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When Scrolling Turns into Shopping: How Influencers Advertise to Consumers on TikTok

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When Scrolling Turns into Shopping: How Influencers Advertise to Consumers on TikTok

ABSTRACT

Every marketer wants to reach a larger audience and TikTok has become one of the most popular places for advertisers to sell products. Past research shows that social media can be an effective form of advertising because of influencers who seem more genuine in their reviews. My research expands on this to further develop how TikTok specifically helps these influencers reach their target audience and persuade their purchasing decisions to increase sales. Through careful analysis it was revealed that quick links and short-form advertising are allowing the app to experience a high volume of consumer sales. Understanding TikTok's success can lead to better informed consumers and more successful forms of advertising for marketers.

You pull out your phone, open TikTok, and the first thing you see is Alix Earle getting ready to go out in her new Revolve dress. You decide you must have it and luckily all you have to do to get it is click the link on her account and the dress is at your door in a few days. This is a common occurrence for many because who doesn't love the ease and accessibility that online shopping provides consumers. In fact, a BuzzFeed article written by Emma McAnaw, Allison Jiang, and Clara McMahon features "Just 50 Products I Found on TikTok I Never Knew I Needed." The products vary across multiple different categories from different forms of LED lights, blankets, and even a pet hair remover. However, it does raise the question of what exactly about social media platforms, like TikTok, aids in increasing these kinds of impulse purchases? Originally, social media platforms were created to allow people to connect with friends and family, but now they almost appear to be a marketing platform or a way for advertisers to reach their target audience. Some people on these platforms have even begun to work with advertisers to make a whole career out of reaching consumers through social platforms. These people are known as influencers.

Influencers have grown in presence and popularity among many who view it as a creative way to earn a large income. Rather than working a traditional nine-to-five job, influencers primarily build their own schedules and work for themselves, producing content which they

enjoy. There are a variety of different influencers fitting into several genres such as beauty, sports, and entertainment. These influencers earn their income when brands pay for them to support or promote the company and/or a specific product. In order to appeal to these brands, influencers must be able to have some control, or influence, over their audience's purchasing habits. They need to prove to a brand that by mentioning the product on their social media, it will result in an increase in sales. Additionally, they need a large enough following so companies know their brand/product will be seen by a significant number of potential consumers. While influencers exist among all social media platforms, TikTok seems to be an increasingly popular choice for those trying to build their following and make social media their career.

Created by Zhang Yiming, the social media platform TikTok has become a popular pastime for millions of people. The app allows people to make short form videos that range from a few seconds to a couple minutes. They can post anything they want relating to a variety of different topics such as comedy, informative, entertainment, and more. Viewers see the videos either randomly on their "For You" page or have the option to follow specific accounts and view these posts on their "Following" page. Since its origin, the app has continued to grow in popularity resulting in the success of many influencers. According to John Holdridge, the general manager of Fullscreen, an entertainment company that offers tools, services, and consultation to social media creators, the success from TikTok stems from its unique approach of sharing content while still allowing people the tools necessary to go viral (Tauli). Unlike most social platforms, TikTok encourages its users to engage with different creators' content by scrolling through their "For You" page and experiencing a multitude of different videos. Additionally, the short length of the videos allows for people to view more content in a shorter period of time than

some other platforms such as YouTube. Because users view so many more videos and engage more than on other platforms, it provides a better opportunity for someone to go viral.

However, TikTok takes a unique approach with its advertising practices. Use of influencers is not new, but the social platform's setup results in more subtle forms of advertising, making it difficult to differentiate "normal" content from promotional content. The short video format does not give companies much time to advertise their products in addition to the challenge of holding a consumer's attention. On TikTok advertisements can easily be skipped by scrolling past them. There is no amount of time that the consumer must wait to watch the next video, which differs from platforms like YouTube that make consumers view an advertisement before watching a video. Most people will skip an advertisement if they are aware that something is trying to be sold to them, and brands must include a sponsored label on any videos that are being paid for by a company. As a result, it would be reasonable to conclude that consumer engagement with advertisements would be low on TikTok; however, this is not the case. The platform has had major success in selling products, and because of this, other social platforms have attempted to mimic this approach. For example, Instagram now has "reels" which are usually just TikToks that influencers repost. Snapchat has "Spotlights," which are again videos that look identical to those on TikTok, if not the same videos reuploaded.

Influencers, who are producing these videos, help hold consumer's attention if they trust the person and feel they have some kind of relationship with who they are watching. However, even influencers have limitations if their approach to advertising feels too commercial and insincere. As a result, TikTok influencers have taken advantage of the entertainment aspect of the platform and are promoting products and brands in a way which feels more and more like normal content.

Despite the social platform's influence, little research has been done on exactly how TikTok influencers are advertising to consumers. Additionally, it is hard to determine if all the credit goes to the influencer's marketing skills, or if the TikTok platform itself is set up in a way which maximizes advertising efforts. This leads to the question, how are influencers using TikTok's platform to increase consumer sales?

Literature Review:

The goal for marketing companies is to increase engagement with their audience, build brand relationships, and create brand loyalty, all of which results in more sales. When creating advertisements, companies first must figure out how to appeal to their target audience, those they believe will be interested in the product. Secondly, and arguably most importantly, they now must also figure out how to appeal to this target audience through social media platforms. With the increasing rise of popularity among social media, digital advertising is becoming an integral part of modern advertising. The majority of people often group together various social media platforms when performing studies and analyzing data, but it is important to recognize each individual platform and the differences among them. In their study, Hilde A.M. Voorveld, Guda van Noort, Daniel G. Muntinga, and Fred Bronner acknowledge that people use social media platforms for different reasons, such as entertainment, pastime, and to gain information. Therefore, they believed that when analyzing advertisements, it is important to first be informed how consumers use different social platforms. They argue it is the platform that determines the effectiveness of advertising as opposed to actual content within the advertisement (Voorveld, Noort, Muntinga, and Bronner 38). The social media platforms that they studied were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+, Snapchat, Instagram, and Pinterest. By creating a survey, the team concluded that people use different social platforms to meet different needs and there is

a correlation between this and how they react to embedded advertisements. For example, people who were using YouTube for entertainment purposes or as a way to pass the time had a negative reaction to advertisements (Voorveld, Noort, Muntinga, and Bronner 47). The team provided an explanation for this negative view suggesting that the advertisements are unavoidable and intrusive, preventing people from viewing the actual content for a few seconds (50). Their study reveals some interesting insights, but they did not include TikTok when analyzing the social media platforms. TikTok advertisements have successfully led to a high number of actual consumer sales which raises the question of how they have attained such success. Based on the results of the study it can be assumed that there is something about the platform itself that results in such successful advertisement engagement.

Companies understand that people oftentimes have a negative relationship with advertisements. A brand's goal is to showcase the product in a positive light which can come across to consumers as too commercial or ingenuine and they are skeptical about if the product is worth their money. While people might not trust commercials and advertisements from the brand itself, reviews from other people tend to come across as much more authentic and trustworthy. As a result, several brands will send out their products to influencers and pay for them to review it in order to increase consumer awareness and desire for what they are selling. However, once people realize that the person is being paid to give a review, they once again become skeptical of its quality. Marijke De Veirman and Liselot Hudders studied consumers' feelings towards seeing sponsored posts and made some interesting conclusions based on their results. In their study they exposed people to different forms of advertising disclosures on Instagram which included posts that admit to receiving free products, receiving some form of monetary compensation, and unsponsored content (Veirman and Hudders 102). Their results showed that disclosing sponsored

content makes consumers aware of advertising and decreases the effectiveness while also increasing distrust in the brand and/or influencer promoting the product. Additionally, they discovered that clearly disclosing content as not sponsored had a positive impact on both influencer and brand trustworthiness (Veirman and Hudders 113). Their study used Instagram as the basis for their experiments but researching how TikTok discloses sponsored content would allow for a better understanding of how consumers interact with the platform. TikTok has become well-known for advertising products but as the study above reveals consumers often become skeptical once they realize they are being shown a commercial not a genuine review. Discovering how TikTok can expose consumers to commercial content without creating feelings of distrust could explain why the platform has been successful with sales among its users.

In addition to studying the actual advertisements and platform itself, another big part of the marketing world are the consumers. Children and young adults are arguably the most important audience for the advertising industry. The vulnerability and susceptibility of children make them highly impressionable to advertisements. Young adults might have more knowledge about advertising strategies, but they still lack the brand loyalty that is present in many older people. Additionally, younger kids are more likely to use social media and therefore on social platforms, they are the targeted audience. As a result of their importance in the marketing industry, many people have done research about how advertisers appeal to them in different ways. David Marshall and Joanne Morreale discuss the ambient advertising strategies in their book *Advertising and Promotional Culture*. This technique demonstrates how traditional and non-conventional ambient advertising strategies are merged to make promotion a part of everyday life (Marshall and Morreale 65). They focus specifically on breakfast cereals and how different strategies such as brand mascots and cross-promotion create effective advertisements.

While the chapter does not focus specifically on social media, it is useful to understand how different advertising strategies appeal to the younger generation. These strategies can then be applied to social media and many of them appear on TikTok. For example, cross-promotion is discussed in terms of linking together a product with a bigger aspect of culture (Marshall and Morreale 69). On TikTok, products get linked to certain trends, lifestyles, or even people. Thus, consumers assign different meanings to products based on what they believe it will add to their life.

Consumers dislike when advertising distracts from or interrupts their media consumption. Most people disengage from content once they realize it is an advertisement and as a result, many companies are developing new strategies to increase engagement. One way companies are doing so is through the use of influencers. Many scholars have researched the effects that using influencers have on engagement with the product or company. In their research, Beatriz Feijoo and Charo Sadaba studied how minors between the ages 10-14-years-old interacted with standard advertisements and commercial content produced by an influencer. Their studies concluded that advertisements which appeared to be embedded within an entertaining context, published by influencers, had greater interaction than more traditional forms of advertising. They suggest that this occurs because influencer content does not interrupt the consumers navigation on social platforms (Feijoo and Sadaba 26). While their research establishes the importance of influencers within social media, much of their research focuses on the platforms YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. TikTok is mentioned briefly, but this platform has expanded into arguably the ideal platform for an advertising agency and is therefore deserving of further research. Companies can produce content in a way that is difficult to differentiate from non-promotional content and as a result does not interrupt the audience's interaction. Additionally, TikTok has an abundance of

“influencers” that branch out from the standard definition. Rather than highlighting a person, the platform focuses on drawing attention to niche lifestyles and incorporating the products one needs to be included in these lifestyles. For example, several videos have emerged on TikTok showing different organization methods. This includes keeping an organized refrigerator, having a coffee bar, and even keeping the laundry room organized. In all these videos the focus is the products that allow the person to stay neat and decrease clutter. While there are some accounts that only focus on this type of organizational content, the focus is not on the influencer or content creator themselves, but their overall lifestyle.

Influencers are becoming the new “celebrities” of the current generation. As a result, more people have a desire to become an influencer and seek out ways to grow their following. There have been many studies performed regarding celebrity wealth, but Gillian Brooks, Jenna Drenten, and Mikolaj Jan Piskorski studied how influencers accumulate an income. Their study consisted of several interviews with influencers themselves but also the companies who pay them and those who manage brand relationships. As a result, Brooks and her co-authors discovered three ways influencers earn financial capital. They consisted of generative practices (building a following), collaborative practices (forming a close relationship with followers), and finally evaluative practices (being able to persuade others to make purchases) (535).

Additionally, they mentioned that unlike traditional celebrity income, influencers acquire wealth from content and community, not just media visibility (542). This knowledge about how influencers acquire wealth is useful, but it doesn’t acknowledge how social media platforms attract those desiring to grow a following. For example, TikTok allows a person to reach a large number of people making the generative and collaborative practices simple. As a result, many

have turned to TikTok to start their influencer career and due to the evaluative practices more products are being advertised by these influencers on the app.

Despite TikTok being a relatively new social media platform compared to those like Instagram, it is clear from an advertising standpoint that it has had major success. While there is currently not much research specific to the platform, Jiaoju Ge, Yuepeng Sui, Xiaofeng Zhou, and Guoxin Li did a recent study in 2021 on the effectiveness of short video advertisements on sales. Their study used TikTok, which developed in China under the name Douyin, and focused on 10 of the most sold products according to the Taobao e-commerce platform (Ge, Sui, Zhou, and Li 879). Through their data collection, they were able to come to several interesting conclusions about short video advertisements. First, they determined videos that received high amounts of likes and comments had a positive effect on increased sales. Additionally, their research revealed that content generated with music, a female, or a couple had a positive effect on sales while content involving children had a negative effect (Ge, Sui, Zhou, and Li 888). The study gives several interesting insights into the effectiveness of short video advertisements, but it also raises more questions and shows the need for further research on the platform. Their study focused mainly on factors within short videos that increase sales, but not on specific accounts that have successfully embedded advertisements into their content. As short-form video content expands onto other platforms, like Instagram reels, focusing on the short-length videos alone is not enough to fully comprehend TikTok's advertising success. This research leads one to question, how do influencers utilize the TikTok platform in order to increase trust and engagement with consumers while simultaneously producing a high number of sales?

Method:

As mentioned, TikTok has been highly successful and there are thousands who have started their social media careers on the platform. Therefore, it is impossible to study every influencer, so I needed to narrow down the number of people that I focus on to obtain my data. I have selected three influencers to gain information about advertising on the TikTok platform. Each person had to meet a certain criterion in order to be considered a TikTok influencer and be used for my study. First, they needed to have at least 1 million subscribers, so they have a large enough following to be considered profitable to potential advertisers. Additionally, they needed to start their influencer career on TikTok so this would eliminate celebrities who have an account but established themselves on another platform. Lastly, they needed to still consistently upload on TikTok. The three influencers that I selected who met all the above criteria were Alix Earle, Darcy McQueeny, and Emilie Kiser.

For each of their accounts I took notes on their profile pages, observing any links they had listed. I also watched any videos they had pinned on their pages. Pinned videos are simply those that are saved on the account. They appear at the top of the influencer's page regardless of when they were posted. Normally, videos appear with the newest posts at the top and older ones at the bottom, but pinned videos show what content the influencer wants to promote to their audience by having it saved. The other videos I selected were those posted on November 25, 2022, to December 25, 2022. This timeframe begins on Black Friday and ends on Christmas Day. According to SaleCycle, these are the two most popular months for people to shop online due to the holidays (Ward). For every video that I watched I took careful notes and answered the following questions:

- 1) Does the video contain a sponsored tag?
- 2) What hashtags are used in the video? Is anyone tagged in the video?

- 3) Are any products shown? Do any specific products stand out among the rest?
- 4) How is the product advertised through the influencer's content?
- 5) Any other promotional techniques such as a referral code or reference to a brand?

After watching all the videos I then sorted them into the categories sponsored, unsponsored, or outlier. In order for a video to be considered sponsored it had to contain an actual sponsored tag attached to the video making it obvious to the consumer that the video was a promotion. I then looked at the unsponsored videos and organized them into either neutral or promotional. Neutral videos contained no promotional strategies at all and were not advertising to the consumer in any way. Promotional videos were those that did not have a sponsored tag but still contained advertising techniques such as referencing a product or including a referral link. Any videos that did not fit into the categories were labeled as outliers.

Analysis:

Earle has a following of 5.1 million and a total of 317.9 million likes, making her the most popular influencer I studied. McQueeney has a following of 1.4 million and a total of 120.1 million likes on her profile. Both Earle and McQueeney are college seniors who post a lot of get ready with me (GRWM) videos. Earle gained her following by going viral for her GRWM videos and McQueeney gained popularity for her haul videos which showcase recent purchases she has made. The similarities between the two make them an interesting comparison to see how influencers producing similar content advertise in different ways. Kiser is older than both Earle and McQueeney, and her videos are drastically different. She has a following of 2.2 million people and a total of 123.9 million likes on her page. She is a mother so her content centers more around lifestyle videos and her daily routine appealing to an older demographic. In total between the dates selected for my study there were a total of 455 posts. Earle accounted for 125 of these

videos, McQueeney posted 147 of them, and Kiser had a total of 183. After watching the videos I put 16 in the sponsored category and 424 in the unsponsored category. That leaves a total of 15 outliers. The outliers were videos that wouldn't be seen as promotional but were also not completely neutral. For example, all three influencers posted giveaway videos showing multiple products that they would be giving to a follower. While there were products shown, they were not being advertised because the goal is to give them away rather than sell them. Additionally, Earle posted a video on November 28 where she removed her Balenciaga posters from her wall. The video included the hashtag "cancelbalenciaga." In this case she is advertising for people to not support the brand. I labeled it an outlier because although it is trying to persuade people in some way, it is encouraging them to not shop at Balenciaga, so it almost does the opposite of what advertising is intended to do, which is to sell products.

Based on these results it is evident that traditional advertising accounts for an incredibly small percentage of the content on TikTok. On the surface this would make it appear that TikTok influencers do not post promotional content very often. However, after going back through the unsponsored videos I categorized 140 of them as promotional. This leaves only 284 neutral videos, which is significantly smaller than the previous statistic. There are still more non promotional videos however this is justified because if an influencer overwhelms their audience with promotional content, they will appear overly commercial deterring their audience from trusting their opinions. While there were some similarities I found, each influencer used different ways to incorporate the promotional content into their videos.

Earle had only one pinned video on her page, and it did not contain any hashtags or tags it was a transition video posted on December 16. She is shown waking up and then the video cuts to her being dressed for her 22nd birthday. Most of her captions were very sparse in terms of

their content. However, I noticed a common theme where she used the caption to provide information about the products she was referring to in the video. For example, on November 25 she posted a video trying on clothes from Hello Molly where she describes what she likes the best about each outfit. Surprisingly, she never verbally mentions Hello Molly in her actual video. Instead, it is only in the description that she promotes her referral code ALIX to get money off. She also tagged Hello Molly to the video and used the hashtag “hellomollypartner” in the description. This technique allows her to promote the brand in the video without sounding commercial because she herself is not verbally saying anything promotional. The consumer must look at the description and go to the website themselves if they are interested in the clothes she is showing.

A similar strategy she used was using a popular audio in her video, not speaking at all and just wearing the clothes. For example, on November 27 she is shown wearing a dress about to leave for a wedding, and dancing to a song. It appears as though she is not even drawing attention to the clothes themselves but the description for the video uses the hashtags “revolveme” and “revolvefinds.” This informs the consumer that the dress is from the brand revolve but once again she is not verbally advertising for the brand. Additionally, she is able to successfully advertise a product without making it the focus of the video to once again deter the commercial feeling of the video. For example, on November 28, she shows her workout routine and mentions what pre-workout supplement she takes before going to the gym. She quickly mentions that it is found on her storefront and continues her theme of tagging the company in the video and using the hashtag “rsppartner.” However, because she continues the video by showing what she does to workout, the advertisement is not the main focus of the video, nor does it seem

to stick out during the video. She is exposing the consumer to the product but once again they must seek out the information themselves if they are interested.

McQueeney comes across as a little more commercial than Earle and this is shown in the fact that her pinned videos all contain promotional content. The first was posted on April 25 and it is an Urban Outfitters haul where she is showing what she bought from the store. The second was posted on December 8 and is a video at lululemon showing their new University of Alabama merchandise, which is the school she currently attends. The last pinned video was posted on November 11, and it is a review of a Tarte makeup product. Each video is promoting a different brand and she is very open about the fact that it is promotional unlike Earle who promoted products in a more subtle way. Also different from Earle, McQueeney discusses within her videos the benefits of the products that she is using. For example, on November 25 she posted a video showing how she curls her hair. During the video she uses the Matrix Vavoom extra hold freezing spray and makes sure to mention that she has it linked in her bio and her Amazon storefront. Even though she is showing how she curls her hair, the focus of the video is about the hairspray, and she refers to it throughout the entire video.

As mentioned, her pinned video already set her content up to be more promotional, but she also commonly made videos to create anticipation for one of her hauls. For example, on November 26 she posted a video of herself out shopping and doesn't draw attention to any brands or products but mentions for people to come back to see her haul. The next day, she posted a video where she showed what she bought from Dior and Louis Vuitton during her shopping trip. She could easily post the haul the same day she goes shopping, but delaying it encourages people to come back and view her page if they are interested in seeing what she bought. Additionally, it builds anticipation and curiosity among her followers, so they are more

likely to follow her page to see her haul. This puts the consumer in the position to make the active choice of either staying on her page and following her account or just scrolling past the video.

Additionally, these videos also create a buffer between the promotional ones she posts. If all her videos were hauls, then people might get bored of her content and think she only produces advertisements for companies. However, inserting a video about her actual life is effective in preventing her from coming across as too commercial. For example, on November 27 she posted a series of pictures of herself throughout the year. There was no promotional content she was merely showing photos that she liked. That same day she posted a video trying on different White Fox Boutique t-shirts and writes out her referral code “DARCYTT” in the description. Immediately after that video on the next day she posted her packing and getting ready to go back to school after Thanksgiving break and there was nothing promotional about the video. This strategy allows her to post commercial content that is more obvious without being viewed as overly commercial.

Unlike Earle and McQueeney, Kiser did not have any sponsored videos at all. While she did still have promotional content, it is surprising that despite having a larger following than McQueeney her posts all appeared to be unsponsored. This could help explain why she came across as the most genuine compared to the other two influencers. She is more vocal about her promotions like McQueeney but does so in a less formal way. McQueeney focused more on listing out all the benefits and then moved onto the next product. This could be because she usually was showing quite a few products, but Kiser takes her time to explain what she loves about each product and even shows how she uses them. This makes her videos seem more conversational while she talks to her audience rather than talking at them about a product. For example, on

December 3 she posted a video of a package she received from Rare Beauty. She is very open about how it was sent to her for free and expresses gratitude throughout the video to the brand. She uses each product and explains why she loves each individual one and the benefits that she has found by using them. Even though it is still a haul, and the company sent her the items to show her audience, her review makes it seem genuine because she is able to say exactly why she likes the products and is not just reading from a script.

Another way she appears genuine to her audience is by taking advantage of the comment section to promote the products she references. Both Earle and McQueeney tended to use the descriptions to mention where an item was from, but Kiser is more active through comments. For example, on December 6 she posted a video of her showing what she was wearing while music played. The description just said, “You guys I’m obsessed with these [jeans],” but there was no mention where they were from in the description. However, the first comment of her video was her saying that she had added them to her Amazon storefront. The comment section is usually where the audience is able to give their feedback and have a discussion with the creator on their video. By using it to promote the products she shows it makes the promotion seem more conversational. She does this strategy again on December 10 where she is once again showing her outfit while music plays and there is no mention in the description where any of the items are from. However, in the comment section of this video she is actually answering comments from people asking where she got certain items. When someone posts an outfit video it is very likely that at least one person will ask where the clothes are from. Not mentioning the brands until someone comments and asks for them makes it appear like she is just answering a question rather than promoting the products.

Another technique that Kiser commonly uses in her videos is to create an association between certain products and popular trends of the time. She mostly did this during the month of December while promoting different products to buy for stocking stuffers or other gifts. For example, on December 1 she posted a video with the title “‘That Girl’ Stocking Stuffers Under \$50.” The “that girl” was a popular trend that focused on productivity and being the best, most ideal version of yourself. Some of the products she lists in the video include hair care items, hair clips, portable chargers, jewelry, and skincare items. She is associating all of these products with the trend so anyone who is trying to become “that girl” or follow along with the trend will want to buy the products. Therefore, the focus is more on the trend in general rather than the individual items she is showing. As a result, people believe that she is showing products that will help them achieve an overall lifestyle. This makes consumers more likely to make purchases because they gain more than just a product, they gain a desirable lifestyle.

Despite the different strategies used, all three influencers rely on “pull advertising” techniques in order to appeal to their audience. Pull advertising is a more subtle form of advertising differing from its converse of “push advertising.” Push advertising is oftentimes seen as aggressive and usually annoying to consumers. An example of push advertising would be a company sending emails to its consumers promoting different products. Pull advertising tries to do the opposite, instead of pushing the advertisement onto the consumer it wants the consumer to seek out the brand or products itself. Earle, McQueeney, and Kiser all rely on pull advertising to prevent their content from seeming too commercial and the TikTok platform allows them to use this marketing strategy successfully. For example, Earle takes advantage of the description box to share where the items she shows are from, making the consumer responsible for actually seeking out the links themselves. McQueeney is more open in her videos about saying brand

names and products but she spaces her videos out so that the consumer can either wait to see the hauls and promotions or simply scroll past them. Additionally, she also uses the description to mention referral codes or brands. Kiser, unlike both Earle and McQueeny, usually doesn't post anything promotional in the description of her videos. Occasionally she will tag a brand but she uses the comment section to reach her audience. This not only allows her to promote brands through conversation, it also builds her consumer trust because she is actively engaging with those who follow her.

All three influencers relying on pull advertising for their content makes it apparent that this is popular among TikTok but it does not address how they are able to include promotional content without having a sponsored tag on their videos. Kiser, as mentioned previously, did not post any sponsored videos, but she still works with brands and promotes their products. I found the answer to this question in the use of partnerships. All three influencers had partnerships with different brands but when they posted a video about the brand it did not contain a sponsored tag. This is because the partnership means that the brand is paying the influencer to become a partner or advertiser for their brand, but they are not paying for a specific video in general. For example, a brand could send them free products and the influencer will post a video, but the brand did not pay for that specific video, and it is therefore "unsponsored" even if it is promotional. For example, Earle posted a video of her cleaning out her refrigerator before leaving for Christmas break on December 22. In the video she orders Grubhub because her refrigerator is empty and on the video she tags Grubhub and uses the hashtag "grubhubpartner." McQueeny posted a similar video on December 2 promoting Tree Hut products and like Earle, she also tagged Tree Hut and used the hashtag "treehutpartner." Lastly, on December 2, Kiser posted a video showing her Nutribullet blender sharing her favorite smoothie recipe and following the same format as both

Earle and McQueeney she tagged Nutribullet and used the hashtag “nutribulletpartner.” Based on the pattern, one can conclude that with partnerships a sponsored tag is not necessary if the brand is tagged, and they include a hashtag mentioning the partnership. While this could still seem to be apparent to the consumer, when multiple hashtags are used it can be easy to overlook them. Additionally, the sponsored tag is much bolder and appears higher on the video than the description, so it is more noticeable. Most consumers also associate the word sponsored with something promotional, but the word partner seems more mutually beneficial. It implies to people that the influencer is working with the brand or company rather than working for them.

Despite their different approaches to pull advertising, a common theme among all three influencers was their promotion of their Amazon storefront. Amazon allows for anybody to create a storefront where they can group products together into any categories of their choice. When someone buys a product using their storefront, they earn a commission fee from the sale. It is written on the storefront that the person will earn a commission so this is not hidden in any way but it seems to be an extremely popular way for influencers to advertise to their audience. Amazon has a variety of different products and being able to sort them into categories makes it convenient for their customers to find what they want. From an influencer point of view, it appears that the Amazon storefront is so popular because they are able to show their audience an abundance of products they would be interested in, over a short period of time. For example, on November 30, Kiser posted a video using the E.L.F. brow lift and mentions that she has it linked in her storefront. In order to find the product, the consumer must click on her storefront and then select the makeup category. In doing so they will be scrolling through an abundance of different products all makeup related. Not only will they find the product that they want, but they might also see something else that catches their eye and end up purchasing more than the one item.

This could not have occurred had she just linked directly to the individual product, instead she is increasing the amount of time the consumer spends on her storefront.

The Amazon storefront also allows the influencers to pin certain categories to the top of their storefront similar to how they can pin videos on TikTok. This gives them control over what consumers see first when they go to the storefront. McQueeny for example has three pinned categories. They are “GRWM,” “Top Favorite Purchases,” and “Darcy Starter Pack.” The first category is referring to her GRWM videos that she posts often on her account. When people become familiar with these videos, they are then able to go to her storefront in order to find the products she uses so they can purchase them for themselves. Her “Top Favorite Purchases” and “Darcy Starter Pack” categories both appeal to those who follow her account and enjoy the products she uses in her videos. These are sharing what she herself recommends and how someone can “be like her” through the purchase of the products. Similar to how Kiser created an association between a trend and specific products, McQueeny has done this with herself. People view the items less as individual products and more as a way to make themselves be more like her. Through the various products she produces herself as the commodity that people are purchasing. However, once again pull advertising is used because it is the consumer’s choice to click on the link.

The common theme of pull advertising techniques being used seem to indicate that consumers have a more active role in advertising on TikTok. For example, it is up to the consumer to click on the links provided by the influencers if they want to buy an item or see what products the influencer recommends. It is also the consumer’s decision to look through comments, like in Kiser’s videos, in order to figure out what brands or products are being shown in the video. In Earle’s videos, the consumer would have to read through the description to see

what brand was tagged or if there was a hashtag revealing where her outfit was from. Not only are the consumers responsible for purchasing the items, but they have to put in the effort to figure out where to buy the products. The influencers use TikTok's platform to provide the opportunities and oftentimes some form of encouragement to the consumer in terms of purchasing an item, but it is ultimately the consumer themselves that must follow the steps to actually make a purchase.

Conclusion:

Despite all three influencers using different methods to advertise to their audience, there is some overlap which is what makes them successful. The key component among each of them is that they understand and effectively use the TikTok platform to combine entertainment and advertising. Providing an Amazon storefront and other links at the top of their account pages allows for the audience themselves to choose if they want to click through them. As a result, the advertising method is a choice rather than something forced upon the consumer. The consumer feels like they have more control over what they are viewing rather than feeling forced to view an advertisement. This coincides with Voorveld, Noort, Muntinga, and Bronner's research which demonstrated that advertisements do differ in success based on the individual platforms. Unlike what they found for YouTube, TikTok can successfully market to consumers because the advertisements are embedded within the content and therefore do not distract or interfere with the videos.

Additionally, it is apparent that more companies are spending time forming relationships with influencers rather than relying on quick advertisements. Earle, McQueeny, and Kiser all had recurring companies featured on their accounts. The smallest category of advertisements for all three girls was traditional advertising, in which the video they were posting was sponsored. This

does not mean that most of their videos were without any form of marketing instead it was more common for the brand to be mentioned in a tag or the description. For a consumer, this increases their trust that the influencer genuinely likes the company or product because it is shown so often. It also distracts them from the fact that they are viewing an advertisement and instead it comes across as a recommendation from a person.

While my study reveals several interesting insights into TikTok advertisements there is still plenty of room for future studies to expand upon this question. I looked at female influencers because according to Statista 54.1% of TikTok users are females and thus they are the majority. However, studying men's posts could lead to new discoveries. While women are the ones purchasing the most and many products are marketed towards women, this does not mean that men should be ignored. There are plenty of male TikTok influencers and a study focusing on males could result in information that furthers what I found or shows completely new advertising strategies. The girls that I studied were also all white, conventionally attractive, and reasonably young. Increasing the diversity of my study could lead to more insights in the future.

Additionally, another area of improvement could be widening the number of people studied. Due to the time limit of my study, I did not have adequate time to study more than three influencers. However, over a longer period of time it could be interesting to study more influencers and expand on the categories of what qualifies an influencer. A comparative analysis of people with different sized followings would reveal how smaller and larger influencers market to their audience. Additionally, I wanted to disqualify celebrities and focus on people who solely work on TikTok, but it would be intriguing to compare advertisements of celebrities across multiple platforms including TikTok.

Despite its success, TikTok is not viewed as a popular platform by several lawmakers. Recently there has been talk about banning the platform out of fear that the Chinese government is using it to collect data from its American users. The app originated in China and is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. A *New York Times* article written by Sapna Maheshwari and Amanda Holpuch explains how several countries have already banned the platform from official government devices. Government officials are worried about the implications should China gain data about the platform's large American audience. There are several other countries that have also been discussing banning the platform due to the distrust of the Chinese government. Additionally, American officials worry the Chinese government will use the platform to spread misinformation to its users.

Overall, TikTok is a huge and quickly developing platform that has had major success in the marketing world. Whether the platform continues to grow or not its influence on the advertising market is undeniable, and it has led to more successful forms of advertising. Consumers are also now in a position where they are given the opportunity to participate with the marketing strategies in a completely new way. They have to seek out the links for the products they want and therefore play an important role in TikTok's marketing strategy. However, as advertisements and entertainment continue to become embedded within the platform it is questionable if consumers realize their position. It can be easy to click through an Amazon link unaware that the entire storefront is set up in a way that will hopefully promote larger consumer spending. They may also not even be aware of what they are purchasing. As Kiser and McQueeny showed, products hold more meaning than their actual use. Is the consumer actually in the market for a new journal and pens or are they really seeking out a way to become "that girl?" And do they even realize the power trends have over their purchasing decisions? There is a

popular saying from the documentary *The Social Dilemma* that goes “if you’re not paying for the product then you are the product.” On TikTok advertisers want more than just consumer’s money. They want their time, attention, and loyalty. Consumers are the product of successful advertising methods. Even without making a purchase if a brand can get a person to associate their product with an ideal lifestyle, they have power over the consumer, and will most likely end up with higher sales. Therefore, it is important as consumers that people take the time to educate themselves and be aware of how much promotional content exists even on a social platform like TikTok designed for entertaining videos. Otherwise, they blindly allow their purchasing decisions, time, attention, and product associations to be created and developed among marketers who are the very influencers that hold their trust.

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