What Does Your Brain on Influencer Marketing Look Like?

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Measuring attribution and return on investment remains a key challenge when marketing with influencers—which means that it can be hard to quantify the merits of utilizing them. But neuroscience research from the UK, showing cognitive responses to traditional marketing vs. influencer posts, may provide some answers.

In May 2019, influencer agency Whalar and neuroanalytics firm Neuro-Insight analyzed reactions to influencer ads from UK social media users ages 18 to 65. The study looked at subjects' "emotional intensity" and "memory encoding." Respectively, these terms were defined as the strength of the emotion being felt and as the experience of committing something to long-term memory.

The research showed that influencer ads generated 277% greater emotional intensity and 87% higher memory encoding in participants than TV ads did. Influencer ads were also similarly more effective than Facebook and YouTube ads, particularly when it came to memory encoding.

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Impact of Influencer Ads Compared with Ads on TV, Facebook and YouTube Among UK Social Media Users, May 2019

	Emotional intensity	Memory encoding
TV	277%	87%
Facebook	64%	182%
YouTube	28%	73%

Note: ages 18-65; brain responses passively measured via steady-state topography (SST); emotional intensity registers the strength of the reaction, whether positive or negative; read as influencer ads registered 277% more emotional intensity and 87% more memory encoding than TV ads
Source: Whalar, "The Science of Influencer" conducted by Neuro-Insight, June 2019

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Shazia Ginai, CEO of Neuro-Insight, explained to us that emotional intensity and memory encoding were measured using headsets with sensors placed on the areas of the brain specifically responsible for those cognitive functions. "Our brains are very specialized, so these responses can be measured with confidence," she said.

Researchers also took a look at the effect of "priming," or the act of one stimulus subconsciously influencing how people respond to subsequent stimuli. When respondents viewed branded influencer content prior to seeing a non-influencer ad for the same company, their reaction was often more positive compared with those who had not seen an influencer ad beforehand.

The study produced similar results for influencer-primed linear TV ads: a 13% positive response (also referred to as "approach"), 103% greater emotional intensity and 58% higher memory encoding. On the other hand, influencer-primed YouTube ads showed heightened approach (63%), but they resulted in just 16% higher memory encoding and a 26% decrease in emotional intensity.

Impact of Influencer Priming* on TV, Facebook and YouTube Ads Among UK Social Media Users, May 2019

	Positive response	Emotional intensity	Memory encoding
Facebook	158%	116%	103%
YouTube	63%	-26%	16%
TV	13%	103%	58%

*Note: ages 18-65; brain responses passively measured via steady-state topography (SST); emotional intensity registers the strength of the reaction, whether positive or negative; read as YouTube ads registered a milder (-26%) and more positive (63%) response with influencer priming vs. those without; *influencer content for the same brand viewed prior to the ad*
Source: Whalar, "The Science of Influencer" conducted by Neuro-Insight, June 2019

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Influencers with audiences of varying sizes were also found to be more or less effective in different cognitive areas. Microinfluencers, who have between 100,000 and 500,000 followers, solicited the highest degree of approach. Participants' emotional intensity and memory encoding registered at 62% and 55%, respectively, above ads within general content. ("General content" being that found on TV, Facebook and YouTube.)

Impact of Influencer Ads Among UK Social Media Users, by Influencer Category, May 2019

	Memory encoding	Emotional intensity	Positive response
Celebrity influencer	74%	40%	-54%
Microinfluencer (100K-500K followers)	55%	62%	62%
Macroinfluencer (500K+ followers)	48%	67%	40%

Note: ages 18-65; brain responses passively measured via steady-state topography (SST); emotional intensity registers the strength of the reaction, whether positive or negative; read as celebrity influencer ads registered a stronger (40%) and less positive (-54%) response than ads within general content (TV, Facebook and YouTube)
Source: Whalar, "The Science of Influencer" conducted by Neuro-Insight, June 2019

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When respondents saw celebrity influencers, the memory encoding was 74% higher than it was during their general browsing state. However, their approach was down 54% compared with their reactions to general ad content, indicating that celebrity influencer ads were memorable for negative reasons.

Whalar said that the data on celebrities related to campaigns where specific influencers used tended to evoke negative responses. Additional data provided to eMarketer showed that some celebrity influencers can be used effectively in certain circumstances to drive positive results for brands.

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