
Social media celebrities as influencers in brand communication: An empirical study on influencer content, its advertising relevance and audience expectations

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Castulus Kolo

is Dean and Vice President for Research and Teaching at Macromedia University. He studied physics at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich and earned a PhD at CERN, Geneva. He subsequently gained an additional PhD in social anthropology. He has extensive experience in consulting and applied research, and his research interests include media economics and management with an emphasis on social media, influencers as media entrepreneurs, gamification and emerging media technologies.

Macromedia University, Sandstraße 9, München 80335, Germany

Tel: +49 (0)89 544 151 x 892;

E-mail: c.kolo@macromedia.de



Florian Haumer

is Vice Dean and Head of the Media School at Macromedia University. He studied communication science and economics in Munich and Dresden and gained a PhD in communication science from TU Dresden. Since 2011 he has worked as a consultant for performance marketing, strategic brand management and Big Data analytics. He has previously held leadership positions in marketing, communication and business development in the media and consulting industry. His research interests include media education, media effects, psychology and game studies.

Macromedia University, Sandstraße 9, München 80335, Germany

Tel: +49 (0)89 544 151 x 861;

E-mail: f.haumer@macromedia.de

Abstract The rise of social media has expanded the opportunities for brands to communicate with their target audiences. In addition to mass communication and direct advertising, brands today can cooperate with social media influencers to target potential consumers via third parties who are less institutionalised and thus highly credible. Although the two-step flow of communication is well established in communication research, social media technology has clearly fuelled the role of opinion leaders ('influencers') with respect to brand recommendations. In recent years, however, influencer communication has undergone a process of professionalisation, leading to differentiation in terms of roles, content and audience behaviour. This study combines observational data of influencers' followers with data from a content analysis of influencers' YouTube posts and a representative survey of their audience. The results show that influencers' communication is no longer restricted to certain categories and that their followers seek gratification through the consumption of social media content in very much the same way as with traditional media content. The study also shows that advertising is omnipresent but also consciously anticipated and accepted by followers if certain conditions are fulfilled.

KEYWORDS: social media celebrities, influencer marketing, brand communication, advertising, media content, audience preferences

INTRODUCTION

Social media communication has undergone fundamental changes in recent years. A considerable number of social media users have developed from mere influential co-consumers with an interest in certain brands or products into ‘influencers’ with a substantial follower base.¹ Some of them have even started to act as professional media entrepreneurs and achieved stardom on YouTube or Instagram by accumulating double-digit millions of followers.² This development has occurred at the same time as a shift in logic regarding the selection and production of content as well as business and monetisation models.^{3,4} While some concepts still have to prove their sustainability (eg donations on Twitch), social media celebrities have clearly unlocked various ways to earn money that resemble traditional concepts in the media business.⁵ As a result of this development, social media communication has become a highly attractive field for brand communicators, content creators and audiences alike.^{6–9}

However, the evolving dynamics in social media technology bring with them a whole set of questions for companies wanting to promote their brands. In a very specific way, this also holds true for media enterprises that are recognising both the potential and the challenges of such influencer communication. Social media platforms are constantly developing new features and possibilities to communicate with followers (eg Facebook Live, Instagram Stories) and the interests of audiences are shifting from one global trend to another (eg from sustainable fashion, to travel to healthy food to do-it-yourself). In this respect, it is particularly interesting whether the underlying core concept of influencer communication (ie word of mouth) and especially brand

recommendation might be affected by such changes and whether influencers have to change or adopt their behaviour and business models.^{10,11}

One of the earliest elaborations on specific motives for word-of-mouth (WOM) communication dates back to Engel *et al.*¹² and Dichter.¹³ Based on those findings, Sundaram *et al.*¹⁴ later asserted that the motives for engaging in positive WOM communication differ from those for engaging in negative WOM communication. Kolo *et al.*¹⁵ provide a comprehensive overview of all known motives for brand recommendation in social media. Factors like ‘involvement’, ‘helping others’ and ‘consumer empowerment’ play an important role in most of the empirical studies reviewed by Kolo *et al.*¹⁵ For the current study, these findings play a crucial role in terms of audience expectations in a changing social media environment. When audiences’ interests are shifting, will they still be engaging into actual social media content? Furthermore, what will happen to WOM communication and brand recommendation when social media influencers are developing into social media celebrities that obviously exploit their user base for monetisation purposes?

METHOD

To address these research questions, a multi-methodological approach was applied that combined data from an observation of followers of social media influencers (top German and international YouTubers, $n = 40$), a content analysis of YouTube posts (top 20 German and international YouTubers, $n = 40$) and from an online survey of 14–35-year-olds in Germany ($n = 1,000$) based on a representative panel. The data collection took place between June and July 2017.

SOCIAL MEDIA CELEBRITIES AS BRAND INFLUENCERS

The core concept of influencers and WOM is well known in the social sciences and is widely considered as a success factor for effective communication.¹⁶ However, the rise of social media and mobile devices has clearly contributed to its significance. Today, social media platforms enable users to comment on companies or products rapidly and in various ways throughout their personal network. It is also striking that some users stand out in their impact on brands as influential co-consumers.^{17,18} These individuals are particularly active on diverse social media platforms and exhibit above average brand engagement.¹⁹ Some of these users also have personal skills which have helped them to achieve stardom, at least among the younger generation.^{20,21} These social media celebrities, also referred to as ‘bloggers’ or ‘YouTubers’^{22,23} usually orchestrate themselves and their content across diverse social media and provide a new powerful basis for promoting brands and products.²⁴⁻²⁶ Social media celebrities

post their content in channels on topics as diverse such as news and politics; comedy and entertainment; travel and outdoor; fashion and lifestyle (fashion in the following); beauty and cosmetics (beauty); gaming and games (gaming); do-it-yourself; and food and cooking.

An influencer is characterised by high credibility (by being an authentic co-consumer, a celebrity or an expert of some kind with a high reputation) in the relevant target group and high reach within the same group of people.^{27,28} Both characteristics are necessary and sufficient to trigger a viral process that makes influencers particularly interesting for marketers beyond their mere primary reach.²⁹ In general, the range of influencers spans from thought leaders via influential co-consumers via ‘micro influencer’ (surpassing already about 5,000 followers) ‘category influencers’ (having more than 50,000 followers and some fame already within a specific category but not beyond) to social media celebrities with more than a million followers (Figure 1). Although differing

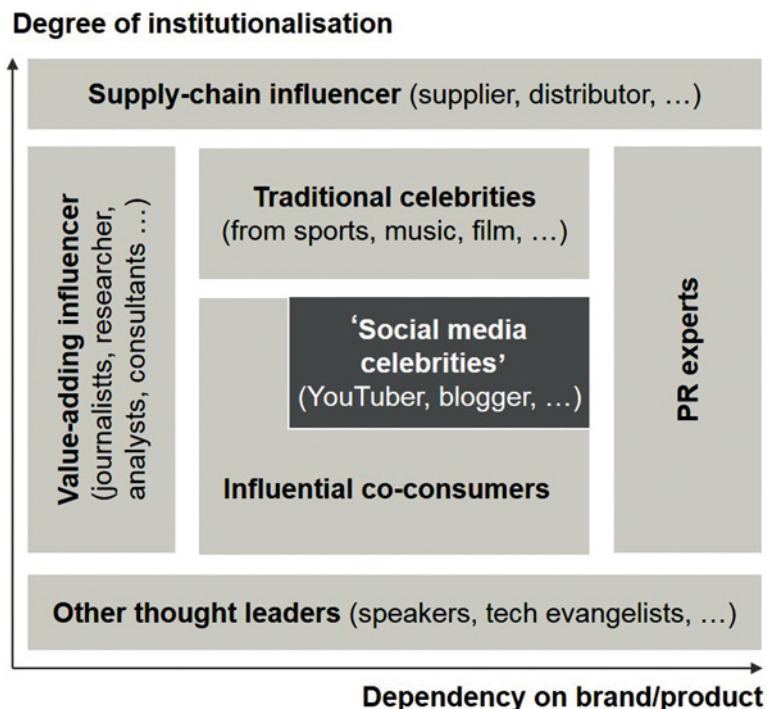


Figure 1: Social media celebrities as brand influencer

across categories, social media celebrities are generally young. In the fashion category, most of the audience are in their 20s. In the beauty category, the audience is even younger. The video content of social media celebrities is mainly dominated by one-protagonist productions — at least in the top-ranking channels. With slightly over 50 per cent, the video content in gaming, fashion and beauty are enacted solo. Generally, the content often contains several aspects of self-disclosure from the protagonist, emphasising authenticity. Influencers in gaming focus more on events (63 per cent of all videos of gaming influencers show events, eg e-sports contests) while social media celebrities in fashion talk more about general wellbeing (35 per cent of all videos from fashion influencers contain general wellbeing). However, both groups share a similar amount of personal information in their video content (35 per cent of all videos contain personal information).

THE CREATION OF CONTENT BY SOCIAL MEDIA CELEBRITIES

Content analysis reveals that the variety of typical, established formats differs strongly across categories. Within categories, the relevance of these specific formats varies also to a significant extent across countries or cultural contexts respectively. In fashion, ‘product overviews’ (65 per cent) and ‘shopping hauls’ (65 per cent) are the most common type of international content, whereas German fashion influencers predominantly focus on ‘lifestyle’ (85 per cent) and ‘fashion tips’ (75 per cent). Emerging topics like ‘food’ (15 per cent) and ‘interior design’ (15 per cent) are also more common for international celebrities than they are for German ones (Figure 2). However, content from German fashion protagonists seems to be more varied than international fashion content as most formats appear in higher frequencies. Gaming celebrities of German as well as of

other (here ‘international’) origin most often show ‘sequences of online gaming experiences’ (eg outstanding or funny performances) and ‘walk-throughs’, however, international celebrities present almost three times as much walkthrough content. Further, ‘best of’ content is also much more common for international gaming celebrities on YouTube than it is for their German counterparts. On the other side, German protagonists create significantly more content about ‘pre-release tests’ of current video games (Figure 2).

In general, the data suggests that content is the most important success driver for both celebrities in gaming and in fashion. When analysing quantitative audience measures, success appears to be based less on publication frequency or the time a channel is in operation than on the specific content. However, apart from the variations in content, all of the videos from the top celebrities analysed included product placements, internationally as well as locally in Germany. It is also striking that most celebrities orchestrated their content across multiple social media platforms. In fashion, Instagram has become an absolute must in parallel to YouTube (100 per cent of all fashion celebrities run Instagram accounts), and Facebook still is a necessity for gamers (95 per cent of all gaming celebrities run Facebook accounts). The data shows further differences regarding models of monetisation. Celebrities in fashion still embrace Snapchat to extend their scope (90 per cent), while gamers are far more likely to run their own web shops. Traditional websites play a minor role for both types of influencers. It comes as no surprise that the achieved numbers of followers on Instagram and subscribers in YouTube are significantly correlated for fashion, $r(20) = 0.76, p < 0.01$ as well as for gamers $r(18) = 0.80, p < 0.01$.

The top-ranked social media celebrities work with different advertising models, sometimes in parallel. While newcomers are often happy with free product experiences for promoting specific brands or products,



Figure 2: Relevance of content formats for two categories and country contexts

Note: Own content analysis and classification of content formats.

category influencers as well as social media celebrities rather go more systematically for cost-per-engagement (CPE), cost-per-click (CPC) and cost-per-acquisition (CPA). The latter is also driven by an increasing professionalisation of the entire domain of celebrity content in terms of partnering with advertisers where so-called multi-channel networks are taking increasing responsibility for the coordination between advertisers and the plethora of possible partners among the established and rising stars of social media.^{30–33} Most celebrities do not see their partnership with advertisers as a handicap and hence openly communicate it. Indeed, it grants them access to genuine information and the latest developments that subscribers expect.

AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS

Social media celebrities with the largest audiences fall in the categories of gaming and games as well as comedy and entertainment. Following at a distance although quite close to each other, are the categories of food and cooking; fashion and lifestyle; as well as beauty and cosmetics. Not far behind are news and politics; do-it-yourself; and travel and outdoor (Figure 3). Such data suggests that social media celebrity content is not restricted to specific content categories. It is therefore a relevant competitor to all general as well as special interest traditional media players. However, the results indicate a clear age effect: 83.6 per cent of 18–25-year-olds follow social media celebrities compared

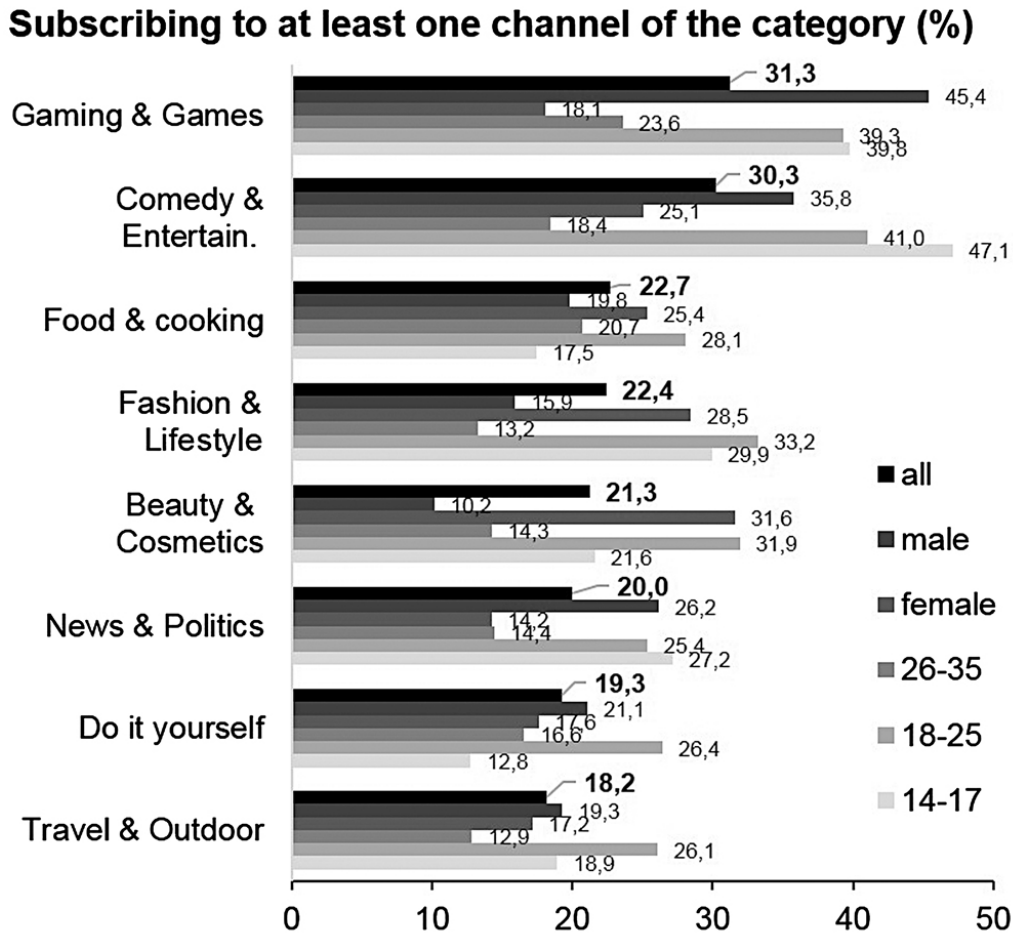


Figure 3: Audience preferences for content categories

Note: Answers to the question: ‘Have you subscribed to one or more channels of the following categories?’

with only 69.1 per cent of 26–35-year-olds. Thus, regardless of category, the following of social media celebrities is most prevalent among the so-called Generation Z. In this generation, gender does not seem to play any role in terms of social celebrity content usage. Additionally, formal education has no influence on social media consumption. Besides this general pattern, the clearest differences in gender prevalence shows up in games and gaming (more male than female followers) as well as in fashion and lifestyle and beauty and cosmetics (in the opposite direction). Games and gaming also attracts the highest proportion of older users (45 per cent of users aged 26–35 years follow games

and gaming celebrities) as well as youngest users (40 per cent of users aged 14–17 years follow games and gaming celebrities).

Across all age groups (and gender), a relatively similar pattern becomes visible: users seek gratification via the consumption of social media celebrity content very much the same way as with traditional media content. The seeking of enjoyment (76 per cent) is closely followed by information interest (71 per cent) and relaxation (64 per cent). No significant differences show up when comparing gratifications sought by subscribers to different categories. As such, the results outlined can be taken as a general pattern.

Overall, the key criteria for judging the quality of the celebrity content (at least implicitly) do not differ from what is known of traditional media content^{34,35} (see also Figure 4). Information or facts given should be correctly and professionally elaborated. In addition, users expect professionalism in terms of film/image production.

Further, sympathy for the protagonists seems to be an essential quality aspect, as does trust. For all categories covered explicitly in this survey, the personality of the protagonists is considered by almost half of the users as being influential on how brands or products (that are placed or presented

in the videos) are seen. For a majority, the personality matters regardless of the quality of the content, and over 40 per cent would like to learn more about the personality even though only one-third would actively research more information about them. A majority of social media users would prefer videos without advertising. However, users know that they are exposed to advertising but this does not put them off. The specific presentation of brands and products in a video is seen as the least annoying form of advertising. About half of the users surveyed do not mind that the protagonists are paid, while only one-third think that their opinion

I agree or rather agree (in %)

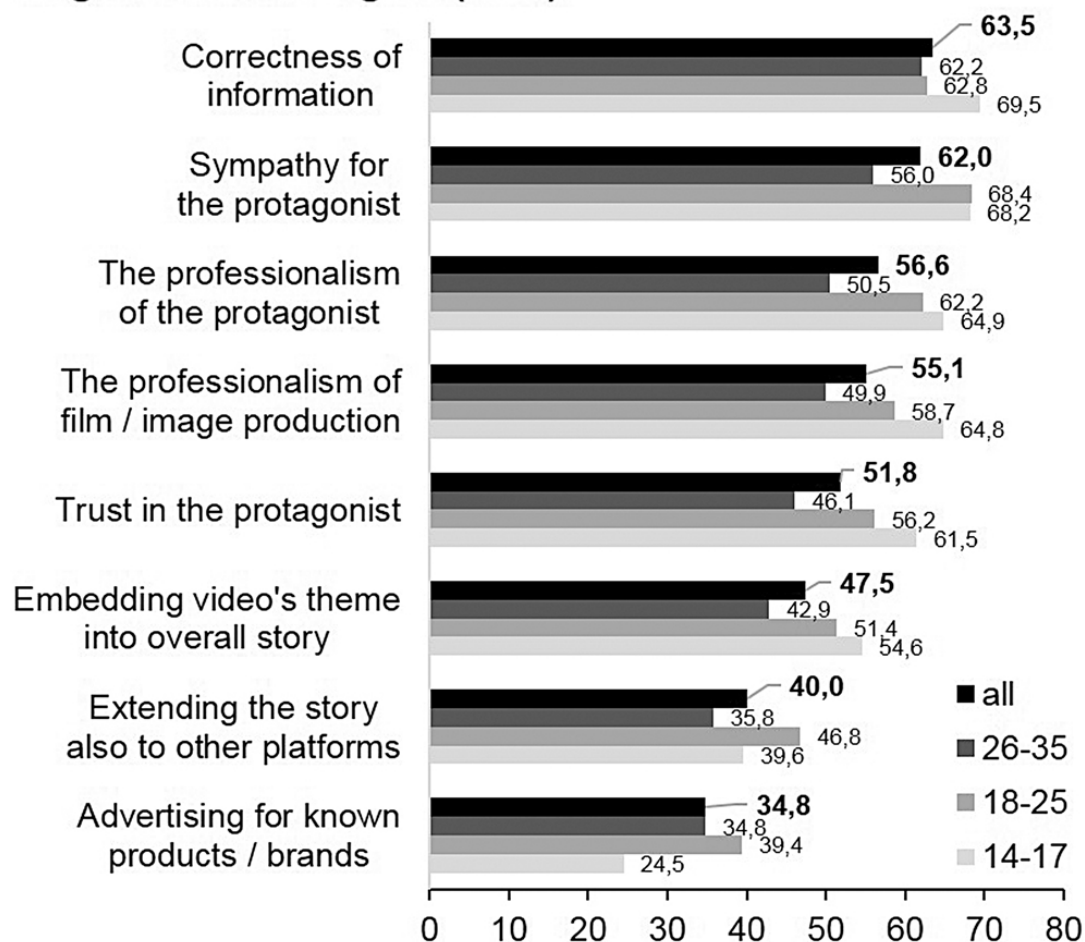


Figure 4: User criteria for judging the quality of content

Note: Answers to the question: 'Why do you use YouTubers' video content?'

is not influenced. However, 58.4 per cent of users would cancel their subscription if they knew the opinion on a brand/product was 'bought'. A total of 41.8 per cent reported having purchased goods because of some kind of promotion in a celebrity video.

CONCLUSION

Social media celebrities create content in various categories and their audiences expect this content to be very professional. Thus, social media celebrities as content producers should be taken seriously as media entrepreneurs that have a significant influence on consumer decisions. However, they still have to follow the traditional rules of the attention economy. The interactivity of social media is making quality standards like 'correctness of information' or 'professionalism of film/image production' more problematic because users can instantly comment on every flaw and share their opinion with their own followers. Indeed, previous research has shown that negative communication is a substantial communication style among social media users.³⁶ This puts significant pressure on social media influencers to constantly manage the quality of their output. The latter might be a challenging task, especially when they enjoy growing attention and develop from mere influential co-consumers, via influencers within a category, towards social media celebrities.

Additionally, the data in this study suggests that audience interests in terms of topics are fluent and that influencers need to adapt their content to emerging trends (eg food, interior design) in order to stay successful. The findings from this study provide further support with respect to the assumptions regarding monetisation models of influencers. Social media influencers obviously rely heavily on established online key performance indicators (CPE, CPC and CPA). Still, 18.1 per cent buy products that are unrelated to the video topic (eg travel services in a fashion context). However, social media influencers lose credibility

and effectiveness when their content does not follow global trends in interest and consumption. In that respect, social media influencers might also be subject to some kind of natural life cycle that requires innovation of content production patterns and change management just as in traditional media companies.

This has practical implications for protagonists, social media agencies as well as for traditional media companies. Protagonists will have to learn about the rules and success factors of entrepreneurship and management if they want to develop a successful and sustainable business in the long run. On the other hand, social media agencies that connect influencers with advertisers will have to shift their focus from traditional metrics like 'likes' and 'shares' to more qualitative aspects like 'quality of content', 'product-market-fit' or 'technical professionalism', when evaluating social media influencers and consulting customers. Incumbent media companies should be aware of the social media influencer life cycle suggested as influencer content could add to more traditional media content in an enticing way — particularly for younger target groups. By partnering with influencers at an early stage, they could foster and actively develop relationships rather than running into head-on competition. The latter is a substantial risk as media companies compete with social media celebrities for eyeballs and consequently also for advertising money. Social media celebrities as competitors are at an advantage here as their very lean organisational structure makes them much more agile and sensitive to any kind of changes or trends, giving them also a good starting point for a longer-term, successful media business.

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