
EMERGING ISSUES IN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

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Editorial: A note on influencer marketing in social media

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1 Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a significant shift in how products and services are marketed. The proliferation of social media marketing, alongside advances in mobile technologies and location-based targeting, has significantly enhanced the capabilities of customer engagement. *Influencer marketing* which is becoming more contextually relevant with brands has taken off with this unprecedented connectivity. With increasingly more influencer agencies coming on board, influencer marketing becomes more accessible and measurable than ever before. Over the past five years, many companies have collaborated with influencers, to increase brand awareness or boost conversions among a specific target audience or about a distinct niche. Influencer marketing is set to grow from an ancillary marketing tactic to a \$5–\$10 billion dollar industry (Mediakix, 2019). Fashion, beauty, gaming, travel, and lifestyle brands are prominent verticals that are continuing their strong support from influencer marketing.

Social media influencers (SMIs) are individual users or entities on social media who have established authority and credibility among potential customers in a specific industry through their online activities (Brown and Hayes, 2008). Influencer marketing is regarded as a form of advertising when the SMIs receive a compensation (free products or financial incentives) and advertisers have control over the post, such as final approval of the content or general instructions regarding the post (De Veirman et al., 2017). Unlike traditional brand ambassadors who are usually connected through an explicit relationship with a brand or company, SMI are considered ‘independent, third-party endorsers’ and are evaluated by their social media ‘reach’, including their number of social media posts and followers (Freberg et al., 2011). Their pre-existing online presence in a niche makes them a useful channel for brands in search of targeted influence over consumer decision-making and/or collective action.

Academically, an extensive body of research on social media marketing and related topics, such as online word of mouth (WOM) and social networks, has been developed. Extant research has shown that consumers pay attention to the information transmitter and draw inferences about contents (Luarn and Chiu, 2014). In light of this, a number of researchers have studied influencers’ effects on the virality and effectiveness of content. For example, Moldovan et al. (2017) suggest that the impact of influencers is strongest in smaller strong-tie groups and that it decreases with the increasing group size. There are also opposing views that assume the broader population has the greatest influence on the viral spread of content and that influencers have more local impact (Zhang et al., 2016). In summary, despite what academics and practitioners have studied and learned over the last decade on this topic, due to the fast-paced and ever-evolving nature of social media, topics related SMIs deserve more attention as a subject of academic interest. For marketing practitioners, it is also important to understand the main drivers of effective influencer marketing in order to derive an appropriate strategy to support organisational objectives and socio-economic targets.

The papers in this special issue share a number of common themes. First, a number of the papers explore the issue on SMIs credibility. In particular, which activities by SMIs mislead consumers in a way that reduce trust? Several papers ask this question under a variety of different contexts and call for new regulations against production and dissemination of fabricated information and deceptive contents that distort actual facts or statistics. Many researchers are contributing to this debate on regulation of information distribution and media literacy interventions, through the papers in this special issue and

elsewhere. A second theme involves the differences between celebrities that have a strong social media presence versus ‘micro-influencers’. Micro-influencers usually have strong and enthusiastic followings that are usually more targeted, attracting anywhere between a few thousand to hundreds of thousands of followers (Appel et al., 2020). They may not have the massive follower count of the big players in the space, but they are much more cost-effective, providing that the brands can identify those who have niche audiences that align with their target consumers. Finally, a third theme addresses the issue of different strategies adopted by SMIs and the impact of these strategies. This gives us an excellent toolkit for measuring how SMIs will affect different segments of the population through information dissemination and customer engagement. Of course, these themes are not mutually exclusive. In measuring the impact of SMI strategies, papers can also question the need for credibility and demonstrate that the type of SMIs (celebrities vs. micro-influencers) may cause different consequences.

2 Message value and SMI credibility

The credibility of a source has a positive influence on the use of the content or purchase decision (Aghdaie et al., 2012; Gunawan and Huarng, 2015). If the content is received from a recognisable and trusted opinion leader, the perceived information value of the message and the distribution rate of the information increase. Autonomous SMIs that appear not to be explicitly affiliated with the brand may be one way for organisations to build and grow that digital legitimacy. Drawing from previous literature, Ohanian (1990) defines source credibility as a three-dimensional construct that included expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Source expertise is a source’s competence or qualification, including the knowledge or skills, to make certain claims relating to a certain subject or topic (Koot et al., 2016). Source trustworthiness concerns with the receivers’ perception of a source as being honest, sincere, or truthful (Lin and Xu, 2017). Attractiveness, referring to a source’s physical attractiveness or likeability (Gong and Li, 2017). When recommended by a competent, trusted, and likeable source, consumers let their guard down, and are more receptive to product or service suggestions. Some of these issues are discussed by the papers in this special issue.

Djafarova and Matso (2021) explore the influence of beauty SMIs on visual platforms like Instagram and YouTube through the analysis of top micro-celebrity profiles and surveys with the followers. These platforms are especially influential as they go beyond simple product placements and enable product demonstration and tutorial videos. The authors find that quality of images and professionalism of profile layouts are crucial in determining the credibility of micro-celebrities. Another paper from this special issue seeks to understand the diet trends on social media, SMIs’ influence on food product choices, and their impact on the society. Their findings show that since the food choices are being influenced by the brands and many SMIs have limited nutritional background, diet trends on social media does not increase awareness for a ‘healthy diet’. Moreover, some of the unproven or false health claims made by these SMIs may even cause health issues in the long-term (Vasconcelos et al., 2021). Exaggeration of the health benefits and misleading nutritious information may draw in the consumers who quest for ‘wellness’ and even give them the illusion that they’re making better consumption choices. This

stream of research calls for more stringent regulations and control from authorities against fraudulent SMI ads that lack clinical evidence.

3 Social media celebrities and ‘micro-influencers’

The idea of using celebrities (in consumer markets) or well-known opinion leaders (in business markets), to influence purchase decisions is a well-studied marketing strategy (Knoll and Matthes, 2017). However, the proliferation of social media has tremendously increased the accessibility and appeal of this approach. While major brands have stepped up their games by collaborating with mega-celebrity influencers like Selena Gomez, these traditional celebrities are so expensive that smaller brands have begun, and will continue, to capitalise on the popularity of micro-influencers. Micro-influencers, who are particularly cost-effective in engaging specific segments and niche markets, are more accessible and suited to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) than well-known social media celebrities. Some of the micro-influencers may not have an enormous number of followers, but, are still popular for their relatability and authenticity. De Veirman et al. (2017) classified a low level of following as 2,100 followers and 21,000 as high following, whereas a study by Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono (2019) distinguished between celebrities and experts for food Instagram posts based upon the average number of likes their posts attracted.

Conversely, other studies refer more broadly to perceived opinion leadership (Xiong et al., 2018). Xiong et al. (2018) argue that there is no consistent measurement regarding perceived opinion leader status. This leaves little consensus as to what level of followers or likes segments SMIs into distinct groups. Furthermore, there are specific online opinion leadership roles for different influencers, and these roles and their influence differ according to influencers’ social reach (i.e., the number of followers and likes they attract). These can take the form of niche experts in fields such as cosmetics, athletics, or interior design. Nano-influencers, those who have less than 1,000 followers on Instagram, have higher engagement rates (7.2%) than mass influencers, those who have more than 100,000 followers (Rahal, 2020). In general, these types of influencers are considered to be more trustworthy than traditional celebrities, which is a major reason that influencer marketing has grown increasingly appealing to brands (Enberg, 2018; Williamson, 2019). These individuals are often seen as credible experts in what they post about, encouraging others to want to view the content they create and engage with them. In view of this, there lies an important gap in the literature of the impact different influencers have on consumer responses.

In this special issue, the paper by Jin and Muqaddam (2021) addresses contemporary issues of online celebrities and the dynamics of fame and envy in Instagram influencer-based luxury fashion marketing from a consumer psychology perspective. Their findings provide evidence on the efficacy of endorsement by micro-influencer (versus mainstream mega-celebrities) in Instagram influencer marketing. Furthermore, other researchers have also found that using these micro-influencers allows the brands to communicate via a first-person narration (compared to ads), which is considered more personal, and thus is proven to be more effective in engaging consumers (Chang et al., 2019).

4 What drives the appeal of SMIs?

In reviewing the social media ecosystem, the personality traits of SMIs play an important role. Previous research highlights that influential SMIs demonstrate personality traits of being verbal, smart, ambitious, productive and poised (Freberg et al., 2011). Ambroise et al. (2014) studied personality transference from celebrity sponsors onto a brand, and found that brand ambassador personality traits could carry over onto consumer's brand and influence attachment and purchase decisions. The researchers concluded that the effect was particularly salient with well-known brand ambassadors. In addition to SMI characteristics, disclosing sponsorship compensation also has an impact on SMI content effectiveness. Previous research shows that consumers evaluate SMI sponsored content based on different cues in the message that indicate the level of influence from the brand (Carr and Hayes, 2014). Consequently, consumers' attitudinal responses and behavioural intentions toward sponsored content are affected by the disclosure information (Liljander et al., 2015). Sponsorship disclosures have roughly been divided into simple disclosures (e.g., 'this content is sponsored'), and disclosures that provide additional information about the sponsorship, for example by emphasising the honesty of opinions presented in sponsored content (Hwang and Jeong, 2016) or by informing viewers what kind of compensation is received for sponsored content (Lu et al., 2014). The study by Stubb et al. (2019) offers empirical evidence that sponsorship compensation justification generates more positive consumer attitudes toward influencers receiving such incentives, and increases source and message credibility, compared to a simple sponsorship disclosure.

In this special issue, Acikgoz and Burnaz (2021) look into factors affecting the sponsored content value as well as attitudes towards YouTube influencers. Based on the advertising value model (Ducoffe, 1996), their findings reveal that entertainment and informativeness are the key factors of sponsored content value that affects attitudes towards YouTube influencers. Another paper in this special issue by Jaitly and Gautam (2021) investigates the antecedents of social media marketing, different methods adopted by SMIs, and the corresponding outcomes such as customer engagement and brand perception using a systematic review. The findings of the study indicate customer's perception and attitude are much influenced via influencers since they are more capable of communicating to a niche segment. Influencer marketing can act as a lead acquisition medium for the firms, such that the consumers who show interest in the product offering endorsed by the SMIs are potential customers that companies can reach out to. SMIs help the brand open a two-way conversation and build direct relationships with a well-targeted group of consumers. They also become the direct voice on behalf of the brands that consumers can trust. In light of this, these SMIs enable their collaborators to gain a competitive edge over other firms, by creating a thread of customer-generated content containing important insight for co-creation. Co-creation enhances the value of core product offerings. Companies can address these ideas to drive brand loyalty further (He et al., 2013; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

5 Conclusions

There are many interesting future research avenues to consider when thinking about the role of SMIs. First, determining what traits and qualities (e.g., authenticity, trust, credibility, and likability) make sponsored posts by a traditional celebrity influencer, comparing to a micro-influencer or even a computer-generated influencer, more or less successful is crucial for marketers. Understanding whether success has to do with the actual influencer's characteristics, the type of content being posted, whether content is sponsored or not, etc. are all relevant concerns for companies and social media platforms when determining partnerships and where to invest effort in influencer marketing. In addition, future research can focus on understanding the appeal of live influencer content, and how to successfully blend influencer content with more traditional marketing-mix approaches.

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