authentic.

5. Many influencers will promote products in exchange for free product.

There may or may not be additional compensation. Surprisingly, some influencers mentioned that larger companies are less likely to give additional compensation than smaller companies are.

6. Overwhelmingly, most influencer participants said that they focus more on increasing brand awareness of the company they are promoting rather than driving purchases of the products. Some influencers make sure that their posts don't look too much like ads and don't push sales directly. This is likely why an influencer with two million followers wasn't able to sell 36 shirts.
7. Influencers are generally very successful in increasing brand awareness and aren't used to increase sales as much. However, influencers can provide a better financial ROI when they are paid by the brand to boost their posts. This isn't done often because it takes more coordination and effort.
8. However, promotional (or discount) codes are used to track influencers' sales and provide some incentive for influencers' followers to purchase the product.
9. Most of the measurement of how successful influencers are in reaching goals is done by the brand. However, influencers are able to gauge their success through Instagram insights, feedback from their followers, how many people saved their post, or how many people used their promotional code (which is information that they get from the brand).

10. Influencers have many tactics that increase the engagement they get on their posts. Factors that increase engagement include posts with the influencer in the photo and the scenery of the photo. It also helps if the posts themselves are natural (meaning that they aren't staged). Influencers also collaborate with other influencers to get access to more audiences. Posting consistently and having a theme/consistent look for posts are also tactics.
11. All influencer participants believe they provide value to brands they work for in one way or another. They give brands exposure and followers, which is essentially word-of-mouth advertising.
12. It takes having the right influencer and campaign in order for influencer marketing to be successful. For example, brands shouldn't use a beauty influencer to promote a travel campaign. The influencer used in a campaign should be based on the brand's target market.
13. Influencer marketing is valuable because influencers are seen as real people by their audience. Influencers have a relationship with their audience and are therefore seen as being more trustworthy to their followers. People are more likely to take referrals from people they trust. This makes influencers valuable to brands.
14. Micro-influencers have highly engaged, niche audiences. Brands can benefit from influencer marketing because they reach the influencers' specific audience. This is a way to target a very specific audience.

15. Brands should look for influencers to promote them mainly on blogs and Instagram. Blogs are important because they help improve search engine optimization.

A potential limitation is the sample size. There were eight influencer participants and two participants that work with/hire influencers. A larger sample size may provide additional insights. This study focused on the value of micro-influencers specifically; all influencer participants had less than 50 thousand followers. In the future, a study could be done on macro-influencers to determine if/how their value and the success of their campaigns are different from micro-influencers.

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Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306-0155
Phone: 765-285-5052
E-mail: orihelp@bsu.edu

DATE: February 28, 2020

TO: Julia Steele

FROM: Ball State University IRB

RE: IRB protocol # 1531878-3

TITLE: How Influential Are Influencers?

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: January 30, 2020

ACTION: EXEMPT

PROJECT STATUS: EXEMPT

DECISION DATE: February 28, 2020

EXPIRATION DATE:

REVIEW TYPE: Administrative Review

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your Amendment/Modification for How Influential Are Influencers?. Your project was deemed MINIMAL RISK and approved on January 30, 2020. The changes you requested were reviewed at the Administrative Review level and were approved on February 28, 2020. Your project has been reviewed at the Exempt level .

Editorial Notes:

Modification approved.

As a reminder, it is the responsibility of the P.I. and/or faculty sponsor to inform the IRB in a timely manner:

- when the project is completed,
- if the project is to be continued beyond the approved end date (if applicable),
- if the project is to be modified further,
- if the project encounters problems, or
- if the project is discontinued.

Any of the above notifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to IRBNet (www.irbnet.org). Please reference the IRB protocol number 1531878-3 in any communication to the IRB regarding this project. Be sure to allow sufficient time for review and approval of requests for modification or continuation. If you have questions, please contact Sena Lim at (765)285-5034 or slim2@bsu.edu.

In the case of an adverse event and/or unanticipated problem, you will need to submit written documentation of the event to IRBNet under this protocol number and you will need to directly notify the Office of Research Integrity (<http://www.bsu.edu/irb>) **within 5 business days**. In case of any emergency do not wait 5 days to submit the report, contact the office at once. If you have questions, please contact Sena Lim at (765)285-5034 or slim2@bsu.edu.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project or as required under Federal and/or State regulations (ex. HIPAA, FERPA, etc.). Additional requirements may apply.