

Dialogue 36 Instagram Influencers

A: Hi Pete, what are you looking at?

B: Hi Rachel. I'm looking at some new photos on Instagram from people that I follow.

A: That's funny, I just heard about a scandal involving an Instagram influencer. Do you know Tiffany Mitchell?

B: Hmmm, no I've never heard of her. What's the story?

A: Well, she posted pictures of herself on Instagram after she had a motorbike accident. At first she received a lot of sympathy. But quite quickly after the photos of her lying beside the road were posted, people started to doubt her story.

B: Why was that?

A: Well, for a start the pictures were very artistic - in fact they seemed too beautiful for an accident. Not only that, there were some strange things in her photos - she appeared to have two motorbike helmets. People started to ask questions: Why was there no blood? Why did she name her tattoo artist in her post? (she said her flower tattoo might need a "touch-up") and - even more strange - why was there a prominently branded bottle of water in the forefront of one of the photos?

B: Who took the photos?

A: Her friend Lindsey was the photographer and she said that looking back at the photos she could see why they seemed so staged. If she hadn't been there herself, she said, she might also have had a hard time believing they weren't fake. She added that Tiffany had no idea the photos were being taken until hours after the accident. But the negative response in Instagram was so strong that Tiffany later removed the post, and uploaded a video defending herself.

B: What did she say?

A: Well, she denied staging her crash, which she says happened when she took a corner too fast on a country road in Tennessee. The other helmet belonged to her friend who was also in the photos. She also said that she had no idea how anyone could believe that it was staged, or being exploited for attention for a brand campaign.

B: Ah, so people were focused on the bottle of water and didn't believe her.

A: Exactly. She said the water was handed to her and could have been any brand. It turns out that the brand was SmartWater which is owned by Coca Cola. SmartWater later said that it had no working relationship with her. Tiffany said that she always discloses her brand collaborations.

B: Ok, so it seems pretty clear she was telling the truth.

A: Yes, but the scary thing is whether you believe her side of the story or not, the reaction to it suggests people are becoming increasingly cynical about what they see on Instagram. There are many examples of Instagrammers failing to declare when their posts are sponsored by the brand they are promoting, and not a spontaneous expression of their own personal preference.

B: So, you don't really know if they are just promoting products or if they are being natural. There was an Instagram post by a UK reality TV star which was banned by the Advertising Standards Authority - it showed her drinking a branded weight loss coffee while she pregnant. The Authority said that not only did it break several rules, including encouraging unsafe practices during pregnancy,

but it was also not identified by her as an advert. She said she was not paid by the company that makes the coffee product.

A: And on the other hand, there are those who like to pretend they have brand collaborations even when they don't, because in the Influencer world, the more sponsors you have, the more credibility you have. Instagram followers actually like a beautified version of reality. They don't want to see the washing-up in the kitchen sink. Influencers are constantly working with Instagram's algorithms in order to boost their followers and make the products more marketable. It's a popularity game.

B: Well I can see that from an Influencer's perspective you need to post things the audience wants to see, because it gets more promoted if more people are looking at it. But Instagram Influencers should get some credit for their creativity too.

Summary

With the popularity of Instagram, influencers are being linked to promoting an idealistic lifestyle with products that fulfill the image of a desirable life. By following them, are we in danger of being victims of marketing and losing our sense of reality? Two friends give two different examples of Instagram scandals that show that in social media not everything is as it seems. Or have we become too cynical, expecting too much from these Influencers and being too quick to judge what we see.

Questions

- 1) What do you know about Instagram- why is it so popular?
- 2) What is your opinion of social media applications like Instagram?
- 3) Can we believe what we see on social media, and how can we verify if what we see is true?
- 4) Whose responsibility is it when it comes to truth in social media?