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The Perception of LGBTQ Influencers on Social Media

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Abstract

Social media brand influencers have become one of the biggest marketing and public relations trends of 2017, especially those who promote lifestyle brands (Glucksman, 2017). While many social media users are capitalizing on the “brand influencer” trend, people who identify as the LGBTQ still struggle to connect with the heterosexual audience as brand influencers source. YouTube and Instagram are visual mediums that allow brand influencers to craft their expertise verbally and visually to communicate their expertise and enhance credibility. Using the source credibility theory, which posits that persuasiveness of the message is based on the perceived credibility of the source (Hovland et al., 1951), this study investigates how the LGBTQ and heterosexual influencers were perceived by the followers on the YouTube and Instagram platform. Using a Netnography approach, ($n = 4,646$) comments were analyzed from YouTube and ($n = 16,683$) from Instagram to identify positive, negative, and neutral sentiment. Findings demonstrate the LGBTQ community have a higher level of engagement, but at the same time, a high interest from followers on the sponsored posts. The commenters responding to the heterosexual influencers focus more on the influencer appearance rather than the content presented by them. Comments on Instagram are more explicit compared to YouTube.

Keywords: LGBTQ, heterosexual, influencers, social media, source credibility

The Perception of LGBTQ Influencers on Social Media

The Internet has changed communication and how individuals interact with each other. In contrast to traditional media, social media allows users to build personal profiles to share information and engage with others (Tiggermann & Zaccardo, 2016). The web has changed the patterns of how we do business, communicate, build social relationships, and the way we spend our spare time (Shiryaeva et al., 2019). It has become a place where people can express their opinion, and discover new information from different perspectives and cultures on which to base their different decisions regarding a brand or a product.

From the marketing perspective, social media helps brands interact with their customers. In the past few years, brands have started catching on the social media celebrity that possesses characteristics of both celebrities and peers: the social media celebrity (Booth & Matic, 2011). According to the Association of National Advertisers (2018), consumers nowadays rely more on peer-to-peer communication, which has made influencers the key components for companies. Influencers are also known as opinion leaders and have emerged as influential participants of online communities, serving as a source of advice for their audience (Casaló et al., 2016).

Companies are turning towards these endorsers because they connect the intended target audience with brands without losing their personality in their communication (Childers et al., 2018). These changes in communication allow streaming and social media platforms to attract customers. The potential of social media is the capacity it has of connecting people with similar interests in a visible and accessible space (Habibi et al., 2015). YouTube has 1.57 billion monthly active users, giving businesses the chance to share company content with over 30+ million daily active users who are likely to watch it (LYFE Marketing, 2018). Most of the content posted to YouTube is created by regular people like us; any user is able to upload content

to the platform. YouTube has become a highly significant medium for self-expression. Their company values focus on “the freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of opportunity and freedom to belong” (YouTube, 2019).

On the other hand, Instagram now has more than 700 million monthly active users; 60% are users between the ages of 18 and 29 (Huang & Su, 2018). Instagram empowers users to engage with others through the different visuals and features the platform offers (Kang & Wei, 2018). The platform allows companies to post creative content focusing on visuals showcasing their product or service in a more appealing approach (Lyfe Marketing, 2018). Instagram is the platform preferred by influencers; this is due to the simplicity and focus on images the platform has (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). It has not only been a rapid growth of its user’s database, but also has an important role in the emerging of influencers (Marwick & Boyd, 2015).

Both YouTube and Instagram networks provide users with their own platform that allows them to share content, interact, and engage with users. The rise of all these different social media platforms has resulted in the emergence of brand influencers, or as scholars define it, “influencer marketing” (Brown & Hayes, 2008). According to Forbes (2016), influencer marketing is defined as a form of marketing that focuses on specific individuals rather than the target market as a whole. They highlight a product, offering information about it, with the goal of influencing users’ perceptions towards the product discussed (Batra et al., 2000). Influencers promote brands on social network platforms in exchange for monetary or sponsorship compensations, while users see them as more credible and honest than traditional media celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Users relate the word influencer with a specific person or celebrity. As opinion leaders, the content they share on their social media platforms can affect users’ perceptions towards the topic being discussed (Casaló et al., 2015).

Influencers are more powerful than traditional celebrities, especially in online contexts, they are viewed as more credible and accessible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The accessibility to the internet, computers, smartphones, and tablets allows users easy access to connect with them. The platforms where personal branding as an influencer have been more powerful are on YouTube and Instagram (Kuitunen, 2019). Companies hope that by presenting people of interest to their target markets, consumers will be more inclined to try the product or service that the company offers (Glucksman, 2017). According to Mintel (2015), younger audiences are looking for “relatable” and “accessible personalities” that they can follow; this is a key opportunity for brands to reach this demographic. Brands nowadays must consider the inclusion of a social media influencer as part of their overall marketing strategy.

Social media platforms have been found to be helpful for users and brands, as well as communities. One of the most beneficial contributions has been its impact on marginalized groups, specifically, the LGBTQ community (Janczak, 2017). LGBTQ is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. Some people use the “Q” to stand for “questioning,” referring to those individuals who are still discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity (Dastagir, 2017). The words of this acronym are used to describe a person’s sexual orientation that falls outside of what most of the population considers normal. The terms “LGB” focus on sexual identities, “T” indicates a gender identity, and “Q” can refer to both (Eliason, 2014). Back in the 1960s, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder, but through the years the perception of this community has changed (Meyer, 2003). The LGBTQ identified people who did not have a platform or community where they could express their feelings without being judged, or attacked by homophobic people. Visibility is one of the main struggles of the LGBTQ community, and nowadays is a goal of the LGBTQ rights movement (Roth,

2015). With the rise of social media, the LGBTQ community has found different ways to communicate and engage with their peers. For instance a person unrestrained by physical boundaries, lack of resources, or who is questioning their identity, without any accessible support can find useful information through social media platforms (Janczak, 2017).

Literature Review

The LGBTQ community uses social media to engage in developing their identity while sharing new understandings across the public (Duguay, 2016). Previous scholarship on the LGBTQ community has often focused on different topics regarding the perception of this group and the interaction with them. The main fields that have researched these topics are psychology and communication. Psychologists have investigated the perspectives on gender relating it to racial and ethnic identities (Parent et al., 2013), the factors associated with the well-being of the LGBTQ youth community (Higa et al., 2012), and an analysis of the benefits and barriers of relationship across gender identity and sexual orientation analyzed by Galupo et al. (2014). Other studies focused on social media and its effects on users. For example, Andsager (2014) investigated the different research directions scholars can apply when they are analyzing social media and its effects on individuals accepting their body image.

On the other hand, Lloyd (2014) examined the role social media plays in young people's mental health. Other social media studies focus on popular trends used by youth. Tiggermann and Zaccardo (2018) did a content analysis of the famous hashtag #fitspiration on Instagram, and Byrd and Denney (2018) studied how to tell stories with Instagram using your own voice. In the media perspective, a study analyzed the television show *Glee*. "Dolphins are just gay sharks" was a study of *Glee* and the Queer testing the case of transmedia as text and object (Marwich et al., 2014).

In the communication field, most scholars focused on the interaction the community has with the different social networks that have been emerging throughout the years. One of the main topics regarding social media is brand influencers. The study “Having it all” on social media explored the entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers (Duffy & Hund, 2015), and Casaló et al. (2018) examined the antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. Other studies discuss the LGBTQ youth and social media, analyzing if it is a safe and supportive environment (Tropiano, 2014) or in other aspects, analyzing the relation with group membership, stigma, and mental well-being (Chong et al., 2015). Most of the studies regarding the relationship between social media and the LGBTQ influencers have focused more on how LGBTQ individuals use different social networks made specifically for their sexual orientation. In 2012 Gudelunas tested the uses and gratifications of online social networks for gay men, and in 2008 another study examined the social network Gaydar and the commodification of difference presented in this platform (Light et al., 2008). Following the gay community studies, the NBA’s Jason Collins coming out process was used to test the traditional and social media frames surrounding him (Billings et al., 2015).

Some other studies have focused on analyzing how social media helps users to build an identity online. A study explored the influence of new media towards identity development and the coming out process for LGBTQ youth (Craig et al., 2013). Another analyzed the informal learning and teaching experiences the LGBTQ community has on social media (Fox & Ralston, 2016). On the other hand, a previous study showed that Instagram users frequently create two accounts to present themselves in a flattering and unflattering manner among their peers (Kang & Wei, 2018). Some scholars have researched LGBTQ communities and the social movements involved in the support of LGBTQ individuals. For example, one study used a historical

approach to analyze the cycles of sameness and difference in LGBT social movements (Ghaziani et al., 2016). Another study analyzed the different research methods and visualization tools for online LGBT communities (Oosterhoff, 2014) and LGBTQ celebrities, such as Ruby Rose, with the study *Queer visibility through selfies* (Duguay, 2016).

However, there are a limited number of studies that examined the LGBTQ community's participation in the growing phenomena in brand influencers on social media. Given that there is still stigma and discrimination associated with the LGBTQ community, it is important to analyze how people perceive and engage with the LGBTQ influencers. Online use may expose users to cyberbullying, online harassment, or abusive comments (Thurlow et al., 2007). According to the Pew Research Center (2013), more than 50% of LGBTQ individuals have been victims of homophobic or transphobic slurs. Researchers previously defined homophobia as the fear or hatred towards homosexuality or individuals that identify as homosexuals (Dynes, 1990). These individuals create content "inspired and curated from their personal interests and daily activities" of a specific topic (MidiaKix, 2015), specifically to raise their voice as an LGBTQ identified person.

Managing a YouTube or Instagram account consists of constant branding, content creation, filming, editing, and designing (Kuitunen, 2019). Social media provides a voice to underrepresented populations (Brundidge et al., 2010). Due to the discrimination and homophobic times, we still can see a bad perception towards the community itself. Sometimes this perception changes when we talk about influencers or celebrities. This study examined if the influence perceived by the followers affects their perceptions towards the endorsed brand discussed by the influencer. This research offers influencers a better understanding of what users' attitudes, perceptions, and needs in social media are. It offers the LGBTQ influencers the

opportunity to generate new content aligned to their followers' expectations to raise their voice and succeed in the online world.

Theory

Using the source credibility theory, this study examined the perception of LGBTQ's influencers on Instagram and YouTube using a netnography approach. This theory explains how communication's persuasiveness is affected by the perceived credibility of the source of the communication (Hovland et al., 1951). It can also be defined as judgment of relevance and a key element of information quality (Masrom, 2016). The theory allowed me to identify how LGBTQ and heterosexual influencers expose themselves on social media and how followers perceived them. Previous research showed that this theory is essential to the success of celebrity endorsement (Nelson & Deborah, 2017). This study analyzed how social media users perceive different LGBTQ influencers, and examined the level of engagement between followers of LGBTQ and heterosexual influencers. The platforms examined in this study were Instagram and YouTube, the most popular platforms for product promotion and influencers. In addition, this study examined the main differences between the engagement on YouTube and the engagement on Instagram.

The LGBTQ and heterosexual influencers with more than one million (1M) followers were selected for analysis. LGBTQ influencers were Ingrid Nilsen, Bretman Rock, and Nikita Dragun, and heterosexual influencers were Camila Coelho, Nash Grier, and Marcus Butler. The dependent variable "post engagement" will be defined as posts that generated more than one hundred thousand likes and two thousand comments. The analysis focused on posts with more than one thousand (1K) likes and two thousand (2K) comments, published during December 2018–February 2019 on YouTube and Instagram.

This study analyzed LGBTQ and heterosexual influencers testing the source credibility theory. The rise of influencers and online sponsored content has motivated researchers to use the theory on their pursuit of understanding the different impacts these influencers have on users' opinions. The concept of source credibility was developed in Aristotle's treatise *The Rhetoric*; the philosopher identified three elements of persuasion: pathos, logos, and ethos (Rapp, 2010). These elements help the process of persuasion in three different aspects. Pathos seeks emotional or motivational appeals (i.e., vivid language, emotional language, and numerous sensory details). On the other hand, Logos is the logic used to support a claim (i.e., induction and deduction); it can also be the facts and statistics used to help support the argument. According to Aristotle, Ethos can be described as the most important persuasive element because it refers to a speaker's knowledge, moral authority, and helpfulness. It can also be defined as relevance judgments and a key element of the quality of information (Masrom, 2016).

The source credibility theory indicates that when a communicator is perceived as credible, the message is more likely to be accepted by the recipients. The theory was originally developed in a study by Hovland and Weiss (1951) testing the audience's attitudes. The study focused on presenting an identical persuasive message from credible and non-credible sources. The researchers tested if a credible source could influence an individual's opinion higher than non-credible sources. Individuals exposed to the same communication classified credible sources as "more justified" and they changed their opinion to connect with the credible over the non-credible source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Later studies demonstrated that highly credible sources' opinions are more respected and readily accepted (McCroskey et al., 1974). Through the years, this theory has been applied all around the world to communication elements in fields such as marketing, advertising, religion, politics, business, and public affairs.

The definition of credibility has been debated through different research produced by source credibility scholars (Applbaum & Anatol, 1972; Berlo et al., 1969; Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey, 1958; McGuire, 1985; Wynn, 1987). Researchers can determine a speaker's persuasiveness through the source-credibility model (Hovland et al., 1953) and the attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985). For source credibility, expertise and trustworthiness were the two vital qualities identified (Hovland et al., 1953). Expertise was defined as "the degree to which the speaker is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" while trustworthiness as "the level of confidence in the speaker's intent to communicate the assertions considered most valid to them" (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21). On the other hand, McGuire (1985) discussed the need for developing attitudes that are accurate and the need for enhancing users' self-image by connecting with sources considered to be likable. Physical attractiveness, familiarity, similarity, and likeability were recognized as key factors for persuading an individual inspired by social or self-gratification needs. These factors were part of the source-attractiveness model tested and researched by McGuire (1985).

Through the years, source credibility has been applied to the advertising field, specifically for advertising research including the audience and celebrity endorsers. DeSarbo and Harshman (1985) concentrated on expertness, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and likeability, while Whitehead (1968) used trustworthiness, competence, dynamism, and objectivity. Ohanian (1990) recognized the need for more consistency in source credibility studies, and developed a fifteen-point tri-component scale for ranking celebrity endorsers using the expertise and trustworthiness dimensions from Hovland et al. (1953) and the attractiveness dimension from McGuire (1985). The attractiveness dimension is a combination of physical looks and overall

likability (Ohanian, 1990). The basic tenets of the theory are appropriate to applying to social media and its effects on the users.

Source credibility theory identifies source expertise and source bias as elements that affect the credibility of an information source (Birnbaum & Stegner, 1979; Buda & Zhang, 2000). These scholars discussed the source expertise as the perceived competence of the source providing the information. On the other hand, source bias is conceptualized as source trustworthiness, referring to the possible bias/incentives that may be reflected in the source's information (DeZoort et al., 1993; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Perloff, 1993). Different communicators have different perceptions among users. According to Eagley and Chaiken (1993), communicators with positive attributes are more persuasive than communicators with less positive attributes. These attributes can be evaluated by the terms of homophily and tie strength. According to Rogers (1983), homophily explains group composition in terms of similarity of members' characteristics such as age, gender, education, or lifestyle. The tie strength attribute is defined as "a multidimensional construct that represents the strength of the dyadic interpersonal relationships in the context of social networks" (Money et al., 1998, p. 79) and includes closeness, intimacy, support, and association (Frenzen & Davis, 1990). Referring us to the online environment, these evaluations must be made from the relatively impersonal text-based resource exchange provided by actors in the site network (Brown et al., 2007).

In the past, Mitchell and Dacin (1996) analyzed how people rank expertise on influencers. The researchers identified that individuals highly ranked in expertise are also likely to possess greater awareness and knowledge about a market and products within it. These experts, most of the time, are being identified as opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) accelerating the diffusion of information. The reputation is an important variable in order to

analyze the effectiveness of each opinion leader, or as millennials refer to them, “influencer.” According to Tadelis (2002), reputation is thus key to allocating the value of information. Although some communities employ online reputation mechanisms (Dellarocas, 2003), or provide explicit information about contributors such as posting history, location, photograph, and feedback profiles, they tend to be either moderated by the brand owner, transaction-focused, or paid opinion forums.

The studies related to source credibility and social media influencers offered different conclusions about how users rate social influencers in terms of the before and after they become a brand ambassador. Brison et al. (2016) analyzed how a Twitter endorsement from a fictitious athlete of an unknown brand affected consumers’ attitudes toward the brand and the athlete. This study revealed positive effects on the athlete’s endorsement attitudes toward the brand and demonstrated higher scores of trustworthiness. On the other hand, there was no change in expertise and attractiveness after the athlete engaged in an endorsement. Fred (2015) tested the endorsement effects on a YouTube makeup artist, but this study reported a negative impact on the YouTuber’s trustworthiness and expertise after being engaged in an endorsement. These studies focused more on users who were unfamiliar with the influencer, and the results can vary if they focused it with familiar ones.

Recent studies analyzed the credibility of influencers in influencing purchase decisions of young female users (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), identifying that young female users are more attracted to acquiring a lifestyle. Reid et al. (2018) analyzed the theory by testing the user’s credibility towards crowdfunding campaigns and found that users seek a storytelling approach to product promotion and evidence that supports the cause.

Since the source credibility theory analyzes the persuasion process, it is appropriate to use it to study what the perception of LGBTQ influencers is among users. In addition, it can help identify what the specific process is, and what needs to be taken into consideration to compare a good engagement with poor engagement. In order to understand the effectiveness of their engagement, we first need to understand the principles of influencers and engagement. This theory will help the readers to have a complete understanding of this study. With the rise of social influencers, it is important to understand the credibility of their engagement. This study contributes to the field of communication by identifying how social media users respond to heterosexual and LGBTQ influencers on YouTube and Instagram. It will give the field a better understanding on how brand influencers engage with users and how sexual orientation can affect the persuasion process.

Social Media and Brand Influencers

The LGBTQ community and brand influencers are topics that through the years have gained more attention. Most of the LGBTQ self-identified people have been discriminated for their sexual orientation and appearances; this is often translated into psychological aspects encountered on the individuals (Veltman & Chainmowitz, 2014). Sometimes the discrimination is just towards their sexual orientation, but in other cases their cultural background can be affected as well. Balsam et al. (2011) identified a high rate of discrimination towards the Black lesbian community. Findings demonstrated that users were judged more about their skin color rather than their sexual orientation. These psychological aspects have demonstrated strong effects when the individual is on the process of developing their identity, or identify themselves. These aspects are the reason why users have different identities online (Parent et al., 2013). Some individuals present different identities to build relationships online, but the study

demonstrated that these identities often do not find things they can relate to. Presenting multiple identities on social media can be a sign of doubt about themselves. Among the LGBTQ community, not being accepted is a motive for individuals to present themselves in other ways to be accepted by society.

Multiple factors can affect an individual's well-being and mental health. Some of these can be positive, but most of the time the negative factors cause a higher impact on the individual. Higa et al. (2012) analyzed the positive and negative factors that can affect the well-being of LGBTQ youth. It demonstrated that external factors such as schools and religious institutions can affect their identity accepting process. This study helps researchers analyze how society perceives and treats the LGBTQ community, as small actions can lead to life-changing decisions among these individuals. According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2008), increasing visibility through social media of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ is beneficial among the epidemic of suicide among LGBTQ teenagers. This visibility will help individuals to feel identified and some sort of insight on where they can receive answers about their process. Words, actions, and people can bring down the self-esteem of the community and it is important to analyze how they are perceived on social media.

Psychology researchers have analyzed the LGBTQ community and it has been important and useful to understand the different actions by this community and the reasoning why they project themselves in different ways across media. Discussing about the transgender community, individuals try to understand the motive of their decision, but we should first understand how this process affected them in a psychological aspect. This community often has barriers because it requires more background information for society's understanding. Galupo et al. (2014) tested the different benefits and barriers transgender individuals have when they are creating new

relations. The main finding of this study demonstrated that the most encountered barrier among these individuals is the transition process. It is hard to go through that process, but at the same time, it is hard to see the changes in someone in your family or a friend. Numerous questions arise due to the lack of information these individuals might have about this process.

It has been demonstrated that the LGBTQ community has faced rejection and bullying, not necessarily from strangers but also from their same family and friends. This problem is encountered in both the online and offline worlds, but it is important to analyze the online world; the freedom of speech on social media can affect the community with deceptive comments made by users. Tropiano (2014) addressed this issue, analyzing how safe and supportive the social media environment is for LGBTQ youth. The discussion focused on two cases that reported victims of bullying, demonstrating that the bullying encountered on social media can lead to depression and suicidal thoughts. This was a motivation to continue analyzing mental health among these individuals, and Lloyd (2014) tested the different roles social media can have on an individual's mental health. In addition, social media can affect how users perceive their body, and Andsager (2014) investigated the different research directions we can take when analyzing social media and body image. This study demonstrated the great impact social media can have; it could be in a positive and negative way. This study offered a better idea on how to analyze the community on social media. A place we use to share information and photos should be a safe place for us; it is important to understand the negative aspects and its influence on individuals because online bullying presents to be more frequent than offline. It tested how social media have become a factor in the mental health of young individuals. The comments and perception of social media can affect how individuals feel; and their opinions about their appearance.

Through the years, television has been a strong feature for communicating. Individuals use television to watch news, different television shows, and on-demand programs to entertain themselves. Television shows have caused a high impact on individuals, especially those that represented diversity and inclusivity. *Glee* can be considered as one of these shows that their diversity created a new community of viewers. The television show *Glee* was examined in the study “Dolphins are just gay sharks”: *Glee* and the queer case of transmedia as text and object (Marwick et al., 2014). The presence of LGBT characters generated discussion among viewers and it demonstrated to have been a motivation for LGBT individuals to express themselves. Television shows like *Glee* have inspired individuals to talk about their sexual orientation with friends and acquaintances in social networks. For example, the coming out process of the first NBA player identified as a gay generated different frames among the social media and the press. Billings et al. (2015) analyzed NBA’s Jason Collins coming out process by examining the different headlines of the news online and offline. They found that Twitter conversations were more supportive than traditional media coverage.

The importance of these social platforms and how different cultures act on them gives us a better understanding of why certain users use certain social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Balsam et al. (2017) demonstrated that minority groups, such as the LGBTQ community, regularly rely on the internet for support. Being more specific, LGBTQ youth search for support groups through social media communities to develop their identity through the support of peers that share empowering coming out ideas (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Gudelunas (2012) examined the uses and gratifications of online social networks for gay men. It showed how self-identified gay individuals use multiple identities to feel good about themselves. It is often common that LGBTQ individuals have different identities online because they fear

rejection. In the online world they tend to project something they are not. Another study discussed more directly about gay men, Gaydar, and the commodification of difference (Light et al., 2008). Gaydar was used to demonstrate how the LGBTQ community, especially the gay community, is still projected as a niche market rather than part of society.

Brand influencers have been on the rise and their importance on social media has helped companies to spread information about their company or products. Ananda et al. (2016) discovered that engaging influencers to influence customers enhances interaction with customers, increasing the impact of the marketing campaign, as well as benefits for the brand or company. Other studies showed that credibility can be affected by the involvement of users and vice versa (Masrom, 2016). Kuitunen (2019) discussed that branding has three main benefits: identify the wearer, signal membership, and it offers protection to the product. On the other hand, Duffy and Hund (2015) examined the term “having it all” on social media, focusing on entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion influencers. Influencers most of the time are seen to have it all but we should remember they have emotions as any user.

One main issue between brand influencers is how users perceive them, especially their credibility when they are discussing products. Bao and Chang (2014) showed that the influence of users on social network platforms has an impact on consumer behavior. Another study demonstrated that the more persuasive power of digital influencers leads to higher intentions of buying the recommended brands (Jimenez & Fernández, 2019). Bower and Landreth (2001) discussed that the main advantage of using peer endorsers is that the consumers might identify themselves with the endorser; this helps to lower the possible negative effects on the advertising effectiveness. On the other hand, Friedman et al. (1976) demonstrated that the endorser improves the credibility of the communication, and therefore, improves the consumer’s intentions of

purchasing the product. Neal (2017) analyzed the effects of sponsorship on follower engagement with fitness Instagram celebrities. Gruen et al. (2006) demonstrated that influencers contribute to increasing brand value among users. This study was made to test the source of credibility theory, this is the theory I am focusing to test on this research.

The perception and credibility of influencers are important to analyze because they are informing different communities about products they have used. Most influencers have sponsorship from different companies and this is something users keep in mind; they understand that when they talk about a specific product it could be motivated by sponsorship and not because they understand it should be the right product to discuss. Noonan (2018) also examined social media fitness influencers but from another perspective; this research analyzed the innovators and motivators of this niche market on social media. We can encounter different niche markets on social media and it is important to analyze each one; the communities react differently depending on the products or topic discussed.

Gunnarsson et al. (2018) explored portraying the characteristics of the influencer with perceived quality and brand loyalty to understand the credibility encountered among users. The researchers discussed three main characteristics of brand influencers: trustworthiness, reliability, and authenticity. These three variables are commonly encountered on-brand influencers and if they do not have them this could be translated into not generating engagement. Kumkale and Albarracin (2004) stated that the level of persuasion of a message always rests on the credibility of the source that is transmitting the communication. Most brand influencers go beyond to demonstrate a specific lifestyle on social media. Audrezet et al. (2018) tested how influencers' authenticity is under threat when they need to go beyond self-presentation. It compared the relationship between brand partnerships and data. To portray a good relationship between the

products being discussed, and the influencers, they should project that they are passionate and have transparent authenticity. Influencers use social media platforms to express their opinions in different ways. Casaló et al. (2018) tested the antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership on Instagram influencers. This demonstrates that brand influencers must share original content with creativity to be perceived as credible.

Due to the rise of social media, we can also see the rise of different platforms, each one with different motivations and uses for the use of different cultures. Most researchers focus on the importance of social media nowadays. For example, Kallur (2018) analyzed the presence of same-sex couple representations in Watch Brand Daniel Wellington's social media posts. They compared the effects of same-sex couples' pictures on Instagram and heterosexual ones using the watch's brand. The same-sex couple generated more likes and interaction than the heterosexual ones; this demonstrates positive feedback towards the community in the online world. Another platform that is really popular in the community is YouTube, and most of the brand ambassadors' careers emerged from this platform. Blanco-Ruiz (2018) analyzed different channels produced by LGBT+ YouTubers and found that the content generated by these influencers were more diverse on topics than traditional media. Influencers share their personal stories ranging from the good memories to bullying ones.

LGBTQ individuals build an identity online; brand influencers create a different identity online comparing it with regular users of the network. Fox and Ralston (2016) analyzed the informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media and how that can affect the process of building your personal identity online. Craig et al. (2014) analyzed how the new media influence identity development and coming out for LGBTQ youth. It demonstrated that individuals benefit from new media to build their identity and be more secure

at the moment of their coming out process. Farooq et al. (2018) demonstrated that the detection of influential nodes in social networks is vital, which is the key player of the complete network.

Research Questions

Grounded in the source credibility theory and informed by the previous studies, I pose the following research questions.

RQ1: How do social media users respond to content posted by brand influencers?

RQ2: Does the sexual orientation of the influencer impact engagement with their content?

RQ3: Are there differences in comment behavior between social media platforms?

Methodology

This study was conducted using a netnography approach, which is useful for identifying “interaction styles, personal narratives, communal exchanges, online rules, practices and rituals, discursive styles, innovative forms of collaboration and organization, and manifestation of creativity” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 3). Online interactions require a new approach because digital communication is fluid and unstable, and therefore, rather than focusing on social media artifacts as stable objects, they need to be viewed as having multiple messages, contradictions, and randomness (Kozinets, 2015). Hence, netnography helps researchers to obtain new perspectives on digital services such as social media platforms (Heinonen & Medberg, 2017), as well as perception about brands formed based on the product’s quality and credibility towards the influencer (Kuitunen, 2019).

The field sites for the data collection were the YouTube and Instagram platforms. These platforms were chosen because they allow researchers to tangibly observe what has captured the public’s interest (Freeman et al., 2015), and influencers have demonstrated their preferences towards these platforms (Sharman, 2018). Social media engagement metrics such as view count

help spread effective or ineffective messages; comments, likes, and dislikes can indicate that the public is engaging with them.

Since YouTube and Instagram are constructed websites, I set the boundaries on how I contextualized my data, but also what I considered data for this study. According to Kozinets (2015), data are considered to be information and they must include evidence that they are real. In this study, I had archival data from YouTube and Instagram, specifically comments of brand influencers on specific posts during the time frame from December through February of 2018–2019.

Influencers were selected online based on their previous identification as a brand influencer on their social media profiles. The type of influencers I am analyzing are infotainers, who are a hybrid version of informers and entertainers (Gross et al., 2018). Infotainers are considered to have expertise on the topics they are discussing, making them effective ambassadors to build brand recognition and value on social media. These types of influencers usually focus on personalized elements, informational, and entertainment content (De Veirman et al., 2016). The LGBTQ influencers analyzed were Ingrid Nilsen, Bretman Rock, and Nikita Dragun. On the other hand, the heterosexual influencers analyzed were Nash Grier, Camila Coelho, and Marcus Butler.

Data Source

This study analyzed active brand influencers with more than one million (1M) followers on YouTube and Instagram (see Table 1). The influencers were selected through referrals and online articles discussing the top influencers on social media. Due to my lack of knowledge about the LGBTQ influencers, I created a story on my Instagram asking my friends for recommendations on influencers they follow from this community. My followers provided me

with a list of LGBTQ influencers, and then, I selected the influencers who match the criteria for this study. On the other hand, the heterosexual influencers were selected from the “Top 25 Instagram Influencers” article by Influencer Marketing Hub (2019). The influencers had to also have a YouTube channel and 1 million followers.

Table 1

Selected Active Brand Influencers on YouTube and Instagram

Characteristic	Influencers					
	Ingrid Nilsen	Bretman Rock	Nikita Dragun	Nash Grier	Camila Coelho	Marcus Butler
Sexual preference	Bisexual	Homosexual	Transgender	Heterosexual	Heterosexual	Heterosexual
Joined YouTube platform	10/23/09	09/23/12	02/01/13	12/24/12	09/30/11	01/15/10
Subscribers on YouTube	3.66M	7.05M	2.64M	4.72M	1.27M	4.15M
Joined Instagram platform	12/11/11	09/20/12	01/16/12	02/13/12	12/22/11	10/17/11
Followers on Instagram	1.3M	14.1M	5.9M	10.4M	8.6M	3.2M

Data Collection

Comments were extracted with an online comment scrapper; YouTube data with YouTube comment scrapper allows you to extract information such as comment text, replies, username, and date (Klostermann, 2015), and The Instagram data with Exportcomments.com allows researchers to export comments including user’s name, date, and nested comments. To continue the process, I imported the data collected to the DiscoverText platform to begin my coding process. This platform allows social network text analytics in data science software. According to Shulman (2017), text analytics are computer-assisted techniques to reach valid and

reliable insights about a collection text. Once my data was imported, I proceeded to extract the duplicates and I filtered it by just showing me comments that used English as a language. After applying these filters, I began coding my comments using binary coding. The binary code was invented by Leibniz (1689), and according to Computer Hope, it is a coding system that uses binary digits to represent letters, digits, or other characters found in a computer. After coding the comments, I generated a word cloud for each one of them focusing on the top twenty-five words found among the comments on YouTube and the top fifty words on Instagram. I chose a higher amount of words on Instagram because the amount of comments were higher; this offered me a better context of the data studied. Word clouds are a graphical representation of frequent words that offer a greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in a source text (Feinberg, 2013).

LGBTQ Influencers

Ingrid Nilsen's posts did not generate a great number of comments, after extracting the duplicates; I decided to code them all to have a better idea of the perception of her platforms. In total, I coded $n = 371$ YouTube comments and $n = 670$ from Instagram. Bretman Rock's YouTube videos generated 19,026 comments, and after extracting the duplicates and applying the filters there were 16,432 comments. I coded 10% ($n = 1,600$) of the YouTube comments. Both of his Instagram posts generated 14,261 comments, and after I extracted the duplicates, I decided to code 40% of the comments. In total, for Bretman Rock's Instagram, I coded $n = 4,600$ comments. Nikita Dragun's YouTube videos generated 42,790 comments; after extracting the duplicates and applying the filters, it left me with 13,961 comments. I coded 10% of the comments which means I coded $n = 1,400$ comments. Nikita Dragun's Instagram posts generated a high engagement level, therefore, I decided to just code two of her posts; both posts generated

a total of $n = 8,853$ comments and after extracting the duplicates, I decided to code 40% of the comments, $n = 4,000$ Instagram comments in total.

Heterosexual Influencers

The videos of Nash Grier generated a total of $n = 1,094$ comments and due to the amount, I decided to code 55% of the comments to have a better understanding of what type of engagement he has on his community. In total, I coded $n = 600$ YouTube comments. Nash Grier's Instagram posts generated a reasonable amount of comments to be able to compare it to the influencers with higher engagement. I chose two of his posts and they both generated $n = 4,100$ comments. After extracting the duplicates, I coded $n = 4,000$ comments for this network. Camila Coelho videos had a total of $n = 118$ comments, after generating the exact duplicates I had $n = 114$ comments to code. Due to the small number of YouTube comments, I decided to code them all. The same case happened with her Instagram; I decided to code four of her posts because the number of comments did not allow me to compare it to the other influencers. Her posts generated $n = 2,867$ comments and I decided to code them all. Marcus Butler's videos generated $n = 589$ comments, after extracting the duplicates and filters I ended up having $n = 561$ YouTube comments to code. Marcus Butler's Instagram posts had a lack of comments overall, I decided to code four of his posts to be able to have an amount of comments that I could analyze. In total, I coded $n = 546$ comments that represented four posts.

YouTube

Since my data were YouTube comments, I chose the two videos with more views of each influencer. Ingrid Nilsen represents the lesbian community and her videos are mostly based on beauty products. The videos I analyzed were "2018 Favorites: Makeup & SkinCare" and "What's in my bathroom cabinet?" In total, between the two videos, I collected 454 comments.

To represent the gay community, I chose Bretman Rock; he focuses on beauty products and sometimes dresses like a drag queen. A drag queen is usually a gay-identified man that dresses as a woman and performs as an entertainer to caricature stereotypically seductive women (Webster, 1941). The videos analyzed were “Doing and reviewing my makeup litty - a mess” and “Bretman Rock x Colourpop wet and lit collection;” between the two videos 19,026 comments were collected. To represent the transgender community I chose Nikita Dragun; she usually focuses on make-up tutorials, but tends to create videos sharing personal stories of her process as a self-identified transgender person. The videos analyzed were “I got kicked out for being transgender” and “Celebrity make-up artist does my makeup;” between the two videos, 42,790 comments were gathered.

On the other hand, the heterosexual influencers had different focuses. Nash Grier videos are more focused on life experiences he shares with his community. The videos analyzed were “We’re not pregnant” and “Donating my hair;” between the two videos 1,345 comments were collected. To represent beauty products, I chose Camila Coelho English version YouTube Channel. The videos analyzed were “Favorites of 2018” and “Top 5 matte foundations;” between the two videos 473 comments were collected. My last influencer is Marcus Butler; his videos are more focused on comedy than focusing on a specific brand itself. The videos analyzed were “Why my YouTube channel died?” and “Strip challenges;” between the two videos 656 comments were gathered.

Instagram

Since my data are Instagram comments, I chose different posts from each influencer depending on the number of comments it generated. Ingrid Nilsen’s posts did not generate as many comments as the other influencers. I decided to code four of her posts to have a better

understanding of her community and the perception of users towards her (see Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). Bretman Rock's posts generated a good amount of comments. I decided to only code two of his posts (see Figures 5 and 6). Nikita Dragun's Instagram posts showed a number of comments; I decided to code two of her posts (see Figures 7 and 8). Two posts of Nash Grier were analyzed due to the high amount of comments they generated (see Figures 9 and 10). Camila Coelho's posts did not generate a numerous amount of comments compared to the other influencers, therefore I analyzed four of her posts (see Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14). Similar to Camila Coelho, Marcus Butler's posts lacked comments and I decided to analyze four of his posts (see Figures 15, 16, 17, and 18).

Data Analysis

The codes selected for this study were positive, negative, and neutral. For this study, positive comments are texts that includes feedback or questions about the products, opinions about the quality of the video, and recommendations. Comments demonstrating emotional, motivational, and inspiring comments towards the influencer were considered positive. Another type of comments analyzed were the ones that just encountered emojis. Emojis have evolved into characters for a new millennial language (Bosch & Revilla, 2018). Comments with phrases such as "Where can I buy your product?", "I bought your product", "I love you", "You are funny", and "I love your posts/content" are examples of positive comments.

On the other hand, the negative comments are texts that demonstrate offensive comments about the videos or the channel itself. Emojis were also analyzed, but the most important thing was the presence of bullying comments and the perception users had towards the products and their prices. Comments such as "You are so gay!", "This product is bad", "You just recommend it because they pay you", and "You should die" are examples of negative comments. The neutral

comments are texts that encounter a positive and negative context in the same sentence. Personal decisions and opinions, quoting part of the videos, minute references, and questions that were not related to the video or the influencer were considered neutral. Comments such as “The phrase he said at the minute 1:05 of the video”, “She looks like Kylie Jenner”, and “I bought this product last week” are examples of neutral comments.

Results

In total $N = 4,646$ comments were analyzed from YouTube and $N = 16,683$ from Instagram. The number of comments from Instagram was higher because many comments mentioned other users or emoji-based ones. Comments by individual influencers on each of the platforms and combined are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of Selected Comments Analyzed per Active Brand Influencer

Active Brand Influencer	Comments by Platform		Combined N
	YouTube n	Instagram n	
LGBTQ			
Ingrid Nilsen	371	670	1,041
Bretman Rock	1,600	4,600	6,200
Nikita Dragun	1,400	4,000	5,400
Heterosexual			
Nash Grier	600	4,000	4,600
Camila Coelho	114	2,867	2,981
Marcus Butler	561	546	1,107
Totals	4,646	16,683	21,329

LGBTQ Influencers

Ingrid Nilsen

Between her two YouTube videos, 63% of the comments were positive, 30% were neutral, and 7% were negative. The comments on her four Instagram posts, 83% were positive, 13% were neutral, and 4% were negative. This can be seen more specifically in Figure 19; on YouTube, the positive comments focused on followers giving and requesting feedback on products, the quality of the video, supportive comments towards the channel, and emotional comments such as “I love you” or “You inspire me”. The neutral comments focused more on questions about the clothes she was wearing and their stories about using the products she recommends. The negative comments focused on discussing changes in her appearance and the high cost of the products she recommended. In Figure 20, we can see that most of the words are positive ones. The positive comments on Instagram focused on the follower’s interest in the product and campaign she was advertising. Some other positive comments focused on her appearance and clothing she was wearing at that time. The neutral comments focused on followers commenting with each other about a variety of topics that ranged from the space where this post was taken to sharing their experiences with the product or similar products like the ones she sponsored on her platform. The negative comments focused on her appearance, especially her teeth, which were criticized for being yellow. Some comments even speculated on whether she was doing drugs. On this platform, all the negative comments focused on her as a persona rather than the brands or products she discussed. In Figure 21, we can see that most of the words are positive ones and others, a high relation with the products discussed.

Bretman Rock

The influencer tends to use curse words and LGBTQ terms that can be highly misinterpreted. A term often found among the comments was the word “bitch.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "bitch" has been used to refer to a female dog since about

1000 AD and began to be used as a pejorative term for women in around the 15th Century. This word is considered slang and had been appropriated by the LGBT community; it can be seen as fascinating and frustrating (Taylor-Coleman, 2016). Between his two YouTube videos, 70% were positive, 27% were neutral, and 3% were negative comments (see Figure 22). The positive comments of his YouTube channel represented admiration towards the influencer and how proud they are of what he has achieved. Most of the positive comments reflected strong intentions to buy the products endorsed in the videos. The neutral comments focused more on followers' comments trying to generate conversations with other users or the influencer himself. The negative comments here focused more on bullying and his sexual orientation. Terms like "faggot" and "you should die" were frequently used (see Figure 23). His two Instagram posts generated 58% positive, 42% neutral, and 0% negative comments. These comments usually focused on his follower's perception about his content. Bretman Rock's posts usually include comedy, and his followers demonstrated that they enjoyed this type of communication by expressing their appreciation in their comments. On this platform, the positive comments focused on followers demonstrating their interest in the products and brands he was sponsoring. Some other comments focused on followers engaging with the influencer and other followers. I generated a word cloud for these comments (see Figure 24).

On YouTube, we could find significant interest in the products and on Instagram it is even more predominant. Followers of this community demonstrate a high intention of purchasing the product, and that they have previously bought a product from this influencer. On the other hand, the neutral comments on this platform were mostly by followers mentioning other followers to share the content with them. One of the posts informs the community about the visit of Bretman Rock to Ohio; some neutral comments focused on followers commenting they lived

there or others encouraging him to visit their city or state. The total percentage for negative comments resulted in zero, but the comments found focused on his sexual orientation using words that can be highly related to homophobic or bullying comments.

Nikita Dragun

This coding demonstrated more negative comments towards her appearance and sexual orientation, offering different perceptions regarding her gender. On her YouTube channel, the positive comments focused more on the make-up, motivational, and supportive comments. On the neutral aspect, comments focused more on quoting parts of the video and questions among followers. On the negative aspect, most of the comments were abusive ones, specifically hate comments about transgender people. The results of this coding identified 53% positive, 43% neutral, and 4% negative comments. Even though the negative comments have less percent, the words encountered is something to keep in mind. The results can be seen more specifically in Figure 25. Once I generated the word cloud, I could encounter the word “trans” or “transgender;” most of the comments used these words for negative comments (see Figure 26).

Her two Instagram posts coding results showed that 73% of her comments were positive, 25% were neutral, and just 1% were negative. On this platform, Nikita had a better perception and engagement from the followers of her community. The positive comments focused on praising her outfit and accessories she is wearing. Others focused on demonstrating support towards her, as most of the comments had words describing her as an inspiration for them and others (see Figure 27). Regarding the products and brands that she was sponsoring, followers expressed their interests and demonstrated that they really liked what she was offering. Not a lot of comments demonstrated the intention of purchasing the product; one of the reasons is that the brands she is sponsoring are brands for higher target audiences and are not as affordable for the

followers as other products. Her neutral comments focused mostly on comments based on emojis and of followers sharing the content with others. On the other hand, her negative comments focused on her sexual orientation and the fact that she is a transgender woman. These comments had offensive words describing how her followers felt about her transition, and homophobic ones expressing that this should not be accepted by society. Even though she had some negative comments, others focused on sexual comments about her body and desires each follower might have. Small businesses commented on her platform; most of these comments came from graphic designers offering their services.

Heterosexual Influencers

Nash Grier

On his YouTube channel, followers focused more on the appearance of the influencer rather than the content of his videos. After coding the comments, 53% were positive, 44% were neutral, and 3% were negative comments (see Figure 28). The positive comments focused on supporting him and being grateful for the donation of his hair to a specific entity. The neutral comments focused more on his appearance with comments like “he is so gorgeous” (see Figure 29). The negative comments were texts that often talked about how boring his content was getting. As well as his appearance and long hair, there were offensive comments about his hair comparing it to a woman.

His two posts on Instagram resulted in 52% positive, 46% neutral, and 1% negative comments. On this platform, the positive comments still have a strong focus on his appearance. Followers focused on expressing how they perceived him with comments praising his eyes, hair, or style (see Figure 30). The neutral comments were mostly emoji-based, using the ones that expressed different emotions such as in love, hearts, and others that had a neutral tone. Other

neutral comments focused on followers sharing his beauty with other followers, building a conversation discussing how handsome they thought he was. The negative comments included comments claiming that he was homosexual, criticizing his decision of cutting his hair, and other comments, discussing how we nowadays are not as relevant as he were a few years ago through the social network platform Vine. None of the comments mentioned the brands or products he was sponsoring; there was a lack of intention of buying the products or having more information about them.

Camila Coelho

Most of the comments were regarding the products she recommended and her appearance. The positive comments on her YouTube channel focused on admiring her appearance and experiences about using the products she recommends. The neutral comments were mostly comments discussing what she was wearing. On the other hand, the negative comments focused on her credibility when she discussed the products. Comments like “you just talk about this because they pay you” and opinions about how she never looks directly to the camera, this is interesting because followers felt she was not engaging with them. Other comments discussed how the products she recommended were a total fail for the followers. As a result, this channel had 55% positive, 34% neutral, and 11% negative comments. This is the influencer with the most negative comments (see Figure 31). Although negative comments were found, the word cloud showed more positive words. In addition, some Portuguese words can be found; this is because most of the followers made bilingual comments. These words were translated and it meant appreciation and comments like “I love you” in Portuguese (see Figure 32).

Her four Instagram posts comments were 73% positive, 27% neutral, and 1% negative. The positive comments focused on praising the clothing and accessories she was wearing (see Figure 33). Even though some of the brands promoted were considered expensive, some positive comments were about followers wanting to know where they can get a specific item that appeared on the post, whether this one was sponsored or not. The neutral comments focused on followers mentioning other's accounts, discussing topics not related to the post, and just emoji-based texts with neither positive nor negative tone. The negative comments were by followers claiming that she just promoted the brands because she gets them for free, and some even claiming some editing on her pictures.

Marcus Butler

This YouTube channel had more comments based on a positive and negative perspective at the same time. The positive comments focused more on supporting the changes he is making on his channel. The neutral comments were focusing more on quoting him and specific minutes of the videos. On the other hand, the negative comments discussed how his content is not attractive anymore and that he should quit being a YouTuber. After coding the comments, the results showed 64% positive, 29% neutral, and 7% negative comments (see Figure 34). When I generated the word cloud, I found words that validate the coding, words such as "content," that referred to his changes and the follower's opinions about it (see Figure 35).

His four Instagram posts did not generate as many comments compared to the other influencers. The comments were 55% positive, 38% neutral, and 7% negative comments. The positive comments on this platform also had a strong focus on the influencer appearance (see Figure 36). Other comments were regarding his clothing and accessories. Even though followers mentioned the brand on the comments, there was not any intention of purchasing the product or

from the brand itself. The neutral comments focused on followers sharing the content with others, followers discussing topics not related to the post, and emoji-based comments with no positive or negative tone. The negative comments focused on followers questioning his sexuality due to the color of his phone. Other comments were followers sharing their opinion towards his content, claiming that the lifestyle he has is because it's all sponsored, not believable content.

Discussion and Conclusion

The comments analyzed in this study represents a variety of perceptions toward both communities. Discussing the LGBTQ community, even though there is still stigma and discrimination, it is not as representative as the positive comments. From the LGBTQ community, the influencer with the ability to persuade the consumers to buy the product was Bretman Rock. His positive comments reflected admiration towards him, and how proud they are of what he has achieved. The majority of his comments also reflected high intentions to buy the products endorsed on the videos. This theme supports previous research that demonstrated that endorsers are more likely to be considered as experts if they have relevant knowledge (Homer & Kahle, 1990) and have the ability to generate a higher purchase intention (Ermeç et al., 2014). From a different perspective, Nikita Dragun's commenters were more interested in knowing the brands of products that were part of her production such as her bedding sheets. Her followers were interested in what she offers as an influencer but not the brands she was sponsoring. On the other hand, Ingrid Nilsen just generated a few comments that demonstrated an intention of buying the product.

The negative comments varied between these influencers. Ingrid Nielsen's negative comments focused on her appearance and her credibility on recommending brands. This supports previous research that demonstrated that in low-involvement engagement, users form attitudes

based on the endorser, but in the case of high engagement, the arguments will focus more on the message (Petty & Goldman, 1981). Since she has a small community, the followers focus more on her, rather than the products. Some commenters claimed that she only recommended these products due to the monetary compensation the brands offer her. Others claimed that the products she recommended did not work or produced a reaction on their skin. The negative comments towards her appearance focused on some changes she has had over the years. On the other hand, Bretman Rock and Nikita Dragun's negative comments focused on their sexual orientation. These comments included phrases such as "gay," "you are not a girl," and "you should die." These strong words can be considered offensive given the gender identity of the influencer. The influencer who received the most negative comments regarding her sexual orientation was Nikita Dragun. The transgender community is still in the process of being accepted (Bradford et al., 2013), as demonstrated by analyzing comments posted for Ingrid and Bretman and comparing with negative comments with Nikita. The neutral comments about the LGBTQ community were related to followers mentioning other social media users, references of the post, and conversation between followers who did not have any relation with the promoted brands or the post itself. The only difference found was in Nikita Dragun's comments: Followers confused her with the high-end celebrity Kylie Jenner.

Discussing the heterosexual community, the results varied between the influencers analyzed. In this community, most of the positive comments focused more on the appearance of the influencer rather than the content itself. Nash Grier's most positive comments were about followers praising his beauty and physical attributes. Other comments by followers supported his decision to donate his hair, but none of the comments mentioned the organization he sponsored. Some researchers and companies understand that using an influencer with attractive attributes

will result in effective advertising (Sharp, 2018). In this study, the brand does not get any benefit from this advertising strategy because users' focus is more on the influencer rather than the brand they are promoting. Camila Coelho's positive comments also focused on her appearance but she also triggered her followers' interest towards the products presented on the post. Some followers of this network demonstrated their interest in the beauty products discussed, but also, on her style on fashion and how she dresses. On that same note, Marcus Butler's positive comments demonstrated a higher focus on his appearance and style in clothing. Followers on this network tend to praise the influencer attributes, the locations picked for the posts and the clothes he was wearing. These comments did not contain any mentions or express interest in the brands or products discussed by the influencer. Positive comments for heterosexual influencers had a higher focus on the appearance, and overall, lacked clear engagement with brands.

The heterosexual influencers analyzed in this study had different results on their negative comments but some of them were present in all of them as well. Nash Grier's negative comments focused on his appearance as well. His followers were criticizing his decision to donate his hair, arguing that he would become less attractive without hair. Other negative comments focused on followers questioning his sexual orientation and others claiming that he was gay, even though Nash Grier's fiancé appears in some posts. None of the negative comments focused on the brands, demonstrating that none of his followers were interested in products he was endorsing.

Camila Coelho's negative comments focused on her credibility recommending products. Some followers complained that the products she promoted were expensive, do not offer results, and that she promoted products for financial gain. Other comments were about followers sharing their experience using the products she recommended, most of them complaining about negative reactions on their skin. A few negative comments focused on followers claiming that the lifestyle

she projected on social media was due to the high compensations she receives and sponsorship deals. This demonstrates that some of the followers of this network do not believe the source is completely credible. On the other hand, Marcus Butler's comments focused on the content he offered, with followers expressing their discomfort by communicating how his content is not relevant or attractive anymore. Marcus' followers expressed their reluctance to engage with the influencer, which was demonstrated by the number of comments he generated compared to the millions of followers he has on the different platforms.

After coding both communities' comments from YouTube and Instagram, I came to different conclusions that support my research questions. Responding to RQ1, the data collected demonstrated a positive response towards the influencers analyzed in this study. Followers focus on supportive comments and motivational comments on both platforms. This corroborates with previous research that claimed users develop engagement with influencers through personal interactions (Abidin, 2015). Comparing both communities, the LGBTQ influencers have a more positive perception from followers. The comments analyzed show that this community has more support and positive feedback in general than the heterosexual community. The negative comments received by the influencers were not as representative as the positive ones. Therefore, followers have a positive response to the content posted by these influencers.

Sexual orientation was not found to be an important factor when we talk about engagement. Data in this study found that the commenters perceive the LGBTQ influencers to be more credible. This credibility was towards both the content they are sharing and their honesty about recommending the sponsored products. More followers from the LGBTQ community informed the influencers that they have bought the product, demonstrating a sense of trust towards the products promoted in the social media posts. On the other hand, the heterosexual

community's comments did not demonstrate any intention of buying the products or even mentioning the brands; instead, the followers have a higher interest in the influencer's appearance. This contradicts a previous study that claimed endorsers who are considered more attractive will be more likely to motivate the purchase intention (Ermecc et al., 2014). Analyzing the engagement, the heterosexual community overall lacked comments, demonstrating a weakness on the influencer's part in generating buzz or interest in brands.

On the other hand, the LGBTQ community received a higher amount of comments. Many of those showed the intention of buying the product, support, and sharing the content with other followers. This study demonstrated that the sexual orientation of the influencer does not affect the content offered. Rather, followers of the LGBTQ community demonstrated a higher focus on the content and personality of the influencer. On the other hand, followers of the heterosexual community focused more on their appearance rather than the content of the social media posts.

Analyzing YouTube and Instagram comments demonstrated differences not only in how the platform works but also how followers perceive, react, and comment on the content. Responding to RQ3, the first main difference between these platforms is the level of engagement it generates. Both platforms offer a follower the ability to comment on these posts, or to like or dislike the content. Instagram produced the highest number of likes and comments. This can be the result of the second main difference between these platforms, that is, the ability to share the content. When followers share content from YouTube, they are sharing a link; and for the receiver to get fully the communication, they must open the link and watch a long-extended video. On the other hand, Instagram allows followers to mention others or to share the information through the direct message option. Instagram has shown it has a higher potential for spreading a message than YouTube.

Most of the Instagram comments were by followers mentioning other followers, not only raising the engagement of the influencer unconsciously, but also spreading a sponsored post. Analyzing the platforms through sentiments, YouTube generated more discriminatory comments but Instagram generated comments that are more sexually explicit. Discussing it on a general basis, I noticed that on Instagram followers tend to post comments that are graphic, while on YouTube, I did not find these types of comments. On Instagram, at least 10% of the comments had a sexual intention behind it. These types of comments focused on praising the influencer's attributes and romantic things they wished they could do. Another difference found on Instagram is the number of small business and other influencers' accounts that promoted their services or asked for a follow on the influencer post. The influencers who received these types of comments were Nikita Dragun and Bretman Rock. Due to the amount of engagement and feedback these influencers have on this platform, other brands are trying to capture the attention of these followers with the hope of improving their brand recognition or following. The last main difference between these platforms is the follower's behavior on them. On Instagram, followers focus on communicating their opinion through short texts or emojis, and they tend to be more expressive than YouTube users.

Discussing the source credibility theory, the results show that the influencers who demonstrated more expertise were perceived as a more credible source. Identifying credible sources on social media platforms is crucial because those are the ones who the users trust for product recommendations. From the marketing perspective, it allows companies to invest on brand influencers who will offer revenues to the brand, while increasing their brand awareness. In sum, this study offers marketers an insight on online user's behaviors towards products and brand influencers. In addition, it demonstrates that having an LGBTQ influencer as part of your

marketing strategies will offer the brand more revenues than a heterosexual one. Followers expressed more constructive and supportive communication with the LGBTQ community.

The communication is part of our everyday lives, especially now with platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Since anyone can create and share content, a lot of misinformation can be produced and shared. Identifying credible sources and using their services to spread important information can make changes throughout communities. This research also demonstrated that using brand influencers to communicate about social causes, emergency cases, or educational information can be highly effective, due to follower engagement generated and communication through social media channels.

Limitations

Followers' perceptions and reactions can vary across platforms and influencers. Followers' interaction and behavior varies depending on the platform they are using, and because of the limited number of platforms analyzed, the overall follower perceptions may be inconsistent. This study also focused on a limited number of influencers, and so the small sample size taken from both heterosexual influencers and LGBTQ influencers is not sufficient to generalize for either group. Followers' opinions and influencers' content can change over time, so there may be a lack of consistency in results of future replication of the study. This research would have probably had different results if the posts analyzed were organic posts instead of sponsored ones.

Analyzing different communities can vary the results depending on the personalities and cultures these followers and influencers come from. Each culture has specific beliefs and followers' perceptions are strongly based on previous experiences (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014). The posts analyzed for this research have the possibility of disappearing from the platform; this

would depend on the influencers' decision. Some influencers delete previous sponsored content because they no longer work with the brand, and they do not want to be associated with them, opening doors for new brands (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The chosen sentiments for this research could have different interpretations depending on who is coding the data. The results are based on the researcher's reading of the comments, and other scholars who code the same data might offer different results depending on their interpretation and bias of the data.

Future Studies

The results of this research provided interesting findings about influencers, sponsored content, and social media platforms. Future research should analyze why the video with a great number of views does not generate the same amount of comments from the followers. It would help to understand what the motivations are of followers who comment on YouTube channels, and why it is not as frequent as comments on other social platforms. Another topic to analyze is why sponsored posts usually have a lower number of comments than organic posts. This would help us understand what factors influence followers when they engage with these types of posts, and at the same time, what are their motivations for commenting on Instagram posts, especially on influencers or brands.

Future research should analyze why followers demonstrate a higher intention of acquiring the product promoted by a LGBTQ influencer rather a heterosexual one. It would help us to understand what other elements about the influencer, besides their credibility, allow followers to be persuaded to acquire the product. It would also be interesting to analyze the relationship between physical appearance of their social media influencer and the type of content they promote on social media. On the other hand, future research should analyze how the appearance can affect the content offered. This research demonstrated a higher focus on the influencer's

appearance than the content itself; it would be useful to see if the followers received the sponsored message or it got lost because they focused on the influencer's appearance or other attributes.

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Appendix

Figures

Figure 1

Ingrid Nilsen's First Instagram Post



Figure 2

Ingrid Nilsen's Second Instagram Post



Figure 3

Ingrid Nilsen's Third Instagram Post



Figure 4

Ingrid Nilsen's Fourth Instagram Post



Figure 5

Bretman Rock's First Instagram Post



Figure 6

Bretman Rock's Second Instagram Post



Figure 7

Nikita Dragun's First Instagram Post



Figure 8

Nikita Dragun's Second Instagram Post



Figure 9

Nash Grier's First Instagram Post



Figure 10

Nash Grier's Second Instagram Post



Figure 11

Camila Coelho's First Instagram Post



Figure 12

Camila Coelho's Second Instagram Post



Figure 13

Camila Coelho's Third Instagram Post



Figure 14

Camila Coelho's Fourth Instagram Post



Figure 15

Marcus Butler's First Instagram Post



Figure 16

Marcus Butler's Second Instagram Post



Figure 17

Marcus Butler's Third Instagram Post

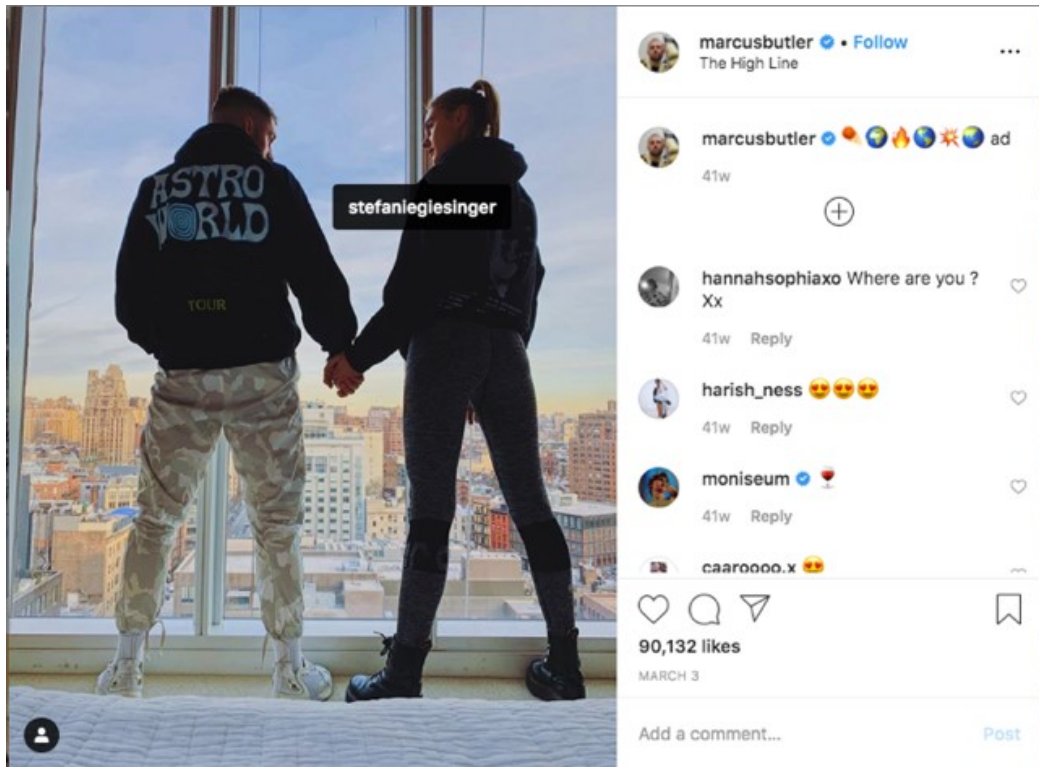


Figure 18

Marcus Butler's Fourth Instagram Post



Figure 19

Ingrid Nilsen's Coding Results

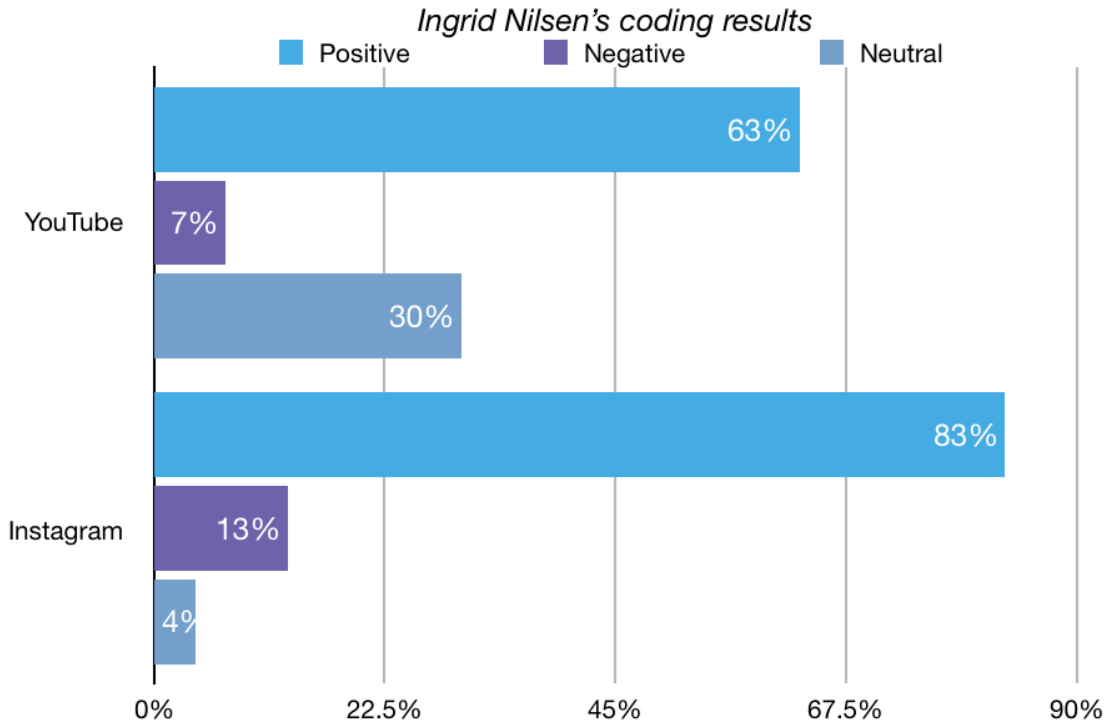


Figure 20

Ingrid Nilsen's YouTube Word Cloud

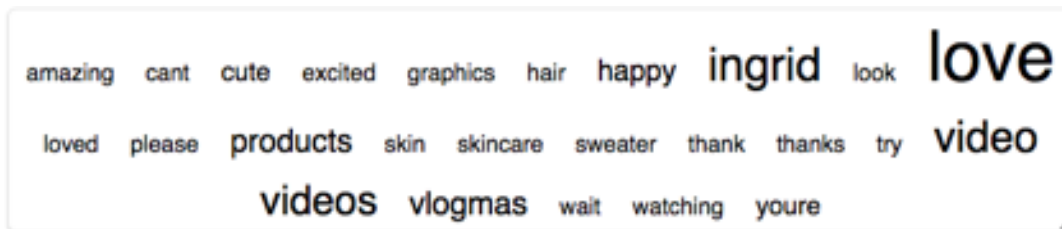


Figure 21

Ingrid Nilsen's Instagram Word Cloud



Figure 22

Bretman Rock's Coding Results

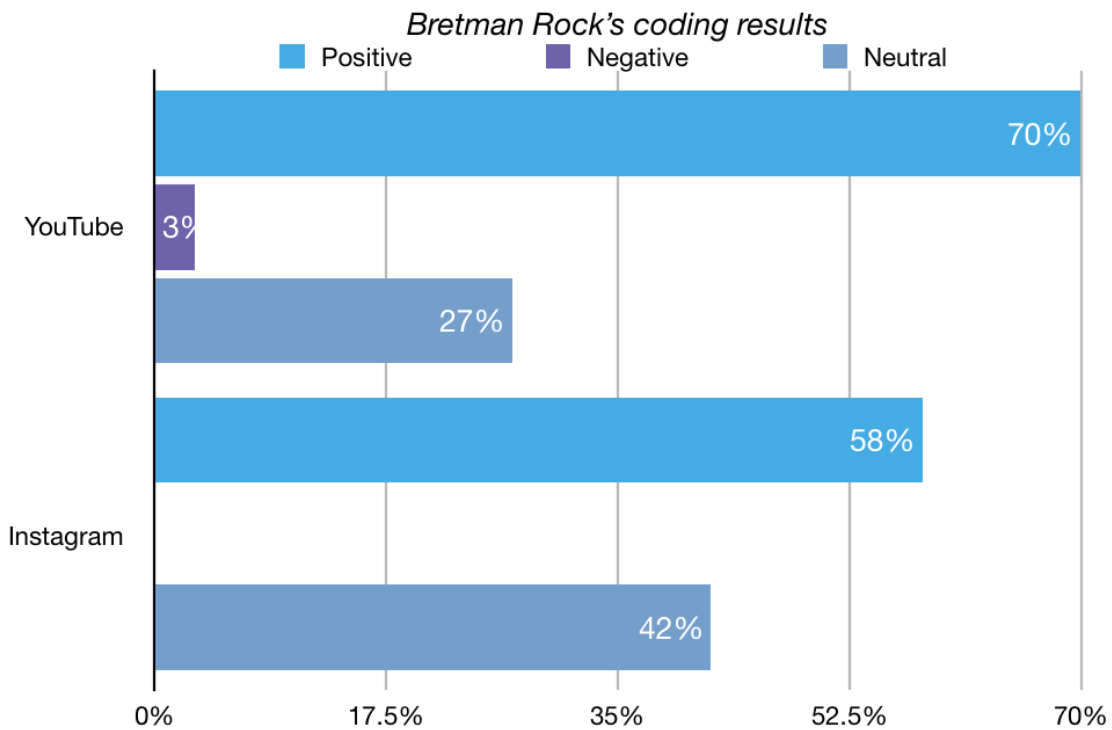


Figure 23

Bretman Rock's YouTube Word Cloud



Figure 24

Bretman Rock's Instagram Word Cloud



Figure 25

Nikita Dragun's Coding Results

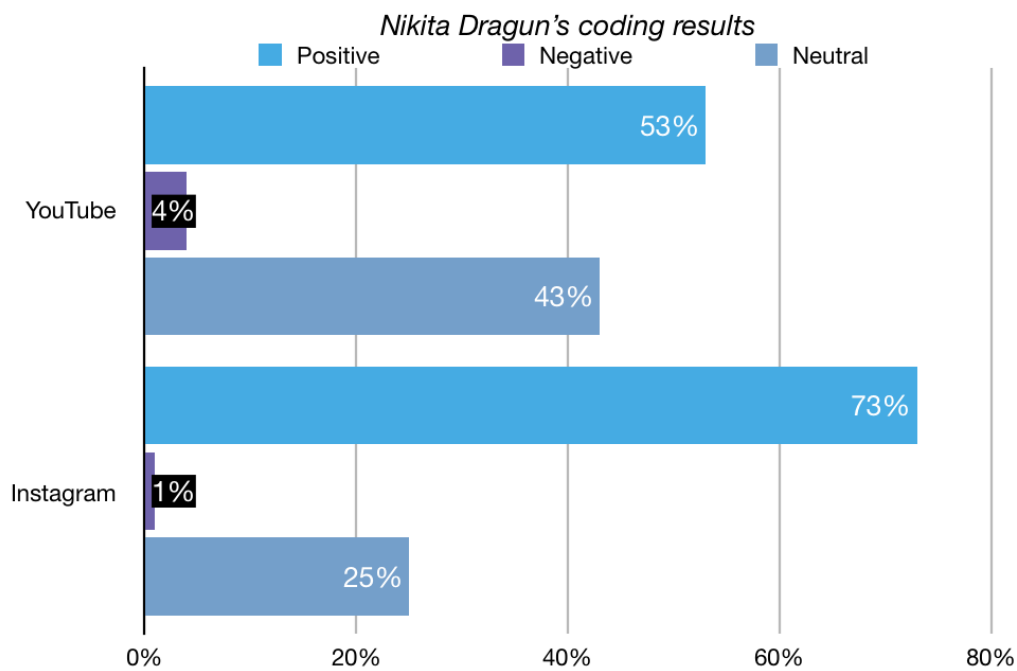


Figure 26

Nikita Dragun's YouTube Word Cloud

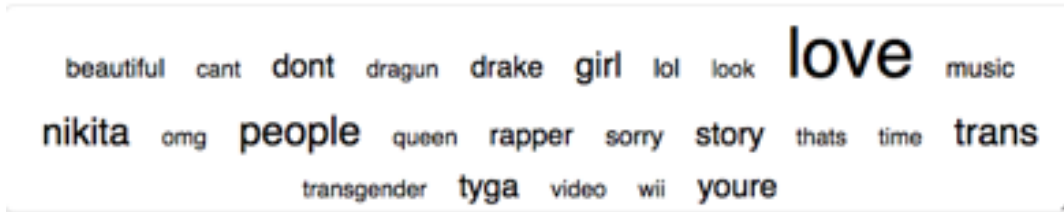


Figure 27

Nikita Dragun's Instagram Word Cloud



Figure 28

Nash Grier's Coding Results

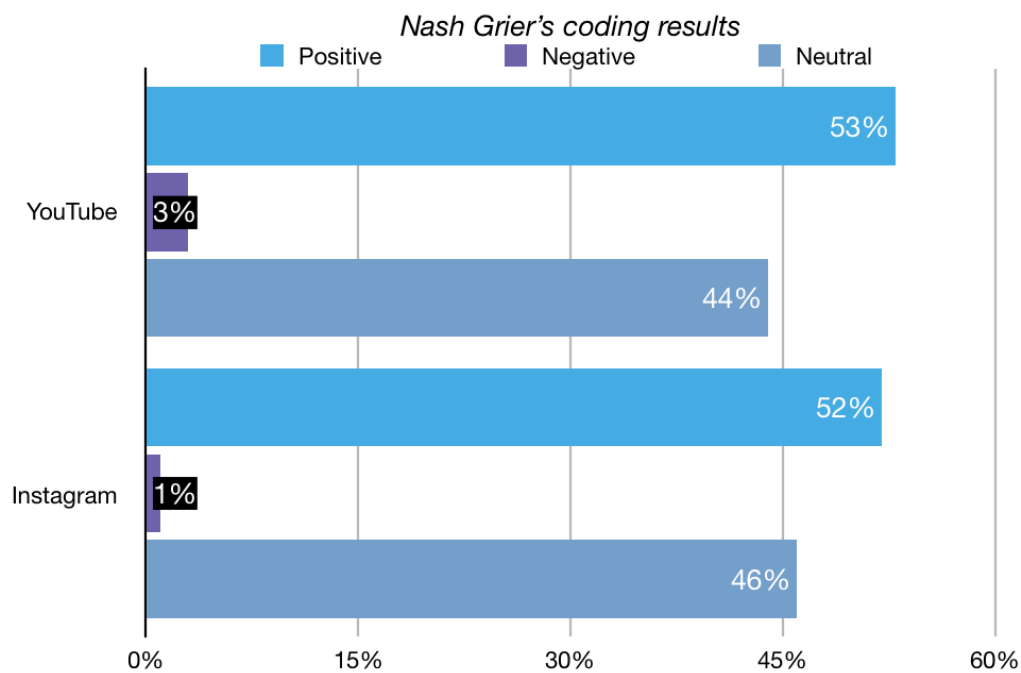


Figure 29

Nash Grier's YouTube Word Cloud

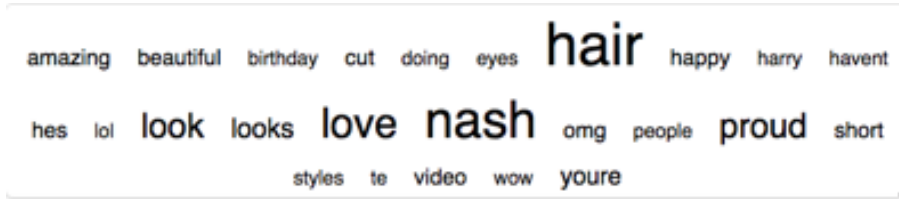


Figure 30

Nash Grier's Instagram Word Cloud

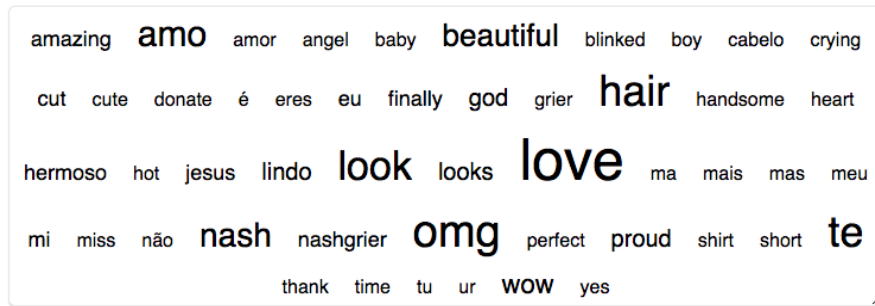


Figure 31

Camila Coelho's Coding Results

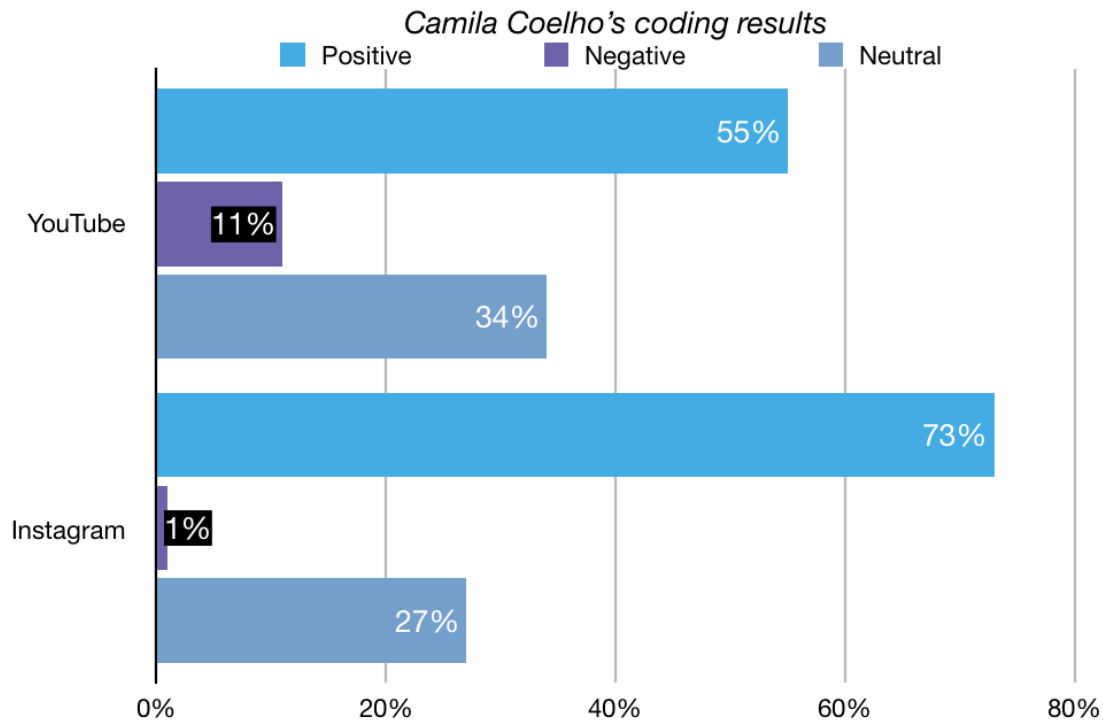
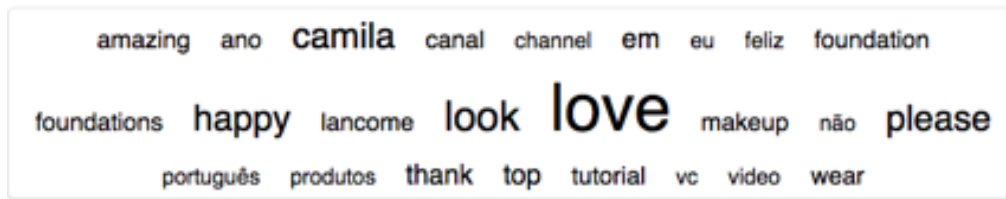


Figure 32

Camila Coelho's YouTube Word Cloud

**Figure 33**

Camila Coelho's Instagram Word Cloud



Figure 34

Marcus Butler's Coding Results

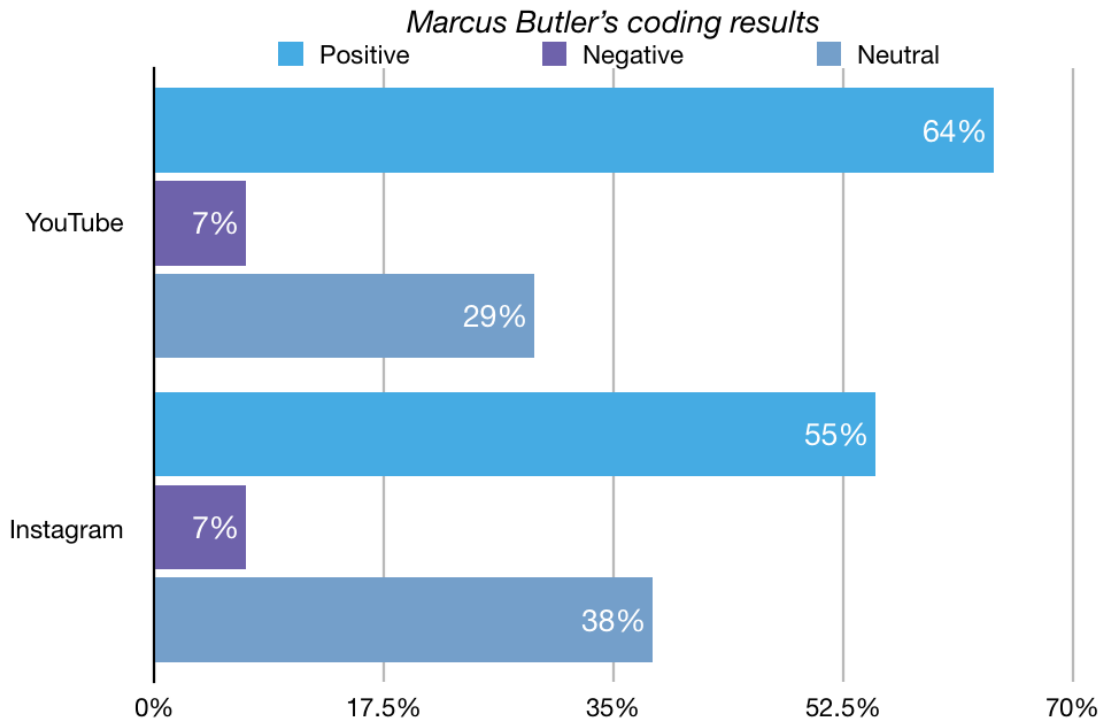


Figure 35

Marcus Butler's YouTube Word Cloud

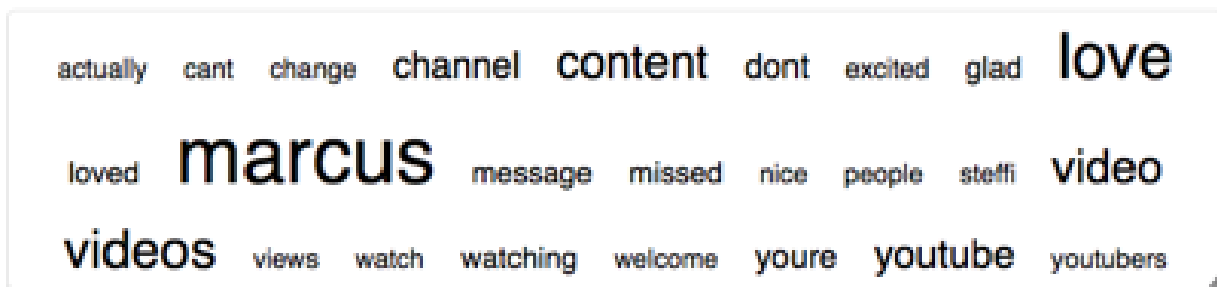


Figure 36*Marcus Butler's Instagram Word Cloud*