

**Why has Instagram attracted the attentions of big business, and what has been the effect of their involvement?**

Instagram is a free online photo sharing and social network platform that began in October 2010, quickly becoming one of the most popular photography apps used worldwide. The app currently has 400 million active users (November 2015), which is predicted to increase in the New Year. When the platform was launched, it attracted a majority of individuals interested in photography and those who like to share their lives on social media. With the rise in the popularity of the app it became very attractive to advertisers, as the platform has a vast target market allowing them to reach out to many individuals, gaining them more business awareness, allowing them to create a marketing strategy with a lot of potential. Although, there are many problems involved with advertisement on social media as many posts are deceptive, with many posts being pernicious to the reader. Essena O'Neill was once an influential beauty blogger who revolted against the deception of online advertising. Her profile had over 500,000 followers, proving appealing to many businesses for sponsorship deals, although as the demand grew, she became less happy with the career she had created for herself on social media as she felt she was losing control over what she was posting, constantly having to keep up with societies standards and expectations.

The reason for the rise in popularity of businesses advertising on social media is because there has been a recent decline in advertisement in hard copy magazines and newspapers as a majority of the digital native are now online and will pay more attention to what is presented online which they can access for free rather than having to pay for a magazine featuring many advertisements. Instagram starting feeding advertisement campaigns and sponsorship to its users towards the end of 2013, beginning with brands that already had a large following on their account and an existing presence on the social media app e.g. Benefit. Campaigns can range from one off posts, a contract for one weekly post or an influencer becoming an ambassador for a company etc.

Benefit Cosmetics is a San Francisco-based makeup brand that began in 1976 which has developed into the successful brand it is today. Benefit believes laughter is the best cosmetic. Their products and advertising are known to be fun and playful, that offer an interactive experience that is truly unique, bold and girly. The business has over 4,000 counters in 40 countries, and has over 4 million followers combined on all their social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc., being one of the fastest growing beauty brands in the industry. Their interactive approach with their customers is one of the reasons to thank for the growth of the business. Benefit engage with women on their own professional Instagram account and through hashtags by reposting inspiring pictures and #fotd (face of the day) compliments for all their followers to see. This interaction is what helps the business differ from other brands, showing they're approachable and creating a feel good brand image.<sup>1</sup>

#Realsies is one of their popular advertisement campaigns on Instagram, promoting the release of their new mascara, They're Real! With the rise of 'selfies' Benefit Cosmetics used

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<sup>1</sup> <http://shortyawards.com/6th/benefit-cosmetics>

this opportunity to produce a campaign where customers are able post pictures of the product and them wearing the mascara themselves. This is attractive to consumers as they believe it gives them a voice and are a part of a community, whilst also benefiting the brand because it creates awareness of their product, and customers give a variety of truthful reviews and previews of the product. The hashtag was not only a chance for customers to review the product, every photo with the #realsies hashtag entered them into a competition run by the business, where Benefit would choose their favourite weekly image of a customer wearing their product, with the chance of winning a year's supply of They're Real! Mascara. This campaign gained over 12,000 tagged photos ranging from everyday girls to well-known celebrities and beauty bloggers.<sup>2</sup> This campaign supports the Uses and Gratifications theory by Blumier and Katz, as it gives the audience a sense of identity, allowing them to express themselves, the brand creates tutorials, giving make up tips, which is educating their audience, they entertain with their fun, unique approach to advertising and engaging with their audience and finally they offer social interaction with the variety of hashtags and competitions they offer for their customers to get involved in on social media. It is also a feminist brand as a lot of their advertisement is focused on empowering women and it has a 1970s vibe but it appeals to today's generation as they modernise it, this can be linked with the theory of Meehan who suggests that women in the 1970s were seen as strong role models which may be what Benefit are aiming to portray through their products, suggesting that if an individual were to wear their products they would feel like an independent, strong women.

In recent generations the way we look has become more and more important, causing many of the advertisement campaigns to be published on Instagram to be about how we look. @NikeWomen on Instagram (1.9 million followers) is an example of this as they created the #BetterForIt hashtag; the campaign began in Moscow when the brand started creating street art of well-known women athletes, showing their achievements and their moments of pride. The idea was for individuals to post a picture of themselves with this street art to show their support for the campaign and encourage women to post about their own fitness goals and achievements. As the posters took over the city, more and more women posted their moments of pride on Instagram. By the end of the campaign, over 25,000 photos were published on Instagram with the hashtag #BetterForIt.<sup>3</sup> Nike Women decided to create this advertisement campaign on Instagram because it allowed the audience to celebrate women's achievements and to socialize with people involved in the same movement. The hashtag also allowed individuals to be a part of the '90 day better for it challenge' which combined workouts from the Nike+ Training club app and the Nike+ Running app where they are able to gain information and fitness tips. Many transformation pictures were posted during the campaign, allowing anyone to scroll through and see the results, giving them motivation to think they can do it too, causing it to be such a success. Nike saw that body image was becoming a popular topic talked about on social media and believed in future the female fitness industry will become increasingly popular compared to the male industry, which is why they decided to specialise the campaign to target women.<sup>4</sup> This campaign may cause controversy as Laura Mulvey, creator of 'The Male Gaze' believes that women are seen as passive objects of male desire, whereas Nike contradict this theory, emphasising that females are just as strong as males, aiming to give more confidence to all women

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.benefitcosmetics.com/uk/en-gb>

<sup>3</sup> <http://wersm.com/nike-celebrates-active-women-with-instaposter/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://uk.businessinsider.com/nike-betterforit-women-campaign-2015-4?r=US&IR=T>

around the world by giving them a voice.

One of the main reasons I believe big businesses were attracted to marketing their products and services on the app is due to the subtle presentation of many adverts. Instagram uses the hashtag (#) feature on the app, allowing users to tag subjects within their photo for example #makeup, anyone with an interest in this may then search the subject and come across a stream of photographs which may include advertisement without the consumer having any knowledge of it. This enforces the idea of subtle advertisement, as in a way businesses are able to manipulate individuals due to not listing their post as an ad.

Another common approach to subtle advertising that many businesses use is using social media influencers, those who have built renown, sizable followings and a regard for being a top tastemaker in one or several niches<sup>5</sup> e.g. bloggers or celebrities to endorse their product through paid sponsorship, known as citizen journalism. *“Those with more resources can shout the loudest.”*<sup>6</sup> Although, the current social media legislations are very vague and don't always have consequences if they choose not to label a post as a paid sponsorship, e.g. captioning it #sponsored. This is due to businesses not wanting to promote the fact they have to pay someone in order for them to like/buy their products or the user/blogger posting these photos not wanting to lose loyal followers due to them losing trust in their opinion, because if they're being paid to promote this product, do they actually like it? This supports the theory of Marxism as businesses are exploiting creative individuals in order to make a profit. It also links in with Jean Baudrillard's Hyperreality theory, with consumers not knowing what posts on social media are realistic and what's produced with the instruction from a business. The social media influencers also gain a profit from posting sponsored content with the earning from £250 to £3,000 per post, depending on how many likes and engagements they have.<sup>7</sup>

The beauty, fitness and fashion industry is popular for businesses to invest their money in sponsoring bloggers and celebrities due to the concept of the app being photos and videos, looks are seen as important in order to gain a following so people listen to those in 'power' when they believe it will enhance their identity, in order to be more like them. Identity and the way we look has become the subject of an individual in recent years with #Fitspo and #Thinspo being one of the most viewed hashtag on Instagram, always comparing ourselves to 'what we could be'.

Something else that may attract the attention of big businesses to promote on Instagram is the lack of words used in a post. The app has a filter on the amount of characters used in a caption, making them very vague to the consumer when a business is advertising a product. The dominance of a picture with the minimal words will be more eye catching and attractive to the consumer as the app users expect the presence of photographs rather than text, meaning they may be more receptive to the content.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://mediakix.com/2015/07/top-social-media-influencers-2015-series/>

<sup>6</sup> The Virtual Revolution, episode 1 – The Great Leveler

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/nov/27/instagram-users-earn-income-advertising-brands>

The app also has a filter on the amount and content of sponsorship shown on an individual's feed. Instagram keeps note of your interests through your following and searches, allowing them to post advertisement campaigns that would potentially interest you, helping businesses reach out to their target markets, gaining more potential profit.

Although many online bloggers and celebrities support sponsored content, one user who has stood against it creating an online movement is Essena O'Neill. Essena had 612,000 Instagram followers, a modelling contract and a career travelling the world just for the 'perfect shot' in order to please her sponsors, making around £1000 per post. On 27 October she deleted more than 2,000 pictures *"that served no real purpose other than self-promotion"*, and dramatically edited the captions to the remaining 96 posts creating a series called 'Behind the image', one stating *"EDIT REAL CAPTION: paid for this photo. If you find yourself looking at 'Instagram girls' and wishing your life were there's... Realise you only see what they want. If they tag a company 99% of the time it's paid."*<sup>8</sup> Essena felt as though social media was consuming her and taking over her real life, she thrived off followers and likes in order to feel satisfied, *"I was so hungry for social media validation"*.

Essena has now deleted all her existing online content and we're left with her website 'letsbegamechangers.com'. This allows her followers and individuals interested in the movement to access her views on what she created and what influenced her to make such a decision that would impact her for the rest of her life. These thoughts are shown through raw YouTube videos, TED talks, and documentaries. There is also a link in which people are able to donate money to her as she has 'sacrificed' her only source of income, sponsored content, with the roles reversing as she is no longer 'in power'. This movement supports Jean Baudrillard's Hyperreality theory as the consumers are no longer able to distinguish the difference between what we are presented with on social media and reality.

To conclude, I believe the presence of big businesses on Instagram has a mixture of advantages and disadvantages, depending on the person. For example, bloggers who have built themselves a career over social media through hard work and dedication benefit from paid sponsorship posts as it allows a steady source of income in order for them to make a living. It may also benefit the audience of Instagram as it has the potential to introduce them to new products and companies which they previously weren't aware of. This would also benefit the business advertising on the site as it creates more profit for their business.

Big businesses advertising on social media may disadvantage some, for example Essena O'Neill, she is one of many who created a career for herself on Instagram and as her popularity grew, so did the attraction for businesses to approach her to promote their brand. She became completely obsessed and began to lose herself and her own Instagram feed because half of her content wasn't realistic. This leads me on to the discussion that it could also have a wide impact on the audience e.g. those following bloggers like Essena. The more people reinforcing the 'importance' of how someone looks and what the 'ideal' body image is will begin to consume people and make them believe they're not good enough, thinking

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/03/instagram-star-essena-oneill-quits-2d-life-to-reveal-true-story-behind-images>

they have to reach extremes in order to compete with societies standards and expectations. This would be the passive audience point of view, which are compliant and controlled by social media. The people being paid to endorse something without notifying their audience further the problem of increasing standards in society and manipulate their followers as the audience aren't aware of what is reality and what was posted with the intention of making a profit. Although, bloggers/businesses that comply with the sponsorship rules on social media and value the trust of their consumers have the correct intentions and allow the audience to feel as though not everything they have been presented with is a lie.

Overall, I believe those who label their posts as paid sponsorship allow their audience to make their own decisions and opinions on what is being advertised rather than being manipulated and controlled by the vague advertisements who take away the meaning of reality.

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