DOUBLE TAP:

Evidence of Genderlect in Instagram Post Performance

Introduction

Young and old, many people flock to social media to post, browse and engage with content. Various social platforms exist, each providing a different method for user approval of content. On Instagram, the fastest growing social platform, a simple double-tap will increase the number of likes a picture receives. This modest action bears the potential to launch an account into stardom. Users who regularly generate high numbers of likes and draw large amounts of followers can attract organizations for influencer requests. These organizations, looking for alternative ways to advertise, often reach out to influential Instagram users to promote their products. In exchange for a shout-out and post, many organizations will often provide complimentary products and services, as well as monetary compensation, to influencers who endorse them. In September, Instagram's number of regular users reached 800 million (Statista, 2017), many in search of the influencer lifestyle and "Instafame." This term refers to accounts with large amounts of followers and high engagement (likes and comments) who do not have a previous, extra-Internet reputation.

But how does one garner enough attention to receive that status? Most writing on Instagram success – tips, tricks and programs to become Instafamous – come straight from social media influencers themselves, over half of which are females (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 2). Many self-proclaimed influencers with a hundred thousand or more followers and high engagement create and market guides to fame, selling their "secrets" to turn a profit. However, nothing but personal stories backs up their claims to stardom.

As a relatively new field of research, Instagram represents an area of scholarship still lacking in breadth. Plenty of individuals have set out to tackle the complex issue of social media influencing and its effect on marketing, but few have analyzed best practices for user success.

Thus, most studies focus on how marketers and influencers can work together in mutually beneficial relationships, but few cover the intricacies of growing a following, fostering engagement, and becoming an influencer.

Paving the way for such scholarship, however, bears the temptation to focus on the posted images themselves. Since Instagram represents a visual medium for information sharing, such a conclusion seems logical; however, one cannot ignore the vital importance of careful caption creation. A picture can say a thousand words, but it takes a phrase or two to set the tone of an image. The same photograph can take on a humorous nature just as easily as it can a contemplative one, depending on the words chosen to represent the user's thoughts. But which of those approaches will receive the most engagement? This study seeks to discover the effect captions have on post engagement, specifically through the lens of gendered communication. Since powerful women inspire the next generation of female leaders, and because Instagram attracts women, understanding what language best connects with followers becomes imperative. Scholarship must discover what motivates a user to double tap.

Literature Review

Instagram success relies on both the number of followers and their level of engagement, emphasizing the importance of quality, not quantity, in content (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). Users perceive individuals with more appealing lifestyles and physical appearances as more trustworthy, thus creators with beautiful pictures and at least the illusion of excitement will garner more followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 3). In turn, those with more followers appear trustworthy and attractive (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 2). However, while many traditional celebrities hold records for the most social media followers, truly powerful accounts,

those with the most self-sufficient brands and organization-identified influencers, hold the most weight. A well-planned feed, coherent voice and consistent visual pattern lends to a more reliable, credible and aesthetically pleasing account (Chatterjee, 2011, p. 82). Instafamous accounts present consistent branding with highly edited pictures. Some accounts capitalize on light and white highlights in their pictures to create softer glows in their feeds, while others increase vibrancy to produce bright images across their boards. No matter the direction chosen, social influencers rely on consistency and quality images to grow and foster their following.

Conversely, most traditional celebrities, such as acclaimed film stars or musicians, use social media to post disorganized and often candid pictures. For example, traditional celebrity feeds, like those of Michael B. Jordan and Miley Cyrus, consist of candid shots, selfies and self-promotions. Jordan includes posters for his upcoming films, and Cyrus often posts videos of her singing. Like the majority of celebrities, much of their content appears unplanned, and provides little consistency. Most pictures are either professional (i.e., magazine) photo shoots or are un-edited snapshots from their phone containing wide arrays of color and focal points.

Organizations wishing to harness the power of social influencers for advertising must first select the accounts to approach. Any number of celebrities and Instafamous individuals should qualify as candidates. However, organizations must take into account the user's brand. Organizations should consider whether or not an influencer's niche (such as travel or fitness) aligns with their product or service, how the influencer's color schemes and editing brands will look when applied to images of the product and if an influencer's tone in promoting past products will benefit the organization. If they determine that a specific influencer's brand and promotion strategy work within their marketing plan, they often reach out to offer a partnership. However, endorsements only work when followers have high interest in the influencer's life

(Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 2), a phenomenon stemming from attractive images and relatability through "parasocial relationships" with influencers and celebrities (Lee et al., 2015, p. 555). Those with a substantial following and the ability to persuade through posts qualify as influencers (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90), and research has shown that users consider organic social media icons more trustworthy than traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 6).

Individuals will mimic accounts they want to resemble – lives they aspire to live (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 2). Influential, organic accounts frequently use empowering messages, promising that with enough hard work, anyone can achieve a dream lifestyle. This message provides relatability and the belief that anyone can successfully imitate an influencer's account and achieve that status for themselves. Imitating the feel and aesthetic of "Instafamous" individuals appears more attainable than starring in a movie or publishing a best-selling novel – the credentials most traditional celebrities hold for their massive social media followings. Furthermore, influencers provide high-quality images and the ability to peer into the lives of people all over the world, the two keys to regular engagement (Lee et al., 2015, p. 554). Paired with the aesthetic quality most Instafamous accounts possess, organic influencers have a better position to sway followers.

Furthermore, females have a leg up in the social world. According to Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), half of Instagram users represent women ages 18-30 (p. 2) who remain more interested in following the lifestyles of other women than of men (p. 5). This, combined with feminine inclination towards aesthetic appeal, suggests Instagram as the perfect scenario for studying powerful females. Since so many young women actively use Instagram, their role models have become Instafamous women who provide snapshots of an "ideal" life, one that

followers hope to achieve. Fitness accounts provide both the image of strong women and empowering messages to encourage followers to eat right, exercise and get in shape. Travel accounts offer windows into the unknown, spark wanderlust and deliver bucket-list items for followers. This empowerment model of influential women inspires other females to follow suite.

As with many social media sites, Instagram remains deeply gendered (Dobscha, 2007, p. 568). This platform in particular relies on holistic aesthetic, photo editing and caption creation skills. Moving beyond the preliminary assumptions and categorizations of influencers, how do powerful women assert themselves on social media? Moreover, what language do these Instafamous accounts use? Because of the feminine-slanted use of Instagram, it would make sense to assume that feminine genderlect language would attract the most attention. However, no research has yet decided if caption patterns affect post engagement.

Genderlect language refers to Deborah Tannen's theory that "male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication" (Griffin, 2012, p.435). Tannen proposes that men and women exhibit drastically different communication habits because they approach communication from different positions. Masculine genderlects use communication to advance their status and prove superiority to their communication partners, whereas those with feminine genderlects institute communication to build relationships and prove equality (Griffin, 2012, p. 435). However, not all men have a masculine genderlect, and not all women have a feminine genderlect. Rather, people exhibit certain communication traits that situate them on the masculine-feminine genderlect scale.

Communication scholars can identify genderlect language through various markers. For instance, Tannen suggests that masculine genderlects will initiate conflict while feminine ones will avoid it, and that masculine genderlects view questions as proof of ignorance while feminine ones will ask questions to foster a relationship between parties (Griffin, 2012, p. 440). When telling a

story, individuals with masculine genderlects will most likely make themselves the hero, whereas feminine genderlects will often give examples of how they failed, or tell stories of others. When telling stories, masculine genderlects joke around and look for approval, whereas feminine genderlects share feelings and experiences in search of understanding (Rumbough, 2007, p. 2). When communicating, feminine genderlects prefer the private sphere and frequently interrupt their partners with affirming sounds and words to validate the dialogue. Masculine genderlects, however, prefer public spaces and perceive interruptions as attempts at overpowering their spoken opinions (Rumbough, 2007, p.1).

Even though not all men exhibit masculine genderlects and not all women display feminine genderlects, society still dictates that genders should fall into their assumed genderlect. When this doesn't happen, inappropriate titles fly: males with feminine genderlects are called "pussies" and females with masculine genderlects are called "bitches." These horrific names reflect a culture determined to build boxes around gendered communication. But at what cost? What affect does this have on female leaders? As the breeding ground for the next generation, Instagram provides the perfect petri dish for studying the relationship between genderlect language and acceptance. By analyzing post captions of an influential female, one can determine which genderlect language followers accept and engage with the most. Therefore, this study poses the question:

> ***In what ways do gendered communication styles relate to follower engagement in the Instagram posts of influential females?***

Methodology

For this Instagram study, both reader and researcher must understand that the influencer under observation will naturally lean towards one genderlect over the other. However, post captions themselves may cross back-and-forth more often than the individual does in person. This study shows interest in the post's content, not the influencer's natural predisposition.

In selecting an account to categorize, it remained crucial to pick an influential, powerful woman whose organic fame began within social media. The influencer needed to have over a hundred thousand followers and bridge the gap between multiple niches. Thus, Instagram account @travel_inhershoes, run by Aggie, served as the perfect candidate. Aggie travels the world, staying in luxury hotels, eating high-quality foods and experiencing much of what the world has to offer. Her sense of style and affinity towards a healthy lifestyle allows her to reach followers beyond the travel community. As of Nov. 20, 2017, Aggie had 306,000 followers and followed 932 accounts. Her bio read "LA based free spirit who can't get enough of adventure, good energy, avocados & puppies!" Aggie also provides the names of her current and next destinations, as well as a link to her YouTube channel.

This study categorized Aggie's recent posts as masculine, feminine or neutral, and then analyzed the data (see Appendix). Some of the traditional markers for feminine vs. masculine genderlect had no application to Instagram posts, such as interrupting to validate (feminine) or trump (masculine) the other person. Others, like the inclination to talk more in private (feminine) or public (masculine), existed through the images more than the copy. Images of Aggie as the center of attention, or with a group of people doing more public things reflected a masculine genderlect, whereas pictures of her in hotel rooms or secluded scenes denote feminine genderlect. However, because many influencers stage their posts or intentionally frame shots so they look

alone in the environment, relying solely on location and number of people in an image proves unsatisfactory. Thankfully, some genderlect traits transitioned to Instagram post copy well. For instance, captions that made fun of Aggie, praised others, used abundant adjectives or asked for follower opinion captured textbook feminine genderlect. Conversely, those that described her special treatment, highlighted her enviable physique or offered advice fell into the masculine category. All of the other posts, some brand promotions and simple sentences, fell into the neutral category.

Because of the fluid nature of Instagram and the constantly shifting number of followers, selecting a relatively small sample size was crucial. Analyzing too many posts would easier skew the results because past posts received fewer impressions in correlation with the smaller number of followers. In turn, analyzing too few posts would not yield enough data. Thus, the most recent 50 posts were compiled into a chart. Each caption was then carefully read through the genderlect lenses. Any loaded words that slanted the post to one end of the spectrum or the other categorized the post as either masculine or feminine. Those that contained no gendered language categorized as neutral.

From the sample (see *Table 1)*, @travel_inhershoes posted 22/50 masculine posts, 20/50 feminine posts and 8/50 neutral posts (see **"Category Examples"**). Aggie's personal preference towards masculine language in captions pulls from those basic numbers. However, the account's preference does not determine user engagement. To determine followers' engagement preferences, likes and comments for all posts within the three categories (masculine, feminine and neutral) were averaged, and the extreme statistics for likes and comments (see *Table 1)* were found.

Category Examples

Feminine



> “Friends make every adventure way more fun! Love having you in Thailand with me @majamalnar! Swipe right to laugh a little at my expense 😉 Thanks @jacob for catching these fun moments!
> .....
> #kohsamui #samui #thailand #destinationdiscoveries #besties”

True to the feminine genderlect, Aggie calls attention to an embarrassing moment of failure: hitting a tree as she drove along. The story she tells emphasizes her failure to safely ride in a car, and capitalizes on the unfortunate results. Feminine genderlect language does just that, highlighting mistakes rather than moments of heroism. Aggie also praises her friend, establishing care and community by emphasizing their relationship and downplaying herself. Feminine genderlect language engages other people in an attempt to prove similarity and equality. By tagging her friend @maiamalnar with the word “love,” and giving photography credits to @jacob, Aggie pulls others into her narrative, acknowledging their personalities and talents.

Masculine



> “One thing you should know about me is that I’m very driven / pun intended 😉
>
> I’m obsessed with reading, learning, meeting interesting people - no rest from self growth or training even in paradise because if you’re passionate about something it never really feels like work! Right?! Happy Saturday!
> ....
> #sixsenseslamuu #sixsenses #beautifulhotels #maldives”

In this post, Aggie writes of her best qualities and gives followers a look into her mind. She brags of passion and earning a living from something that feels nothing like work. The language she chose sets her apart from followers as an ideal, exhibiting the masculine genderlect tendency towards establishing dominance. Masculine genderlect language capitalizes on power and proving oneself as superior in various aspects of life. Aggie, by taking the subject her followers love, travel, and presenting herself in a traveling context with phrases like "no rest from self-growth or training" and "passionate," she exceptionalizes herself in that field. Masculine genderlects also stand out as the more blunt style of communication. Thus, because Aggie begins her post with "I'm very driven" instead of "some people say that I'm driven" or by mentioning some anecdotes that proves her drive, she sets the tone as direct and masculine.

Neutral



"When you go through your last holiday photos instead of packing... eeeeeek I'm coming for you, Green Curry, I mean - Thailand! First stop #KohSamui

.....

With @lisahomsy #thailand #thaifood #greencurry #besties #swing #bucketlist #travelawesome #holidaygoals"

Aggie posts a picture from a previous trip with a caption that prefaces an upcoming adventure. A masculine version of this would highlight unique experiences she might have in Thailand that her followers may never get the chance to experience. A feminine version would pose a question for followers like "What is your favorite thing about Thailand?" or give more attention to her friend in the picture instead of isolating @lisahomsy to a simple tag. Since this post follows none of the feminine or masculine genderlect trends, it classifies as neutral.

Table 1

Note: The most extreme number in each category is bold.

	Masculine	**Feminine**	**Neutral**
Percentage of posts	**44%**	40%	16%
Average Likes	16,643	**17,517**	17,065
Highest Liked	25,955	**46,799**	26,982
Lowest Liked	11,500	**7,469**	8,510
Average Comments	452	**523**	451
Highest Comments	1,064	**1,469**	784
Lowest Comments	269	289	**222**

After analyzing the data, the strength of feminine posts emerges. While Aggie does not post content with feminine language most often, the posts with the highest average likes, the most liked post (*Image 1)*, the highest average comments and the most commented on post *(Image 1)* all represented feminine language. In turn, a feminine genderlect post also had the lowest likes (*Image 2)*, whereas a neutral post garnered the least comments (*Image 3)*.

According to these numbers, feminine and neutral posts generate more engagement than masculine ones, even though Aggie posts the highest number of captions with masculine language. Furthermore, even though feminine language prompted the lowest number of likes on a post, they still generated the most positive feedback across the board. Thus, a relatable phrase or two, attempting to build a connection between influencer and followers, will most likely perform better than one that boasts or attempts to one-up.

Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Study Limitation

It is crucial to state that image quality on Instagram is paramount. Perhaps some post success is due to terrific lighting or angles. Maybe certain people gravitate towards pictures of relaxation, and Aggie just happened to pair such images with feminine genderlect language. As of now, it is impossible to separate a post's success entirely between the image quality and caption content. However, both must receive proper care and attention from influencers in order to foster engagement and hopefully promote account growth.

This study engaged with all post categories, both video and photographic. Video posts historically generate fewer likes than pictures. The video in this study classified as a feminine post, which may have skewed the results slightly, but would not have changed the outcome as the feminine posts still reflected the highest number of averages. Furthermore, this study did not

include cross-posting on other accounts. Very attractive pictures will sometimes post on other accounts as well, and thus drive traffic to the original creator's page. If @travel_inhershoes' pictures were posted on other accounts, those account followers could potentially find their way back to Aggie's page and like the original photograph as well. It would prove near impossible to track down every occurrence and factor in their effect on engagement.

Conclusion

Little scholarship exists connecting communication theory to effective social media growth. Influencers, organic to Instagram, rely on quality images and approachable captions. This study shows that writing posts with feminine genderlect language will prove most effective. Asking questions of followers, thanking others, and providing tips through a lens of experienced failure will result in higher post engagement.

This study shed significant light into the void of social media scholarship. Instagram continues to grow and attract new users, and potential influencers constantly come out of the woodwork to try and turn a profit. Organic users see the success of other social media users and attempt to copy their methods for their own results. By understanding the power of a feminine genderlect on Instagram, social media influencers, no matter their current following or levels of engagement, can begin to generate quality content and engaging posts.

Gendered language has served its purpose in shaping society for years by determining who can display which communication styles, and now people see its affects in the social realm as well (Ray, 2016, p. 62). Connection has served as the purpose of social media since its formation, thus the power of feminine genderlect makes sense. Significantly more engagement occurred on the posts with feminine genderlect language than the neutral and masculine posts.

This scholarly approach steps in where, previously, only "how-to" guides from self-proclaimed influencers stood. This study bridges the gap between self-determined understanding and academically supported research. It bears the crucial link to reinforced and knowledgeable content creation for increased engagement. Those seeking to become Instafamous influencers should continue to take advice from successful users, but they should also rely on scholarship such as this to ensure truly engaging content is created.

Future research should expand this principle and dig into other aspects of caption creation, such as hashtag use and length. An analysis of color schemes and aesthetic branding in feeds could also benefit the industry, providing a wider breadth of understanding social media's potential.

Moving forward, the ability to interact more deeply with followers will allow for genuine conversations and the ability to affect social change locally and globally. Not only can potential influencers benefit from the knowledge of effective post creation, but the Instagram community as a whole can build upon the importance of relationship-building and connectedness through captions. Selecting the phrases that align with a feminine genderlect to accompany a picture has large effects on user engagement, influencing followers in the process. As this power of social media continues to spread, humanity must work harder to understand our part in making it a positive force, and wrestle with how to ethically convince followers to double tap content.

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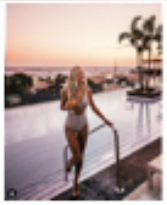
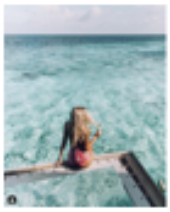
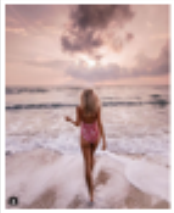
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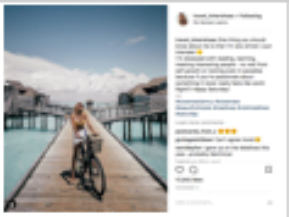
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Appendix

Post	Date	F/M/N	Likes	Comments	Post	Date	F/M/N	Likes	Comments
	11/19/17	M	13,132	355		11/4/17	F	26,053	673
	11/19/17	N	16,206	409		11/4/17	F	19,377	398
	11/18/17	M	15,413	477		11/3/17	F	23,008	533
	11/17/17	M	16,464	347		11/1/17	M	23,843	652
	11/17/17	M	16,609	410		10/31/17	F	11,946	322
	11/16/17	F	29,556	1,014		10/30/17	M	15,959	452
	11/16/17	M	14,968	457		10/30/17	N	10,001	282

	11/15/17	M	25,955	637			10/29/17	M	12,961	342
	11/15/17	M	20,558	506			10/28/17	M	19,253	500
	11/14/17	M	16,682	400			10/28/17	F	14,445	345
	11/14/17	F	16,466	644			10/27/17	N	15,100	425
	11/13/17	N	19,285	488			10/27/17	M	14,322	371
	11/12/17	M	16,079	387			10/26/17	N	14,019	347
	11/12/17	F	18,379	475			10/26/17	M	11,500	363

	11/11/17	M	17,243	425			10/26/17	F	7,469	501
	11/11/17	F	17,714	394			10/25/17	F	16,454	591
	11/10/17	N	26,982	648			10/25/17	M	14,593	375
	11/9/17	F	14,588	327			10/24/17	F	9,691	289
	11/8/17	F	46,799	1,469			10/23/17	F	10,287	341
	11/7/17	M	15,110	359			10/23/17	F	10,325	312
	11/7/17	M	12,602	269			10/22/17	F	10,821	359

	11/6/17	F	17,732	452			10/22/17	F	16,138	454
	11/6/17	N	26,422	784			10/22/17	N	8,510	222
	11/6/17	M	15,807	343			10/21/17	M	12,128	450
	11/5/17	M	24,955	1,064			10/21/17	F	13,096	573