Influencer Marketing Has an Implicit Bias Problem

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When you think of implicit bias, you probably associate it more with workplace culture than with social media and internet culture. But it isn't something we turn off when we leave the office. Surprise—it's also there when we go on that 30-minute Instagram binge. Just take a look at some of the hottest PR influencer trips of the summer that have taken over your feed, which are also likely all very white and very blonde.

YouTube has been slammed time and time again for its algorithm for promoting and recommending predominantly white influencers, ultimately getting more eyeballs on their content, leading to more engagement and more opportunities to work with brands and make a living. Now, with Instagram allowing advertisers to promote influencer content, this issue will take over more and more of our feed there too.

Implicit bias trickles down to influencer marketing and to how marketers select influencers for campaigns. We all tend to follow influencers that look and act like ourselves. We follow people who remind us of our values, those who we see and feel seen by. But even when we look for new content or influencers to follow, platforms often recommend more white content regardless of what had been previously viewed. And even when black influencers do work with brands, there have been many complaints that they often get paid less than their white counterparts.

With the industry hyper-focused on inclusivity, why is

influencer marketing so behind the curve? It’s our job as marketers to end this cycle. Here’s a few things to think about regarding your next influencer campaign.

There is no risk

If we want to create change for the future, we have to systematically change the stereotypes.
Often when it comes to recommending influencers for brand partnerships, many marketers inadvertently bucket diverse candidates into a “risk category aka they aren’t brand aligned, in marketing speak. Marketers need to change this mindset. They need to understand that tapping into diverse influencers is not a risk, and it never was. If brands aim to be more inclusive, it’s not just about matching the white standard but creating a new standard altogether. Bringing diverse influencer candidates to the table is the first step and should be at every step of the creative process.

While legacy brands like Gucci and Revolve Clothing are taking a hit, we’re also seeing brands doing it right, such as Outdoor Voices, Fenty and Reebok. The latter prioritize and empower diverse influencers not in a performative way, but because they understand that diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of culture. And consumers stand behind them.

You can’t hire people you can’t see

When it comes down to discovering diverse influencers, it is just like an HR department. Continuing to recruit from the same sources will give you the same outcome. It’s the same for brands looking to expand their influencer pool. Look outside the regular pipeline of content to discover, even when it means checking the bias of those owning influencer identification.

Point of view over views

Tapping into diverse influencers is a way to show the audience their true self and culture through authenticity. After all,

diverse influencers are reaching the exact audiences that brands need access to without compromising their identity and authenticity in the process, ultimately keeping their fans engaged and coming back for more—and it shows. If we want to create change for the future, we have to systematically change the stereotypes.

We are in the business of culture, which means we are responsible for accurately partnering with those depicting it. Brands that don’t evolve and prioritize true consumer representation will continue to be disrupted by companies that realize the risk doesn’t lie in diversity, it lies in ignoring it.

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