

Rhetoric of Ecology in Visual Culture

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Authentic Deception or the Ethos Paradox of Social Media Influencers: Female Emirati Consumers' Perception of Instagram Models

**Fałszywa autentyczność czy paradoks etosu influencerów w mediach społecznościowych:
postrzeganie modelek z Instagrama przez konsumentki ze Zjednoczonych Emiratów
Arabskich**

Abstract

Instagram is the fastest rising social medium used by young people in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and therefore constitutes a superb means for companies to advertise their brands. To better inform the selection of the most well-targeted and effective models for advertising products, this research first analyzed UAE-based Instagram posts to explore the types of models used for different types of advertising content on Instagram. Individual interviews were then conducted with Emirati women consumers to determine the criteria they use when reviewing Instagram models in terms of the intention to purchase. Results reveal that there are three archetypal models connected with product ranges relating to (1) beauty, (2) health, and (3) fashion. Four determining factors in purchase decisions emerged, namely, (1) product effect, (2) product display, (3) the modesty of the models, and (4) the pose of the models. These last two, and most notably, the modesty of the model, is perhaps somewhat uniquely relevant to the region given the primacy of female modesty within the Islamic canon. Moreover, the majority of women interviewed stressed that they favor models who exemplify a realistic lifestyle and authentic beauty. While the goal of effortless perfection is a common one, this objective may be more dominant in this socio-cultural region, given the Islamic prescriptions on female modesty. Such a desire for an effortless perfection and authentic deception characterizes the essence of the ethos paradox of Instagram models. The value of this empirical investigation is that it highlights a potential pitfall for advertisers in making the assumption that featuring strong influencers in their advertising is necessarily an enhancement of sales potential. Moreover, it illustrates how Instagram endorsement functions in this geopolitical context and offers guidelines for optimizing Instagram advertising.

Instagram, jako najszybciej rozwijające się medium społecznościowe wykorzystywane przez młodych ludzi w Zjednoczonych Emiratach Arabskich (ZEA), jest doskonałą przestrzenią do reklamowania marek. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę instagramowych postów z Emiratów, która wskazuje najlepiej dopasowane do odbiorców i najskuteczniejsze sposoby wykorzystania modelek w reklamie produktów. Przeprowadzone następnie indywidualne wywiady z konsumentkami z Emiratów pozwoliły określić kryteria, według których oceniają one posty pod kątem zamiaru zakupu. Wyniki pokazują, że istnieją trzy archetypowe modele związane z typami produktów, które dotyczą (1) piękna, (2) zdrowia, (3) mody. Pojawiły się cztery czynniki determinujące decyzje zakupowe: efekt produktu, ekspozycja produktu, skromność modelek i ich poza. Te dwa ostatnie, a przede wszystkim skromność modelki, są prawdopodobnie wyjątkowo istotne dla regionu, biorąc pod uwagę prymat kobiecej skromności w islamskim kanonie. Ponadto większość ankietowanych kobiet podkreślała, że preferuje modelki, które są przykładem realistycznego stylu życia i autentycznej urody. Pragnienie osiągnięcia doskonałości bez wysiłku i pozorny autentyzm to sedno paradoksu etosu modelek na Instagramie. Wartość tego badania empirycznego polega na tym, że pokazuje ono potencjalną pułapkę dla reklamodawców - założenie, że zaangażowanie do reklamy znaczących influencerów gwarantuje zwiększenie sprzedaży. Ponadto wyniki badania wyjaśniają, jak działa poparcie na Instagramie w danym kontekście geopolitycznym i proponują wytyczne dotyczące optymalizacji reklam na Instagramie.

Key words

models, Instagram, influencers, endorsement, visual rhetoric, paradoxical ethos, visual argument, social media marketing
modelki, Instagram, influencer, poparcie, retoryka wizualna, paradoksalny etos, argument wizualny, marketing w mediach społecznościowych

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Introduction

Using a celebrity endorser is one of the persuasive techniques widely used in marketing communications (Yılmaz et al., 2005). About twenty percent of the advertisements in the USA feature celebrities (Solomon, 2009). Celebrities include movie stars, sportspersons, models, rock stars, television anchors, social media influencers, and social media personalities (Arun & Raheja, 2006). Celebrity involvement enhances buying decisions and loyalty (Mohammad et al., 2011). Besides, it increases the attention paid to an ad; celebrities are generally attractive, which contributes to persuading, and celebrities are credible sources. For example, an athlete endorsing shoes or a model endorsing makeup (Escalas & Bettman, 2009.) increases product credibility, as the advertising campaign associated with the celebrity's lifestyle.

As a public figure's number of followers on social media rises, they gain popularity and thus become influencers. The term influencer also refers to an individual whose opinion is significant due to their high number of followers and exposure. Social media influencers are rapidly growing on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. A new era of self-proclaimed celebrities has risen, and these individuals are termed "Instagram models" (Bhaskar, 2019). Instagram models are not to be confused with runway models, who are typically signed by an agency and walk at fashion shows, or with bloggers who share lifestyle, fashion, or beauty tips online and do not necessarily rely on physical attractiveness to do so. These models manage to make money by posting pictures of themselves or their lifestyle, tagging brands in them, on a highly visual social media platform, Instagram. As images tend to elicit emotional responses (Campos et al., 1999; Chaudhuri & Buck, 1995; Hill, 2004),

Instagram models have combined forces of ethos and pathos to influence viewers by employing the persuasive power of their own credibility and visual images of their posts.

To be an Instagram model, one needs to have over one hundred thousand followers (Logan, 2015). Most models begin by posting images or videos of themselves from their daily lives, vacation photos, or gym selfies. Just as brands use celebrities because of their fame and influence, in the digital arena, these models have acquired a lot of attention and admiration from their followers and thus have the power to persuade. Instagram models are paid to promote clothing, jewelry, drinks, weight-loss, and cosmetic products (Messina, & Lindell, 2020). However, there is a thin line between Instagram models and beauty/fashion bloggers. Fashion bloggers normally take photos of themselves or others wearing certain outfits they put together. Eventually, some of them become models and get paid for featuring brands, while beauty bloggers' posts revolve more around makeup and beauty products (Mañas-Viniegra et al., 2019). This research will focus on the influencers who identify or describe themselves as models and take photos of themselves, as opposed to bloggers, who mainly focus on products alone and less on their appearances.

The purpose of this research is to identify the criteria for selecting model endorsers based on the consumers' perspective. Data was collected through individual interviews in which women were asked a set of questions regarding their attitudes towards existing Instagram model endorsers in Dubai, as well as international models, to reveal the factors that consumers underline as the most important in affecting their purchase decision. A typology of Instagram model profiles has been generated by analyzing the Instagram pages of models in Dubai. Content analysis of their posts was studied, along with the results from the individual interviews of the female consumers.

Literature Review

There are numerous reasons a celebrity endorser could be influential (e.g., Doss, 2011; Mittelstaedt et al., 2000). They may attract more attention to the product above other messages or slogans or be seen as more entertaining and perceived as trustworthy because of a lack of self-interest (Atkin et al., 1983). Brands use celebrity endorsement as a rhetorical device to attract or influence customers to buy their products. This rhetorical device, known as ethos, refers to the persuading power of an authority or a character of the presenter. For example, in their marketing communication activities, some companies such as Omega rely almost entirely on celebrities like Michael Schumacher, Pierce Brosnan, or George Clooney to

advertise their brands (Eisend et al., 2010). In ethos, effective persuasion relies on the presenter's expertise, similitude, deference, self-expression, and appeal (Higgins & Walker, 2012).

These high-profile celebrities have large audiences and fan bases who pay attention to their lifestyle, traits, and character. Celebrity endorsers have a noticeable effect on brand personality, trust, and preference (Sambath & Jeng, 2015). Celebrity endorsement has been studied to investigate why and how it works. Public figures become symbols, which are associated with the brand meaning (McCracken, 1989). Some consumers look for a connection between the brands and the celebrity promoting it and then associate themselves with those symbols as a characteristic of their self-concept (Escalas, 2009). When a celebrity says a famous line or slogan in an ad campaign, the slogan becomes associated with a brand name or with the celebrity, and this creates a stimulus to which customers respond. This stimulus influences, at least for a short time, the way consumers feel and see the brand (Fleck et al., 2012).

Marketing experts have studied the psychology behind celebrity endorsements and the audience's views (Mittelstaedt et al., 2000). There are three important factors affecting the influence brands have on customers' choices: the correspondence between the celebrity and the brand, the level of popularity, and the celebrity's appreciation (Fleck et al., 2012). Before choosing a celebrity endorser, brand managers study the marketing strategies that help them link the most appropriate public figure to their product. There are five essential attributes that celebrities must have in order to be chosen (Hollensen & Schimmelpfennig, 2013). First, they need to be trustworthy, or, in other words, have a clean legal record. The trustworthiness of the communicator (celebrity) is an essential construct in persuasion and attitude-change research. The expertise, knowledge, and skills of the endorser regarding the brand they are advertising are important. For example, a brand will look for an athlete rather than a pop singer to promote running shoes. The next criterion is attractiveness, a highly subjective issue, but usually, brands look at how the audience perceives the celebrity in terms of not only appearance but also personality. The fourth requirement is respect, which includes the celebrity's reputation, and the fifth is the similarity between the product and the public figure's lifestyle (Hollensen & Schimmelpfennig, 2013). The brand managers will look at how the lifestyle, age, or gender of the endorser matches the target audience (Mohammad et al., 2011). Of the five criteria, the most difficult to measure are attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Ohanian, 1990), and it has been proven that celebrity attractiveness and the celebrity-product match-up have a direct impact on brand trust (Sambath & Jeng, 2015).

Ohanian (1990) has investigated how brands can scale these criteria according to their audiences' perspectives. One of the methods for doing this is to conduct surveys to measure how certain celebrities, such as Madonna, are perceived with respect to the criteria studied. Experimental studies have used numerous sources to determine credibility but have failed in being consistent in their manipulation checks of the experimental variables. Ohanian (1990) has defined the domain of the source-credibility concept and has established a reliable and valid scale for its measurement. By using this scale (Table 1) in their surveys and interviews, researchers can look at the impact of each celebrity endorser's persuasiveness.

Source- Credibility Scale
<p>Attractiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractive – Unattractive • Classy – Not Classy • Beautiful – Ugly • Elegant – Plain • Sexy – Not Sexy
<p>Trustworthiness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependable – Undependable • Honest – Dishonest • Reliable – Unreliable • Sincere – Insincere • Trustworthy – Untrustworthy
<p>Expertise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert – Not an expert • Experienced – Inexperienced • Knowledgeable – Unknowledgeable • Qualified – Unqualified • Skilled – Unskilled

Table 1: Source-Credibility Scale (Ohanian, 1990, 42)

There are many other criteria that advertising managers can utilize when selecting their endorsers. A few examples include the celebrity/audience match up, working difficulty, risk factor after the endorsement, and the cost of hiring (Mohammad et al., 2011). Marketers look at the types of celebrities that they can use in terms of their profession and the correspondence of their lifestyle to the brand. Being an athlete is not enough to endorse for a sports-related brand; a consideration of the history and performance of the athlete, whether or not they are using the product on a daily basis, the familiarity with the audience, and the athlete's equity membership status are also vital factors to be assessed (Erdogan et al., 2001). The criteria are, however, ranked in terms of importance, and there are

specific lists of criteria when it comes to hiring a celebrity to represent them. Table 2 represents the mean source of criteria important for brand managers:

	Mean	Std. Dev
Celebrity-target audience match	4.65	0.66
Celebrity-product/ brand match	4.56	0.69
Overall image of the celebrity	4.55	0.65
Cost of acquiring the celebrity	4.34	0.68
Celebrity trustworthiness	4.28	0.74
The likelihood of acquiring the celebrity	4.17	0.77
Celebrity controversy risk	4.13	0.86
Celebrity familiarity	4.12	0.79
Celebrity prior endorsements	4.07	0.78
Celebrity likability	4.02	0.89
Risk of celebrity overshadowing brands	3.91	1.00
The stage of celebrity life cycle	3.59	0.96
Celebrity expertise	3.32	0.97
Celebrity profession	3.10	0.93
Celebrity physical attractiveness	3.09	0.80
Celebrity equity membership status	2.98	1.10
Whether celebrity is a brand user	2.63	0.83
Sources are obtained from a scale in which 5= Very Important and 1= Very Unimportant		

Table 2: Mean Source of Criteria Importance (Erdogan et al. 2001, 39).

The cost and likelihood of hiring the celebrity, trustworthiness, controversy risk, previous endorsements, celebrity familiarity, and likability are significant factors, while celebrities' risk overshadowing brands and the stage of the celebrity life cycle are not as important. The celebrity's attractiveness, expertise, or profession seem to be neither important nor unimportant. Most advertising agencies believe that fame does not necessarily differentiate physical attractiveness or credibility characteristics. As long as someone is famous, "it is hard to judge whether they are pretty or ugly" (Erdogan et al., 2001).

The process of choosing a celebrity begins with analyzing campaign objectives (Gupta et al., 2017). Participants in a potential celebrity selection process are the client, marketing manager, advertising agency, celebrity, or celebrity's agent. Before choosing a celebrity, a research team will look at the celebrity's profession, appearance, and history (Gupta et al., 2017). The depth of the research depends on the celebrity's history, size of the account, and time limit. The process of choosing the right celebrity begins with analyzing how a potential star reflects the criteria shown in Table 2. This stage is followed by a creative team meeting that tries to match the requirements, the star profile, and the campaign objectives to develop specific marketing strategies (Erdogan et al., 2001).

There are two ways of using celebrities: either as a central feature, where the celebrity is the focus, or as added interest, where the campaign uses the celebrity as an additional factor rather than the primary influence. Therefore, the criteria are analyzed in connection with how the celebrity will represent the product. For example, BUPA Health Centre used Arsenal's striker Ian Wright, who had rapidly recovered from an injury, to illustrate their healthcare services' success and quality. However, other researchers support the idea that managers choose celebrities based on intuition rather than in-depth research, and there is not necessarily a list of people they can employ. The campaign builds around the celebrity and their target audience (Erdogan et al., 2000). Based on the studies provided, the celebrity criteria and profiles can be used as an example in the digital industry of social media endorsement.

Study

This study was divided into two parts: (1) content analysis of the Instagram models' pages to generate the influencers' typology; (2) individual face-to-face interviews with the subjects to reveal the traits emphasized by the followers as significant when viewing the posts of Instagram models. The individual interviews were based on ten questions regarding the models' Instagram endorsement and the credibility or persuasion levels that the models inspire. A group of twenty-five women was conveniently selected for the interviews.

Sample

The content of five popular Instagram models' pages in Dubai was selected for analysis (Table 3). The Instagram models' pages were chosen randomly from the list of the models operating in Dubai provided by the various websites, such as *Arabia Business*.

Models in Dubai are from all over the world. As Dubai is such a multicultural city, it provides a great insight into a racially diverse typology that companies can use. The number of followers and likes per content provides an insight into how popular the models are, and analyzing their comments displays the likability of the models and their content. The models' page contents (video, text, and photographs) were systematically evaluated, and qualitative data derived to generate three typologies of models according to their lifestyle. The method used for categorizing the models is similar to that of the celebrity endorsement in terms of popularity, likability, and profession. For example, likability is measured by deriving qualitative data from the feedback received on social media. Comments such as 'This is so beautiful,' 'gorgeous,' or 'I love this post,' 'fabulous,' implies that the audience of these models has positive views with regard to their content. The models are all based in Dubai and they represent diverse ethnic backgrounds. Their number of followers exceeds 100,000, and their content includes personal lifestyle and product endorsement. After analyzing twelve of their most recent photographs on each page, the models' content displayed three distinct categories of lifestyle: fitness and health, beauty and cosmetics, and fashion. These categories help distinguish what kind of product they are most likely to advertise.

Instagram Model	Number of Followers
Sitorabanu Israilova	Over 1 million followers
Laura Badura	Over 600,000 followers
Deema Al Asadi	Over 200,000 followers
Sheida Fashionista	Over 400,000 followers
Mariam Rod	Over 400,000 followers

Table 3: Instagram Models List

The models who advertise fitness and health had content that included workout routines, slimming teas, or protein products. They mostly displayed full-body photographs implying their results were due to the products they are endorsing.

The models advertising beauty and cosmetics typically post photographs of their faces wearing makeup, close-up shots of cosmetics, and their beauty routines. All the models have tagged makeup brands on their content and have similar features such as full lips, big eyes, long lashes, and full eyebrows.

Fashion models' content includes both close-up photographs of their faces with makeup on, and full-body photographs of them wearing different outfits of brands that were tagged or mentioned underneath their photos. Fashion models also

advertise makeup and cosmetics but also include hand or head accessories such as rings, watches, and headbands.

After analyzing the model's pages, four photographs were selected for the interview (Figures 1-4), displaying beauty, fitness, fashion products as well as lifestyle.

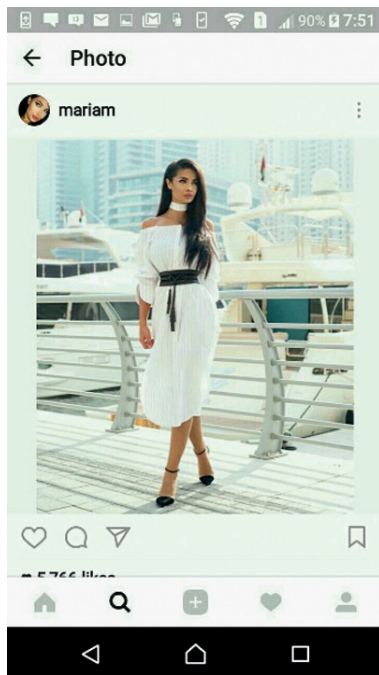


Figure 1: A post by Mariam Rod



Figure 2: A post by Sheida Fashionista

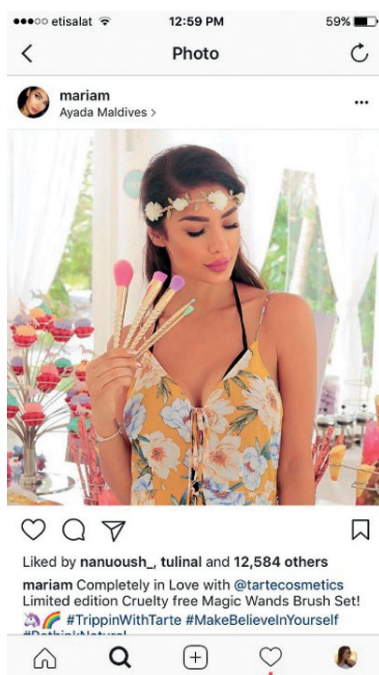


Figure 3: A post by Mariam



Figure 4: A post by Sitorabanu

According to Media Kix, there are four types of Instagram models: “beauty, lifestyle, fitness and fashion influencers” (Mediakix Team). The photographs display each model endorsing various products, from cosmetics to beauty and health/fitness products.

Interviews

Structured interviews were conducted during the January-March 2017 to elicit answers from female respondents. The sample were female students mostly studying at a private university in the UAE. Non-probability convenient sampling was used due to the proximity of the respondents, and the sample size was twenty-five females, from ages eighteen to twenty-four. Women interviewees were selected because the products advertised target mainly the female audience. Statistics show that 37% of Instagram users are aged sixteen to twenty-four (Statista, 2014), which is the second-highest number of users, and reflects the age range among the selected population. Their racial background and financial status are considered to gain insight from a variety of lifestyles. The respondents mainly belong to the middle-class and they are of Arab nationalities.

The first part of the interview aimed to gather information about the general view of Instagram models and the second focused on each photograph to analyze how the promotion of each product reflects on the subjects’ opinion of the product. The qualitative data derived from the interviews was further analyzed. The answers were examined, and codes and patterns were identified from the statements. Categories were created as a result of coding the shortened answers. To test the reliability of the categories and definitions, interjudge reliability is applied, where both the data collectors had a degree of consistency and agreement of over eighty percent. Interjudge or intercoder reliability is applied when qualitative data, which consists of descriptive statements rather than numbers, is derived from the content analysis. The method is used to validate certain codes or measurements by having two independent judges or coders interpret the meanings of the codes by themselves (Lavrakas, 2008).

Findings

During the first phase of the interview, the women were asked what their general attitude is towards the Instagram models and what an Instagram model means to them. Twenty-two out of twenty-five women said they liked the models and their content. Only one of the respondents said she disliked the models, and the remaining two were neutral. When asked to describe an Instagram model, fourteen women

described them based on physical appearance such as ‘pretty,’ ‘tall,’ ‘beautiful,’ or ‘perfect,’ nine referred to them as women who advertise products online, and the remaining two referred to them as being ‘fake.’ Twenty-two women agreed that their feelings towards the model do not impact their desire to purchase the product, while three of them agreed that if they dislike the model, it will affect the way they see the product.

In the second phase of the research, each photograph is analyzed based on the pose of the model, the way the model is dressed, the way the product was displayed, the credibility of the product, and whether the model persuaded the audience to purchase the products. When asked if they would buy the product, the majority of the answers were negative. When asked if they believe that the models use the products in their daily lives, almost 68% said ‘yes,’ and 32% answered ‘no.’ Some women mentioned that they know the models are paid to show the products, and they are ‘just doing their jobs.’ Others went further to state that the models receive these products for free. One of the respondents said, ‘It’s their choice if they use it or not, but I think most of them use the products.’ Fifty-seven percent of the women claimed they would not buy the products displayed, while the remaining 43% said they would. When asked why they wouldn’t make a purchase, most of them replied that the products are not represented clearly, or that the long-term effects of using the products are not explained or shown. For example, advertising a product that is recommended to become fit and slim would normally consist of a model’s posts depicting her transformation, so-called ‘before and after’ posts. In one of the photographs displayed in this research interview, one of the women said, ‘I cannot see her transformation, so how can I know if the product works?’ Other women had a similar comment about other products, ‘I need to see the results. Maybe if they made a video on how the product works, I would be more convinced to buy,’ ‘I need to see the shades of the makeup, and how the lipstick looks on her lips, not just the table,’ ‘How do I know that she looks skinny because of the tea? There should be a before and after photo.’

The respondents were asked to say what they would like to see different in the photographs. There were twenty-five answers per photograph, for a total of four photographs, which results in a hundred answers in total. Out of these hundred answers, there were four most occurring patterns among the responses. The results were examined, and the answers were coded to form four main criteria out of the repeating patterns that the subjects find important. As shown in Table 4, twenty-three percent of the answers focused on the product result. The women wanted to see how the product works, if it works, and how the product is used. Fifteen percent of respondents mentioned the way the product was displayed, insisting that they wanted close-up shots with better lighting. Eleven percent of respondents

wanted the models to dress more modestly, and 11% would like to see the models pose in a more ‘natural’ and ‘friendly’ manner. The remaining 41% were neutral, where the women did not mention any changes regarding the photographs.

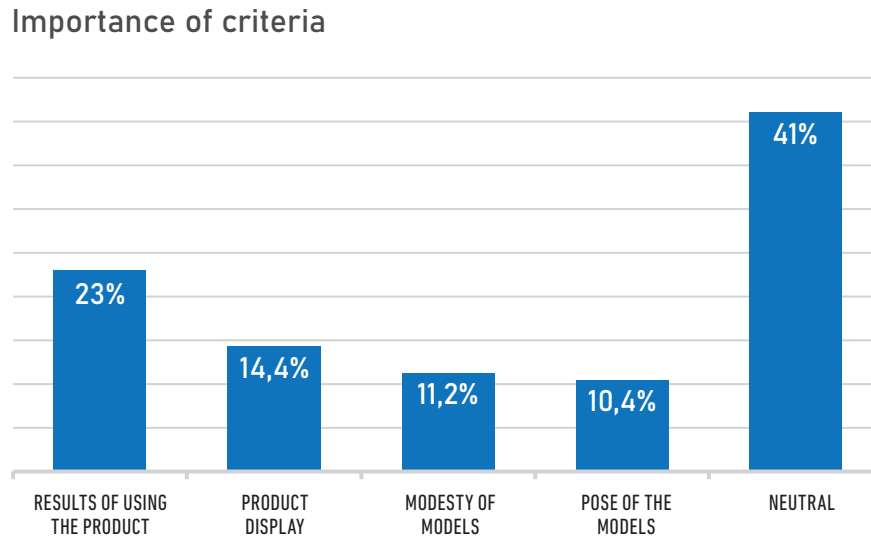


Table 4: Importance of Criteria for Choosing Instagram Models

Discussions

The findings of this analysis suggest that the viewers of the visuals posted by the Instagram models often emphasize the importance of displaying the results of a product’s effect and showcasing the product in a transparent way. This finding shows that the social media viewers develop not only emotional connections with the images but engage in analytical thinking, searching for the rational appeal in the message.

The likability of the models’ content depends on how the model poses and the modesty that they display. Many interviewees agreed that they would like to see ‘less skin and cleavage’ and ‘more friendly faces.’ This cultural aspect is often overlooked by the researchers when examining the ‘likability’ criteria.

The answers show a desire for a more realistic and authentic representation of a woman in the Instagram models’ photographs. Comments like ‘they are too perfect’ or ‘they try too hard’ indicate that the subjects prefer a more natural approach to product endorsement on Instagram. Based on the chosen photographs, more than half of the women interviewed said they would not buy the products, which implies the lack of credibility that they sensed from the content.

Conclusion

The study examined the typology of Instagram models' endorsement and the importance of criteria that the models' content plays in persuading the audience. The purpose of this study was to discover a typology of models, which can help brand and marketing managers when choosing the best-suited model for their product/brand. Furthermore, the research's objective was to create a set of criteria based on the subjects' preferences. Based on the Instagram models' content, three types of models were deducted: fitness and health, beauty and cosmetics, and fashion models.

Results reveal that there are three archetypal models connected with product ranges relating to (1) beauty, (2) health, and (3) fashion. Four determining factors in purchase decisions emerged, namely, (1) product effect, (2) product display, (3) the modesty of the models, and (4) the pose of the models. These last two, and most notably, the modesty of the model, is perhaps somewhat uniquely relevant to the region, given the primacy of female modesty within the Islamic canon. The concept of modesty adds a cultural dimension to the likability of an endorser.

The answers showed a desire for a more realistic and authentic representation of the woman in the Instagram models' photographs. Yet, the respondents have appreciated the glamorous, slim, and splendid look of the models. These perceptions disclosed an ethos paradox pertinent to the perceptions of the Instagram model by social media users. The model is expected to be perfect and yet, not 'too perfect' and not 'trying too hard;' be attractive and again, 'natural' and 'authentic.' Such a desire for an effortless perfection and authentic deception characterizes the essence of the ethos paradox of Instagram models.

More than half of the interviews reported that they would not purchase the products illustrated in the advertising material despite being even an avid follower of the model featured in the ad. Among the reasons they cited is the lack of instructions regarding the product and evidence of its efficacy.

The findings of this study have several implications for both theory and practice. At the theoretical level, the research shows that not all characteristics used for the selection of a celebrity as an endorser are applicable for the selection of Instagram models or influencers. When selecting an endorser from Instagram models or influencers, managers have to consider other criteria given that Instagram is a highly visual social media platform such as product display, pose of the models, and results of using the product. At the practical level, the findings underline once again the importance of authenticity in creating the image of perfection. Such an image can be summarized in terms of 'honest deception,' 'effortless perfection,' or 'effortless glamour.'

This research was limited to only female university students aged eighteen to twenty-four. The study focused more on how the products were displayed and perceived and not the history, popularity, or likability of the brands endorsed in the photographs. Young women express their opinions towards Instagram model endorsement, and with their help, influencer marketing can improve to become more customer-oriented.

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