



Content Creation Over Degree Completion

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Abstract

As technology advances, the influences of social media advance along with it, impacting many generations. Specifically, for Generation Z, there are new habits, livelihoods, and even career paths taken due to social media, as Goanta and Rachordas (2020) study suggests, they aspire to become influencers rather than the traditional, doctors, firemen, or astronauts.

Social media has had significant positive and negative effects on college life, especially the deciding factors including admissions, majors, and graduation. Prior researched theories related to the study were parasocial relationship theory and social norms theory. Horton and Wohl (1956), first coined the Parasocial Relationship Theory which suggests, they are a one-sided relationship that creates an illusion of real intense interpersonal connections. Lapinski and Rimal's (2005) Social Norms Theory, suggests that an individual's behavior is often influenced by how we believe our peers think or act, and human behavior is guided by perception about the popularity of behaviors.

The purpose of the study is to understand if Florida State University undergraduate students perceive they have a relationship with social media influencers, is that changing their perceptions, and if it does, how does it affect the likelihood to choose social media influencing as a career and drop pursuing their degree program. To do so, participants were put into mini focus groups that lasted up to 60 minutes. During the focus group discussion process, students were asked a series of questions about their perceptions about social media influencers, perceptions on their relationships with influencers and about their experience as students, balancing an online social presence. These questions were asked so that we could indirectly assess why those aspiring to be social media influencers may disregard their college degrees and pursue influencing instead. The expected findings from this study will be that these decisions are made for several reasons including that the influencer lifestyle seems easier and more rewarding than a college degree, it may align more with their interests and/or values as opposed to an education.

Introduction

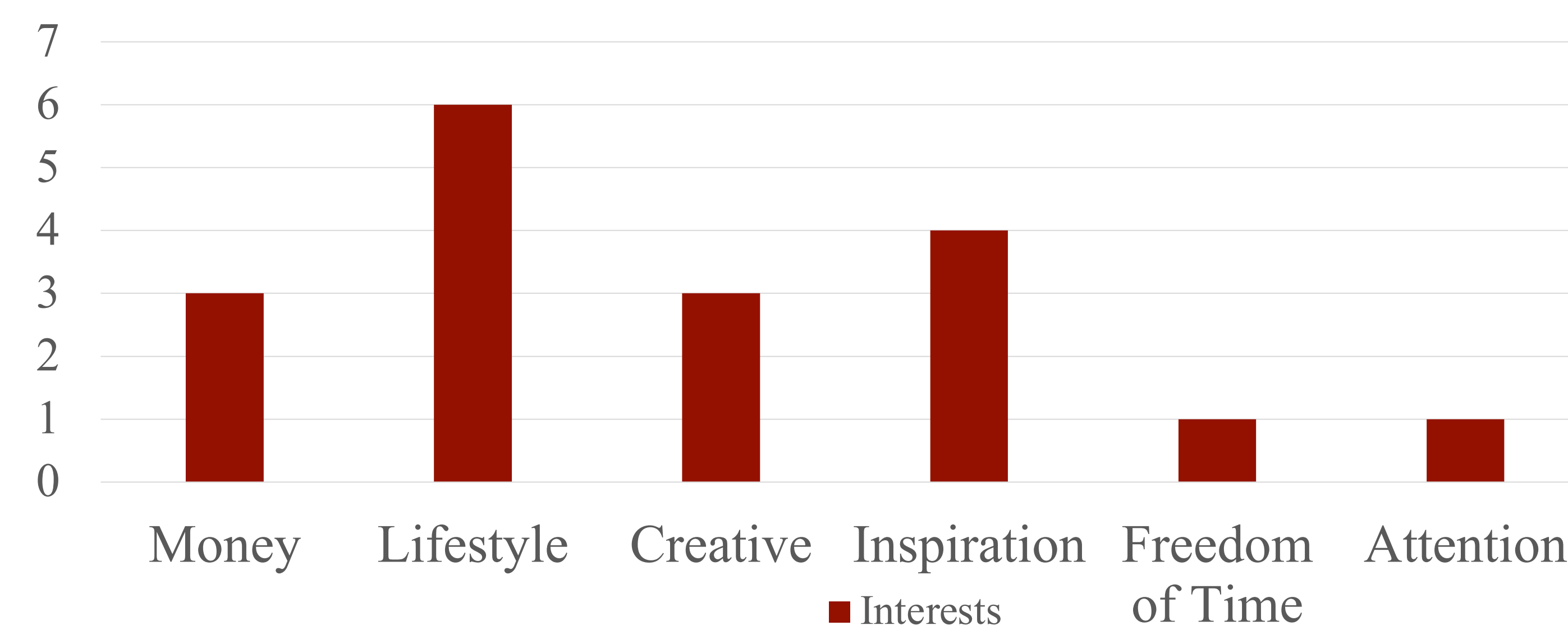
In the last decade, we have seen new approaches that people have taken to use social media to their advantage. Since Generation Z has had ample experience with the shifts in technology, it has impacted their livelihoods and their decisions. The new "Influencer Era" has made a huge impact especially on Generation Z as previous research studies highlight the effects of parasocial relationships with social media influencers, for example Ashraf et al. (2023) mentioned, social media allowed an opportunity for parasocial relationships with influencers and their followers, which have strong impacts on the followers' perceptions. Arriagada and Ibanez (2020), article mentioned that content creators who are social media influencers today, are individuals who create and circulate content on their social media platforms, driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to generate their own media brand. College students are creating and posting content and branding themselves like their social media influencers, and understanding if this can lead to them opposing to pursue an education or degree is vital. Careers with social media such as paid social media influencers through Influencer Marketing seem to allow for quick, easy success with less work than going through the process of graduating college with a useful degree. However, because there are such a great number of aspiring influencers it is unsure if these social media-based careers will guarantee long term success to individuals but most importantly affect retention of students in university. As a result, we must understand the causes and effects of such decisions which will be analyzed throughout this study.

Methods

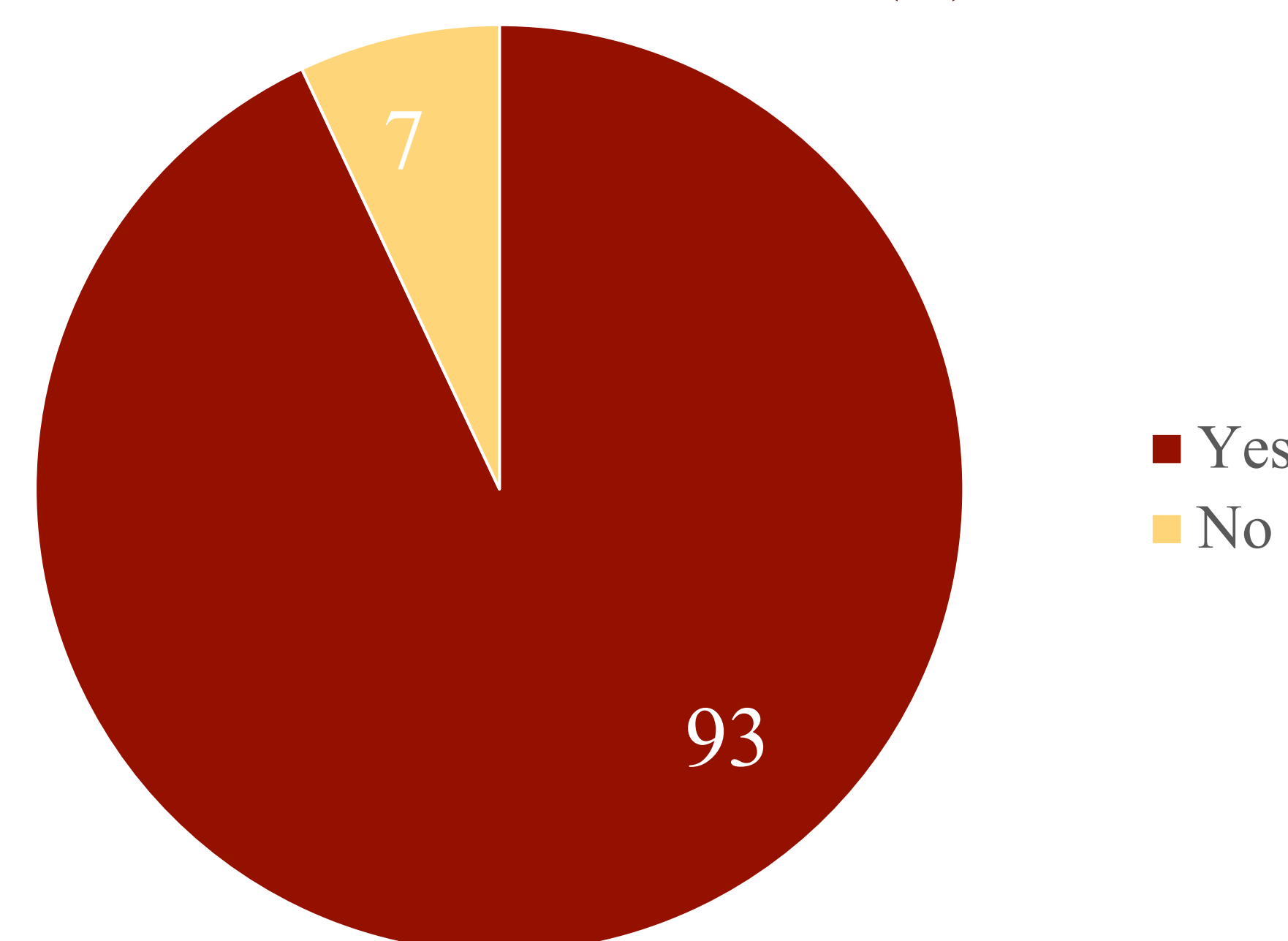
- To gather our participants for this qualitative study, we used flyers to advertise the focus groups for FSU undergraduate students who were interested in becoming a social media influencer. The posters were primarily posted in all residence halls on Florida State University campus and Canvas announcements. If interested, participants would scan the QR code to complete a pre-screening questionnaire to participate.
- The sampling would be described as convenient because the research mentor chose the participants who were easy to gather data from and in close proximity.
- The focus group discussions took place at the University Stadium Center C at the School of Communication in a conference room. The groups consisted of 2-5 students. In total, there were 15 participants. Of the 15, they were placed in six different groups that met on separate occasions for up to 60 minutes.
- To ask questions, the researchers used the same question guide for all discussions.
- The focus group addressed topics including but not limited to:
 - Their preference of social media influencers and content**
 - Their relationships with influencers**
 - The ways in which they balance content creation and pursuing degree programs**
 - The ways in which influencers have marketed towards them**
 - Their motives for pursuing social media influencing**
 - The ways in which social media influencing has impacted their view of college**
- All discussions were recorded and later transcribed using AI.
- Discussions were themed using the Thematic Analysis process where the researcher was able to gather results.

Results

Interests



Can Balance Be Achieved (%)



Discussion

After the focus groups were conducted, discussion amongst the facilitator and Florida State University undergraduate Gen Z participants were analyzed. By logging the responses there were common themes and similarities between participants. Some of these themes included identification, parasocial relationships, influence, content preference, interests, uncertainty, value, impact, intent, and balance. As seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the responses between most participants had similarities. In Figure 1, the motives surrounding students' reasoning for a potential career path as a social media influencer included the most similarities in motives related to money, lifestyle, creativity, and inspirational purposes. Overall, the participants seemed to value their education over any potential short-term success. Students recognized that a degree can be more valuable in the long run. Although participants commented that they have developed a parasocial relationship with their favorite YouTubers or TikTokers, they had little to no influence on student's desire to become social media influencers.

Furthermore, perceived norms did not have much impact on participant's career paths. Students added in the discussion that balancing pursuing a degree along with becoming an influencer seemed stressful. Participants did recognize that there could be benefits to becoming an influencer, such as the lifestyle portrayed and having more free time, but it was not enough to encourage them to disregard their degree program. Participants had uncertainty and pointed out the downsides to becoming an influencer. Students mentioned that one would have to prepare for negative feedback in the form of judgement or cyberbullying which could cause stress or impact mental health. The lack of privacy was also a concern for students who considered becoming an influencer. 14 out of 15 participants thought balancing both pursuing a degree program and becoming a social media influencer was attainable. They believed that balancing was possible depending on the content that is being produced such as an individual producing content about their college journey.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROOP) for providing me with this opportunity to enhance my research studies and skills. Furthermore, I could not have completed any of this work without the guidance from Miss Eldaneka Rolle. I was able to learn about data collection, time management, and the graduate program. She has been an amazing mentor who I can look up to for help regarding academics and any of my future endeavors. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Richard Waters for all of his assistance throughout this process as well.

References

