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What Makes A Successful Social Media Influencer?: Two Case Studies
BY Catherine Jokela

ADVISOR • Susan Baran
EDITORIAL REVIEWER • Stanley Baran

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ABSTRACT

Social media have changed the way people communicate and live their lives. And as might be imagined, with new platforms come new opportunities. One of those opportunities is becoming a social media influencer. Social media influencers can earn fame and fortune, but how is that success measured? In depth interviews with Katy Bellotte and Mikayla Nogueira, two successful social media influencers, will be analyzed to answer the question, "What makes a social media influencer successful?"

INTRODUCTION

There is continuous growth in the use of social media with no signs that it will slow down any time soon. There are approximately 3.6 billion Internet users on social networking sites (Clement, 2020). Social media have become particularly popular among Millennials, who have the most purchasing power among American age demographic groups. In 2019, for example, 90% of 18- to 29- year-olds in the United States were active on social media (Clement, 2020).

Instagram is the primary social media platform for most influencers (O'Malley, 2020). Brands have reported more engagement on Instagram than other platforms when working with influencers (O' Malley, 2020). In the fourth quarter of 2019, total interactions on Instagram were 20 times larger than those of Facebook, its parent company. Women make up the majority of fans and followers on brand pages on Facebook and Instagram, making up 58% of followers (O' Malley, 2020).

Social media influencers, also known as opinion leaders, use social media platforms-- such as YouTube or Instagram-- to share posts with their followers about personal information and products that they have tried. They are independent, third-party endorsers who hope to shape an audience's attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media channels (Freberg, 2011). Social media influencers create content, including videos, pictures, blog posts, and tweets, with a goal of increasing the number of followers they have and thus gaining partnerships with brands.

According to a survey by IZEA Worldwide, those who consume social media see the benefits of influencers, with 56% of respondents saying that they made a purchase based on a sponsored/paid social media post from an influencer. Also, 63% of participants said they find the content created by influencers to be more genuine and compelling than traditional advertising (Suciu, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of social media has had a large impact on how we communicate with each other. Using social media platforms, for example Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, allows people to connect whether they are in the same city or halfway across the world. With the rapid growth of these platforms comes new opportunities and for some a new career path. Not only can enlisting social media influencers become a successful strategy for brand marketing, but those influencers can earn a living from influencing full time. But what makes a social media influencer successful and how can that success be measured? This literature review focuses on the definition of a social media influencer, outlines the large scale of social media platforms, showcases the career of a full-time influencer, and examines how brands and influencers interact and the theories behind influencer communication.

INFLUENCING AS A CAREER

Being a social media influencer has the potential to be a full-time career. According to a recent study conducted by Lego, almost a third of 3,000 children said they wanted to be a social media influencer when they grow up (Taylor, 2019). Sinead Norenius-Raniere, vice president of influencer marketing and paid social at Valassis, says that "most [influencers] start blogging or sharing on YouTube as a passion project or a side hustle. Success doesn't happen overnight. You must build enough content and this process can sometimes take years in order for your platforms to support you financially" (Suciu, 2020).

Having a large following is not important for starting a career in influencing. Rather, brands look for genuine influencers, those who have not increased their number of followers through bots (software programed to increase engagement on a post) and those who produce high quality content. Since there is much more competition for followers today it is harder to build a following compared to 5 years ago (Suciu, 2020).

Still, there is a stigma associated with influencing as a full-time career because it is not seen as a normal career path. Brooke Miccio, YouTuber social media influencer, is an example of a full-time influencer. Miccio had an 8 to 5 job in sales, a podcast, a YouTube channel, and an online

business which led her to "burn out". She quit her 8 to 5 job and decided to pursue influencing full time and admits that she "earns a comparable amount online" to her former sales day job (Perelli, 2019). Miccio earns her money through brand sponsorships, YouTube AdSense, podcast ads, and merchandise sales.

BRANDS AND SOCIAL MEDIA INLUENCERS

Because of the rise of social media, advertising agencies have adjusted their strategies and are looking for the best return on their investment. One strategy they have turned to is influencer marketing. Brands will partner with influencers to convey information and to communicate their brand to an audience (Burke, 2017). Partnering with social media influencers has become common across all industries including beauty/fashion, home/family, health/fitness, travel/lifestyle, food/beverage, business/technology, and entertainment (Burke, 2017).

Advertising agencies are spending more on social media each year. In 2014, they spent $17.74 billion and in 2019 companies spent $130 billion on digital ads (Bridge, 2019). This is the first time in the United States that digital advertising surpassed the amount of money spent on traditional ads used by television and print media (Bridge, 2019). The amount spent on traditional advertising was $110 billion. More and more influencers are partnering with brands to communicate their product to the influencer's audience. Socialbakers, a social media marketing company, found the number of influencers using the hashtag "ad" in their posts grew by 90.5% from the fourth quarter of 2018 to the fourth quarter of 2019 (O'Malley, 2020). For every dollar a business spends on influencer marketing, they gain more than $5 in profits, and in 2020, 63% of marketers said they intended to increase their budget for influencer marketing the next year (Karamustafic, 2020, p.3).

When a social media influencer partners with a brand, the influencer is legally required to disclose the partnership. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) states that "influencers should clearly and conspicuously disclose their relationships to brands when promoting or endorsing products through social media" (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). Influencers also must disclose if there is a "'material connection' -between an endorser and an advertiser – in other

words, a connection that might affect the weight or credibility that consumers give the endorsement. That connection should be clearly and conspicuously disclosed, unless it is already clear from the context of the communication. A material connection could be a business or family relationship, monetary payment, or the gift of a free product. Importantly, the Endorsement Guides apply to both marketers and endorsers" (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). This law was put in place, so the audience of the influencer is not misled.

FINANCIAL SUCCESS AS AN INFLUENCER

There is a wide range of how much money influencers can make. Audrey Conklin says that prominent influencers can make between $30,000 and $100,000 a year (Conklin, 2020). Influencer Katy Bellotte covers the topic about compensation as an influencer on her podcast "Thick & Thin". She explains that brands will purchase a "package" to work with an influencer. What that means is a brand can order a video, either a dedicated video, a 30 second mention, a minute long mention, etc. A dedicated video is when an influencer is only mentioning that one brand, and no other competitor brands. A brand could buy a mention in a video along with three Instagram posts or Instagram Story posts. The "package" depends on how the brand what the brand wants to sponsor i.e., an Instagram post or video, and what platforms the influencer is on. Compensation also depends on negotiation with the brand. Bellotte receives roughly between $2,500 and $5,000 for an Instagram post. A full package, which is an Instagram post, three Instagram stories, and a dedicated video on YouTube, would cost the brand "roughly between $10,000 and $15,000".

These numbers are only an estimate from Bellotte's podcast, but it is a real-life example of how much an influencer can make. The numbers mentioned are also before taxes.

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is one factor that brands look at when working with an influencer. Engagement is defined as "'a user-initiated action' which leads to a 'co-creation' of value" (Khan, 2017, p. 237). Otherwise put, engagement is the user's participation with a post, such as a like on

Instagram, a comment on Facebook, or a view on a YouTube video. Businesses are interested in knowing the engagement social media influencers receive because this translates into how many people the influencer can reach. Engagement can also show if influencers bought their followers. For example, a red flag for a brand is if an influencer has one million followers but posts with low engagement. This raises questions of ingenuity and distrust on behalf of the influencer.

SELF-PRESENTATION

Social media influencers have control over what information they produce and release. This means they can choose what and what not to share and what not to share on the internet. The content that an influencer posts is the primary source of information on how they are judged by the public; it is their presentation of self. The phrase "presentation of self" come from sociologist Erving Goffman who analyzed "interpersonal interaction and how individuals 'perform' in order to project a desirable image" (Bullingham, 2013, p. 101). Everything on social media is written and shared by the creator: what they want to film/put in a YouTube video, the captions posted under an Instagram picture, the biography on their profile. People have power over what they share and how they want to present themselves on the internet. This is especially true for social media influencers. Their reputation is formed from how they present themselves online.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Social learning theory, originally presented by psychologist Albert Bandura states, "In the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behaviors of others" (Bandura, 1977, p. 3). Bandura goes on to say, "On the basis of informative feedback, they [consumers] develop thoughts or hypotheses about the types of behavior most likely to succeed. These hypotheses then serve as guides for future actions" (Bandura, 1977, p. 3). This helps explain why influencers have an impact on their audience. Brands partner with influencers in the hopes that the influencers' audience will model their actions and buy the product the influencers are promoting.

ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH

The Internet has changed the way people communicate. When people are communicating face-to-face, this is traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), an "oral form of interpersonal non-commercial communication among acquaintances" (Cheung, 2010, p. 329). In our new digital era WOM has easily morphed into a new form of communication called electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Electronic word-of-mouth communication is "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, and former customers about a product or a company via the Internet" (Cheung, 2010, p. 329).

This is how influencers connects with their audience. They establish themselves on social media and build a following. They communicate with those audiences through electronic word of mouth.

SOURCE CREDIBILITY THEORY

In communication theory, "source credibility" means that listeners have a sense of trust in a speaker. Source credibility theory states that "a communicator's positive characteristics can enhance the value of information in a message and… the receiver's acceptance of a message." Expertise and trustworthiness are two components that make up credibility. Expertise is "the perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions," and trustworthiness is "the perceived confidence in the source's intent to make valid assertions" (Chapple, 2017, p. 112). The combination of these factors is important in building relationships with an audience. There is no reason to believe that source credibility does not operate the same in influencer/audience relationships as it does in face-to-face speaker/listener relationships.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

Psychologist Albert Bandura presents another theory known as social cognitive theory. In social cognitive theory "human behavior is extensively motivated and regulated by the ongoing exercise of self-influence" (Bandura, 1991, p. 248). Social media influencers get a natural incentive when they see what content is performing well and they continue that content which is

successful. There is a "strong impact of perceived controllability on the self- regulatory factors governing decision making that can enhance or impede performance" (Bandura, 1991, p. 270). If content is doing well, influencers will develop increased aspirations and set mor challenging goals. The opposite is true; if content is failing, there will be lowered aspirations and loss of faith in their capabilities.

SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

In the world of social media, it is natural for users to compare themselves to the picture-perfect person they see when scrolling through Instagram. Festinger's theory of social comparison assumes that there is a "motivation to know that one's opinions are correct and to know precisely what one is capable of not doing" (Suls, 2013, p. 402). The theory becomes "social" in character when people judge themselves against others with whom they are interacting. People make comparisons when different features are present or if they are seeking self-confirmation. This may occur when "(1) people are simply trying to establish the range of abilities within which they fall, or (2) when the primary motive is self- enhancement" (Suls, 2013, p. 402).

BACKGROUND ON KATY BELLOTTE AND MIKAYLA NOGUEIRA

Katy Bellotte is a social media influencer, podcaster, and freelancer. Bellotte's freelancing work consists of her working with different brands helping them with graphic design. She started her YouTube channel on December 27, 2009, and over the past 11 years, has grown that channel to a following of over 470,000 subscribers and more than 51 million views. Bellotte posts new videos

every week "pertaining to my beauty, fashion, and lifestyle musings." Her following on social edia has attracted brands such as Nivea, Fossil, and Aerie. Bellotte runs her own podcast, "Thick and Thin." Every Thursday she talks about her "personal experiences with stories from history, offering advice, laughs and some major epiphanies." Bellotte describes herself on her website as "a Los Angeles based graphic designer, social content strategist, video editor, calligrapher, and lover of extra dirty martinis."

After graduating from Elon University in 2018 with a degree in Communications Design, Bellotte worked at L'Oreal Paris in New York City as the Assistant Manager of their digital and social department. She quit her 9 to 5 job and pursued freelancing, entrepreneurship, and influencing.

Mikayla Nogueira is a beauty content creator on TikTok. She started her TikTok account in March of 2020 and has gained over 4 million followers on the platform with over 200 million likes on her videos. Her goal is to "help other people learn different types and styles of makeup". Nogueira posts TikTok videos daily and has partnered with brands including Ulta Beauty, elf cosmetics, and Colorpop. In addition to her TikTok following of 4 million users, Nogueira has two Instagram accounts. Her makeup account, @mikaylajmakeup, has over 800,000 followers and her personal account, @ mikaylanogueira, has over 80,000 followers. Nogueira graduated from Bryant University with a Communications degree and is pursuing influencing full time.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this thesis is to answer the question, "What Makes a Successful Influencer?" To answer this question the author conducted in-depth interviews with two popular influencers, Katy Bellotte and Mikayla Nogueira. The method employed is in the interpretive research tradition. This methodology relies on "the position of the researcher relative to the knowledge produced, calling for greater reflexivity and struggling over how to present research in the form of stories and narratives rather than 'findings'" (Clark, 2013, p. 319).

My existing knowledge of influencers and social media, based on my extensive reading and understanding of the available literature, will guide my interpretation of the data collected in the interviews. Philosopher of social science Paul Diesing (1992) says "there is no knowledge without foreknowledge. That is we form an expectation about the unknown from what we 'know'… Our initial hypothesis, based on foreknowledge, directs our attention to certain passages in the text as the important ones" (p. 108).

My goal, as communication theorist Katherine Miller would say, is to "gain local understanding of specific social collectives and specific events" (2005, p. 58). Specifically, I want to gain understanding of social media influencers, what makes the two interviewees successful, and where they see their industry going in the future. Miller also explains that this understanding "can be reached only from the actor's point of view." This "inquiry from the inside" requires that I minimize "the distance between the knower and the known," creating "a joint conversation involving values and experiences of both researchers (me) and participants (the interviewees)" (2005, p. 58).

Conducting interviews is an important form of research because those interviews are an extremely effective form of qualitative research. This study includes little, if any, quantitative research; therefore, this is the appropriate method. In-depth interviews are valuable when a researcher wants detailed information about participants' thoughts and opinions about a subject and they provide more context to other data. This is what this study is about, asking two influencers their thoughts and opinions about their profession and providing more context and information on why they think they have become successful.

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The data sources needed to complete my thesis are content produced by the two social media influencers and research regarding communication theory. Appendix A shows the general interview outline prepared in advance of the conversations with the influencers. Of course, as the interviews played out, questioning, of necessity, departed from this basic outline.

FINDINGS

This qualitative study found that a content creators' success is not defined by income or follower count, they are more focused on the authenticity of the content they produce and how the content makes them feel.

The interviews with Mikayla Nogueira and Katy Bellotte went in-depth on how they view their careers. Bellotte and Nogueria both make money on influencing, but the two are very different. Bellotte has multiple streams of income. She says that Instagram, YouTube, and podcast campaigns are "roughly half of my income, half of my job, are those outlets, and the other half is my graphic design work and my Patreon work." Nogueira gains her income strictly from social media. The two differ in the number of streams of income, number of followers, and the types of content they produce.

Influencer's salaries have become a taboo subject because there is little reporting covering the subject and the earning amounts vary depending on follower count. For example, Mikayla Nogueira has 4 million "very active followers" on TikTok. The two main ways someone can make money on TikTok are through the Creator Fund and through brand sponsored posts. Funds are calculated by the number of views and the authenticity of those views, the level of engagement on the content, as well as making sure the content is in line with TikTok's Community Guidelines and Terms and Conditions. The bulk of her income comes from brand sponsored posts. Her management company makes the partnership deals and signs the contracts. She said that,

> "I personally, someone who receives a lot of views, 4 million very active followers, and posts every single day, I make around $200 a day on the Creator Fund- and that is very

high. A lot of people are making 10 cents a day, $5 a day- it really depends on your engagement and your follower count."

When partnering with brands, Nogueria adds,

"Now that I have four million and I grow pretty fast on Instagram as well, I can make up to $25,000 for one TikTok video. It's pretty crazy. Any time I do an ad, that is pretty much my going rate. It also depends on what the brand is that the ad is for and how long they want the ad to be shown for. Say I make an ad for an eyebrow product, if they are asking me to not use any other brand of eyebrow products, that's going to bump that up. There's a lot of factors, but it is usually around the $25,000."

When partnering with a brand, Bellotte and Nogueira always disclose sponsorship on a post. Bellotte says,

"I think influencers are doing themselves a disservice if they don't disclose it because our followers are extremely smart, and they know when something is an ad. If there's no #ad or if there's no disclosure it kind of feels like a slap in the face." Nogueira adds, "If you film and ad and submit it to the brand, they also require you to submit a caption because they want you to prove that in your caption you are going to state whether it is an ad."

Engagement is extremely important for influencers; it is crucial when brands are looking for partnerships and it is how content creators interact with their followers. When Bellotte worked at L'Oréal in their social media department, the number one characteristic the company would look for in an influencer was engagement. Bellotte explains,

"Follower numbers are important but it doesn't really matter if u have x followers, if you don't have engagement from those followers- the way the algorithm works on Instagram, on YouTube, and a lot of different platforms, if your content isn't being served to the people that follow you, it doesn't really matter how many people follow you and the way you get your content served to people more is having high engagement because the more people that engage your posts the more the feed pop ups are going to serve it to them again the next time that you post."

Talking about engagement from her personal perspective, Bellotte says,

> "I have a clear motive with my content, and I hope people can see that from their point of
> view. I'm always trying to connect with people because I feel like there is a lot of hurt in
> this world and I try to put good things out there that will hopefully make people feel less
> alone and feel seen. Engaging with your followers for me is the bread and butter of what I
> do. I try to make sure that I am on the same page as everyone that follows me and try to
> get to know those people. Engagement is extremely important. It also, as a content
> creator and someone who makes a living off of this, it is important to engage because
> that's how you grow. Engagement is the most important thing, in my opinion."

Mikayla agreed in saying that engagement is extremely important, but she also wants to interact
with her followers,

> "I am responding to people because I try to treat it as I'm not just an influencer who is
> putting out content to make money, I actually care and I actually want to know who is
> following me and form some sort of connection, I know I can't meet everybody. I try to
> make some sort of connection, so I comment back to a ton of people. Engagement to me
> is one of my favorite parts because you get to see who is enjoying your content and that
> helps you love what you do even more."

Social comparison between a content creator's audience and the content creator is very common.
Katy Bellotte is aware of social comparison and tries to fill her feed with positivity and she talks
about comparing herself to others.

> "I think it's just a human thing that people compare themselves to other people regardless
> and social media definitely makes it easier for you to compare yourself. I definitely think
> people compare themselves to me- the people that follow me. I always hope that it is in a
> good way that they compare themselves in a sense that where they see the way I create
> things or the way I express myself and maybe they don't think of it as a bad thing, like
> 'oh I'm not this way', maybe take it as a cue to them that they can be like that. They can
> express themselves online more and not feel afraid to do things. I always hope that it is in
> a good way and not inspiring people to hate themselves in any way but I know that it

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happens and so I try to be as transparent as I can and show people that maybe the side of me that they're jealous of isn't always the way that I am. I don't always look like I just got a blowout and there are moments where I don't feel like that. The podcast is definitely the most vulnerable outlet that I have. I think the listeners of the podcast really know me and they know everything is not all its cracked up to be. I compare myself to other influencers and normal people on the street. I compare myself daily. I think it's just something that happens, and I try to be on the good end of it where I'm inspiring people to be better, but in a way that helps them and isn't totally crazy."

Content creators Bellotte and Nogueira have a shared belief system when talking about success. They measure success by an internal spectrum. When asked, "How do you measure success?" Bellotte responded,

"For a while I measured success with numbers, and I think a lot of people do. When certain pieces of content do better it makes me feel good, it makes you feel like you're succeeding. I think as I've gotten older, I have seen value in different things, and I think it has really translated into my content and it has really helped me find more value from my work. For a while I was putting all of my eggs into the 'influencer' basket, and the thing about it making it your full time career – thankfully it isn't my full time career because I have my graphic design stuff too- but for people that do make it their full time, it does get to be stressful when your numbers are not where they should be or the algorithm isn't favoring your posts and you aren't getting the likes you are should be getting. It gets to rule your life and you start to put out content that doesn't feel right to you because you need to get the numbers. Luckily, I have learned over the years that I don't need to put all my eggs into the internet basket, and I have other strengths and I can do other things which helps me put less stress into the numbers. I don't want to have to fully focus on the numbers all the time. It has taken me time to figure this out and, luckily, I have gotten to this point where now I have 2 things that I do, and I have multiple outlets and I don't focus so much on YouTube all the time. YouTube has become a very saturated place where I'm not getting the numbers that I used to get on YouTube and that's fine because I've transitioned my work into other places and I can

still have love for content without it having to be my make or break, 'this is how I'm getting my next meal' type of thing. To answer your question, I think success for me now looks like 'Am I putting out content that I look at and am proud of?' If I am proud of the work, I am creating and I know that it is impacting people in a strong way, that is success for me."

When asked the same question, Nogueira answered,

"To be honest I measure success through my happiness. Right now, for instance, I am really happy. If I feel really happy and very confident on what I am doing, I know I am successful and I know I can be successful. If you always have a positive mindset and a positive outlook you will be successful. If you keep chasing what you want to succeed in, you will absolutely succeed in that. Hate comments for instance happen all the time for influencers. If I were to live my life reading those comments and becoming consumed in them and give up and not want to try because I am discouraged, that to me, is me failing."

Influencing may or may not be a career with longevity- it is dependent on the content creator. Nogueira and Bellotte have differing opinions on the subject. Nogueria said,

"When you are an influencer, it goes like this: you start from the bottom and then you hit this peak- I don't know if I have hit the peak yet- where you are at your most popular and then it starts to very slowly go down. When it starts going down is when you have to start really thinking. Are you going to start doing a podcast? Are you going to start a makeup line at Sephora? What are you going to do to really have a future?"

The TikTok creator added,

"When I am 45 years old, no one is going to care. Right now, I am young, I am fresh, I am interesting."

Nogueira starting pursuing influencing in March 2020 and Bellotte has been creating content for over a decade. When asked about the longevity of being an influencer Bellotte responded,

"I think so, seeing as I've been on the Internet for 10+ years and it's still working out. I would say it definitely is. It really depends on the person. You can get pretty fatigued in this job. I think so, for me personally, yes."

From an outsider's perspective, creating content online and making a living from it might seem easy. It is not a traditional job, where you go into the office from 9-5, receive benefit packages, and your life is not under a microscope. There are unique stresses that come with the job that cannot be translated into a 9-5 job. Nogueira says,

"[Influencers] don't have health insurance given to us. We don't have any of that stuff that a regular teacher would get in their employment package… The minute if you get cancelled or if you fall off and you're not making money anymore, what are you going to do?"

Influencer needs to plan for their future because there is a risk that they will be cancelled. "Getting cancelled" or "cancel culture" means that you stop receiving support from your followers. Mikayla Nogueira does not like cancel culture because "Everybody makes mistakes. A content creator, yes we choose to have our life like of under a microscope, but at the same time we are still people and I hate that we get totally dehumanized and were just seen as entertainment." When asked if there was something that people should know about influencers Bellotte added to this narrative of disliking cancel culture, "I think it is something where a lot of people are very quick to cancel us when we make a mistake. We of course are humans, but it is also if you are cancelling someone you are essentially impacting the way that they are surviving, especially during a pandemic. I think just seeing people very quick to cancel certain people that I follow, and influencers can be really afraid to create things because they are worried about the backlash."

DISCUSSION

The in-depth interviews with Katy Bellotte and Mikayla Nogueira highlight the major question in this paper, "What makes a successful social media influencer?" Social media influencers have

changed the way businesses connect with their audience. Both parties benefit in this relationship; brands build a larger network of consumers and influencers are well-compensated. The findings from the in-depth interviews show that to an influencer, success is not measured by their follower count or how much money they make. Success, for Katy Bellotte and Mikayla Nogueira, comes from within. Failing, to them, is posting content that they are unhappy with and consuming themselves in the negative aspects that come with the job.

A social media influencer with 4 million followers can make $25,000 per sponsored post. The median income in the United States is just over $30,000. If an influencer posts two sponsored videos a month, she is making more money in one month than the average American makes per year. A content creator with a following of 500,000 subscribers on YouTube, for example Katy Bellotte, can make between $10,000-$15,000 for a brand sponsorship. The bigger following an influencer has, the more she can charge for a sponsorship.

The two influencers both saying that they measure success on a spectrum of happiness makes sense. If they get too consumed on trying to outperform their previous video or previous post by getting more views or more likes, they will experience burnout and their enjoyment of creating content will decrease. In the interview with Katy Bellotte, she said that she experiences burnout all the time. She says,

> "I feel like there are some days where I feel like I need to take a step back and remind myself why I'm doing this and make sure I'm not going down the slippery slope of being like everyone else. I definitely experience burnout. There's definitely weeks where I don't know what to post or I don't know what to talk about on the podcast and its difficult, but I always try to work on it."

When it comes to burnout, Nogueira says that due to her energetic personality and her love for what she does, she does not experience burnout. It is also important to analyze the difference in how long these influencers have been creating content. Bellotte has been posting content since she was in high school and her videos on YouTube are over 10 minutes long. Nogueira started posting in March of 2020 and her TikTok videos are one minute or less.

In addition to being happy with what they post, they want to spread positivity through their content. Social media can be very toxic with social comparison and influencers recognized how negative the online space can be. Another reason why it is important to measure success from within is because social media influencers compare themselves to their peers by comparing a multitude of factors. Comparing follower count and brand can be detrimental for their mental health.

The longevity of a career in creating content for social media depends on the person. For Mikayla Nogueira, there is a shelf life to this profession. She says to stay in this industry, an influencer should branch out into new ventures, like starting a podcast or launching a product. This came to fruition with Katy Bellotte. Whether it is intentional or not, Bellotte is creating content on more platforms compared to when she started on YouTube. She has a YouTube channel, Instagram, podcast, a Patreon, merchandise, and a freelancing business. Having various platforms gives Bellotte a chance to create what makes her happy and it also brings in different streams of income.

In my judgement, Nogueira and Bellotte are comparable to other influencers. From years of watching influencers who create different styles of content, the data collected from the interviews further strengthen my knowledge of influencing.

There is a certain stigma about influencing as a career; being an influencer includes creating content for an audience and brands pay a lot to partner with that influencer. To some extent, this is true. There are content creators that make millions of dollars a year. For example, nine-year-old Ryan Kaji from Texas is the highest paid YouTuber making $29.5 million in 2020 from reviewing toys and games. However, this is not the norm but becoming a millionaire and gaining a huge following is a common reason people want to be influencers. Those who go into the influencing business to become rich and famous do not last. Content creators with longevity are the people who start creating content out of pure enjoyment. Bellotte is a unique case because she started her YouTube channel when people were not making money from their videos, at least not to the extent they are now. She created videos as a creative outlet. Nogueira also comes from humble beginnings. In the interview she said she first downloaded TikTok to post videos with

her mom because her mom was a teacher and wanted to make videos for her students during remote learning.

Viewers are smart and can sense when an influencer is being disingenuous. Not being honest with followers takes on many different forms. One example is not being fully transparent when working with a brand. If an influencer does not clearly use #ad or #sponsored on what is clearly a partnership given how they act and talk about the brand, it is off-putting. Another example deals more recently with the pandemic and social distancing. There have been multiple content creators who posted about quarantining and staying safe in the pandemic, then pictures and videos would get leaked of them out at a party. Commitment to transparency is not common in the industry, but the content creators who are transparent and honest have more longevity than those who are not. Bellotte and Nogueira are genuine with their audience which shows in Bellotte's longevity and Nogueira's quick following gain.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought out the answer to the question "What makes a social media influencer successful?" The findings of the in-depth interviews showed that, for Katy Bellotte and Mikayla Nogueria, success is not measured by wealth or fame. Success is an internal feeling from the content they are producing and how they interact with their followers. Bellotte measures success by asking the question, "Am I putting out content that I am proud of?" If the answer to that question is "yes", she sees herself as a success. For Nogueira, feeling happy and confident in what she is doing is success. Failure, according to Nogueira, is getting consumed in the negative aspects of the digital world, for example reading hate comments, and giving up because of that negativity. Katy Bellotte and Mikayla Nogueira are two very different influencers: they create different styles of content, the platforms of their content differ, and the amount of money they make is different. It is important to analyze these content creators next to each other when asking "What is success?" because although they are very different, they both measure success in a similar way. To answer the question of this paper, if an influencer is happy and is confident with the content they are creating, they are successful.

Happiness is the biggest factor in being a successful influencer, but there are many routes to achieving that happiness. Bellotte mentioned that when she started, she focused a lot on the numbers of views/likes she was receiving. Now, she has found value in other things which has helped her to find more value from her work. Nogueira adds that her happiness stems from her confidence, positive mindset, and positive outlook.

There is a spectrum when it comes to happiness. It is hard to be happy every single day; everyone has their days. Hate comments affect influencer's happiness. Nogueira says that when hate comments are posted on her page, they are "extremely difficult" to deal with. Cancel culture also has an effect on influencers' happiness. Bellotte spoke about cancel culture saying, "I think just seeing people very quick to cancel certain people that I follow, and influencers can be really afraid to create things because they are worried about the backlash." Not only does it affect the content influencers put out, which is one of the main sources of happiness, but it essentially affects how they are surviving; if they lose their following, they lose their partnerships, which means they lose their income.

Content creators' success being an internal measure is applicable to influencers outside of Bellotte and Nogueira. The fact that Bellotte and Nogueira are so different in their time creating content, the content they create, and the platforms they post on, but they agree that measuring success in a qualitative manner proves that the answer to this thesis can be applied to any content creator.

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