Chloe Ouellette

Communication Capstone Research Seminar

Dr. Bob Bednar

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<div align="center">Context/Description</div>

In the field of communication studies, researchers will often analyze how social media is used by individuals to interact, share information, and express themselves online. Social media is essentially a large playground for communication researchers to understand how people interact and communicate in the digital age. In connection with the influencer world on social media (specifically Instagram) comes a new version of influencing that essentially refuses consumption through consumption. Instagram is a marketing platform, and the term de-influencer is a departure from this ideology. Analyzing the term de-influencer and the pattern that has emerged as a hashtag trend is crucial to communication studies as it offers a window into the evolving landscape of digital communication. Looking at Instagram posts and reels that specifically use '#deinfluencer' is the best site of analysis to understand what this trend is saying rhetorically, and the effects it's producing. This '#deinfluencer'/ '#deinfluencing' trend reflects shifts within consumer behavior and attitudes towards influencer culture, providing insights into power dynamics, authenticity, and trust in media messaging. As this trend is relevant and modern to the digital world, it's becoming more malleable in definition as people are shifting its use by every video they post with the hashtag. By examining #deinfluencer on Instagram specifically within these posts, the research will explore platform dynamics, ethical

considerations, and audience engagement in online discourse. Revealing the deinfluencer trends' reliance on the use of rhetorical languages and discourses; Marxism Feminist critique, feminism and commodification, ecofeminism, and ideological state apparatuses.

My research object is four different posts from Instagram that use the #deinfluencer & #deinfluencing within their descriptive captions. Three of the posts are reels (short videos), and one is a standard post comprising nine photos. These posts are similar to those you may see on TikTok, as both platforms enable short 30-60-second videos of all kinds to be posted and shared. Yet, it is different from your typical Instagram post or TikTok post, as the ones selected specifically use the hashtag of study, in combination with different rhetorical languages and discourses to describe the trend of deinfluencing. These Instagram posts aim to debunk the hype surrounding certain products or services promoted by influencers. These Instagram posts about #deinfluencing typically feature captions and graphic overlays that explain why a certain product is not worth purchasing, accompanied by other images and videos that illustrate the reasons behind the de-influencer's opinion. The reels highlight specific features and aspects of the product that the de-influencer found disappointing or misleading and include comparisons to alternative options that offer better value or overall performance. Overall the tone of every post is often critical but informative, aiming to empower followers to make more mindful purchasing decisions and encouraging a more skeptical approach to influencer recommendations.

The history of the deinfluencer trend goes back to the beginning of 2023, as some of the first videos were released on TikTok. As an article from the source Dazed states, "We're in our deinfluencing era", as they describe the trend starting with influencers on TikTok are telling their followers what *not* to buy under the guise of critiquing overconsumption and saving money (Shadijanova). The trend had mainly taken root in the beauty and lifestyle communities and consisted of videos in which popular products are labeled "overhyped". These 'Deinfluencing' videos began to surface at the beginning of the year as "a sincere attempt to join the dots between trend cycles, unethical labor practices, and excess waste. Yet, as is often the case with online platforms, the trend has been co-opted by influencers to shill out even more products.

At first, many of the videos tagged "deinfluencing" were genuine appeals to push back against the influencer culture. However what began as a genuine introspection into the beliefs and sentiments of professional salespeople quickly morphed into a savvy marketing tactic once the hashtag gained popularity. Rather than persuading people to buy things, regular influencers would tag their posts "deinfluencing" simply posting negative reviews of products they didn't think were worth the money, and telling you what to buy instead (Jennings). Deinfluencing videos have metamorphosed into a viral video format in which influencers are slating products they didn't like and redirecting followers to other products or their 'dupes'. In essence, most deinfluencers on the app are influencers in sheep's clothing (Shadijanova).

Deinfluencing has emerged as a significant trend on TikTok, where creators are aiming to dissuade audiences from overconsumption and overspending on social media-driven trends. This new phenomenon encourages consumers to reconsider purchases based on personal experiences, promoting more mindful consumption and challenging the pervasive influence of 'influencer' marketing. Deinfluencing videos feature influencers, dubbed "de-influencers", candidly discussing regrettable purchases and urging viewers to be more discerning in their buying habits, considering factors like effectiveness and sustainability (Ruby). This movement has gained traction on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, with millions of views and discussions under hashtags like #deinfluencing, signaling a growing interest in responsible consumerism and sustainability. De-influencers are advocating for brands to adapt to changing consumer preferences and integrate corporate social responsibility into their marketing strategies (Ruby). However, there are still many ethical questions that persist, particularly regarding the authenticity of deinfluencer endorsements and the underlying consumerist culture within influencer marketing. Despite misconceptions and political associations, deinfluencing represents a broader cultural shift from excessive consumerism to more conscientious consumption practices (Ruby).

Many scholars have written about the deinfluencer trend specifically concerning the TikTok platform, and they all are reaching similar conclusions about the trend. The pervasive influence of product promotion on TikTok has led to viewers being bombarded with recommendations, often accompanied by affiliate details and purchase links. In response, "de-influencers" have emerged to challenge excessive consumption, offering

honest advice and promoting conscious consumerism (Espada). This trend signals a

broader shift in consumer behavior, urging companies to prioritize authenticity over

short-term gains in their relationships with influencers (Bramley).

As many scholars go on to say, the rise of "de-influencing" on TikTok reflects

concerns about influencer integrity and the authenticity of product reviews, although

opinions on its effectiveness vary (Adamczyk). Despite this, creators view it as an

opportunity to establish trust with their audience and promote responsibility in influencer

marketing. This trend, initially seen on TikTok, has spread to other platforms like YouTube

and Instagram, providing brands with valuable feedback for product improvement

(Adamczyk). De-influencing is not limited to specific categories and is recognized as a

means for creators to build credibility with their audience (Chawla). While its impact on

brands may vary, it underscores the importance of listening to consumer feedback and

fostering transparency in social media marketing. As consumers increasingly demand

authenticity and responsible practices, de-influencing is poised to become a significant

trend across various sectors (Chawla).

Sarah Macken wrote an article for the Sunday Times in which she investigates

whether deinfluencing could help change our overconsumption habits. She talks about

Fionnuala Jones, a Dublin-based podcaster known for sustainability talks, sharing used

beauty products on Instagram, sparking a buzz (Macken). Jones shifted into

"de-influencing," a trend critiquing overhyped products, like pricey beauty gadgets, gaining

momentum on TikTok. Jones believes it's a reaction to lockdown consumption spikes,

urging a rethink of product accumulation. Lynn Hunter, founder of a talent agency, sees

de-influencing as vital for building trust with followers, stressing the need for authenticity.

Eadoin Fitzmaurice, a content creator, emphasizes the importance of honesty amid

sponsored content saturation, echoing Jones's sentiment on transparency (Macken). The

impact of social media on consumption is evident, with Love Island's shift to preloved

fashion sponsorship reflecting changing consumer attitudes. However, de-influencing's

effect on consumption remains unclear, with skeptics questioning its role in promoting

alternative products. Jones sees de-influencing as a call for transparent influencer

advertising, highlighting a shift in brand-influencer dynamics toward authenticity. TikTok

fosters a more candid review environment, potentially driving more genuine collaborations

and informed purchases. Ultimately, de-influencing offers a path to authenticity in

influencer marketing, aiding consumers in making informed choices and promoting

credibility (Macken).

Aja Barber, the author of Consumed: The Need for Collective Change - Colonialism,

Climate Change & Consumerism, has been documenting and analyzing similar concepts to

the idea of deinfluencing for a long time. She emphasizes that the concept is far more

intricate than merely suggesting product substitutions or deeming certain items unworthy

of purchase, "if you actually care about deinfluencing people, teach them a thing or two

about the places that they are buying from" (Barber). The deinfluencing trend stretches to

include topics of sustainability and Barber reminds people that breaking old habits proves

challenging, and she frequently reiterates her intention is not to promote consumerism;

"We all have a striped T-shirt, we all have a Breton top, we all have black trousers," she says.

"Here's a way to put these pieces together in a way that feels fresh … We're looking at the shapes, we're looking at the structures of the pieces, right? It's not about having the particular brand" (Barber).

Influencers are often perceived as the knowledgeable friends you turn to for advice on living your best life, offering valuable tips and tricks. It's inherent to influencing that they share their genuine likes and dislikes; that's the essence of the role (McNeal). Critics may argue that influencers promote the same products due to sponsorship, and deinfluencing aims to counteract this trend. While it's true that some influencers endorse products solely for profit, and certain items gain popularity on social media platforms through heavy influencer promotion, it doesn't necessarily mean that all endorsed products are disliked or insincerely promoted. Deinfluencing may be an entertaining trend and a popular term on TikTok, but the media's adoption of the concept reveals some misunderstandings about influencers (Bramley). Contrary to what some may believe, it doesn't signify the demise of the industry; rather, it represents a different iteration of the same phenomenon (McNeal).

The initial conclusions of my research object reveal that despite misconceptions, deinfluencing signifies a shift toward conscientious consumption rather than the demise of influencer culture. The Instagram reels and posts that I am choosing to highlight stand as descriptive posts in which the audience can see positive versions of the #deinfluencer trend at work. In conclusion, research on "deinfluencing" Instagram posts highlights a trend challenging consumerism and influencer culture. These posts offer insights into changing

consumer attitudes towards product recommendations, reflecting a growing desire for authenticity and transparency in social media marketing. While the impact on actual consumption is unclear, deinfluencing signifies a shift towards responsible consumerism and prompts questions about influencer influence. Further exploration of rhetorical strategies and ethical implications is crucial for understanding their potential influence on consumer behavior in the digital age. As this paper goes on there is a set of research questions I hope to answer through my research: What are the rhetorical strategies employed in #deinfluencer posts on Instagram, and how do they shape consumer perceptions and behaviors? How do #deinfluencer posts influence audience engagement and interaction on social media platforms like Instagram? How do #deinfluencer posts reflect broader societal shifts towards responsible consumerism and sustainability? Finally, How does the reception of #deinfluencer posts vary across different demographic groups, and what factors influence their effectiveness in shaping consumer attitudes?

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