

A Review of the Mechanism of the Influencer

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Abstract: Opportunities for marketing innovation have emerged in the new media era as a result of the fast diversification of social media platforms and the power of social media influencers. Influencer marketing, which includes user-generated content, multi-agent information distribution guided by social media influencers, and the expansion of influencers' advocacy and endorsement of goods and services, has its roots on social media platforms. The majority of recent studies on influencer marketing concentrate on specific influencers and followers. On the basis of the source credibility model, cognitive consistency theory, matching hypothesis, trust transfer theory, meaning transfer theory, etc., it investigates the influence processes of influencers on specific followers. The main topics of the current studies on the influencer marketing mechanism are the interactions between influencers and businesses or products, and the relationships between influencers and customers. By reviewing the latest developments in current research, this study sorts out and analyzes the mechanism of influencer marketing and interprets how influencers influence followers' behavior from the perspectives of sociology and psychology.

Keywords: social media, social influence theory, consumer socialization

1. Introduction

The number of social media users has lasted increasing every year for the past 10 years. There were 2.46 billion social media users in 2017, which has risen to 3.2 billion by 2021. As of April 2023, social media users were 4.8 billion, 59.9% of the world's population [1]. Social media has fundamentally changed users' behavioral decisions, bringing profound changes to their individual needs, perceptions, satisfaction and other aspects. Social media platforms are becoming increasingly important in people's lives. According to the Digital 2022 Global Overview Report, the average time social media users spent on social media was 2.45 hours per day. Social media emphasizes the transformation of information dissemination and personalization of content, giving users more autonomy and voice and allowing them to share their personal experiences, provide information, and communicate instantly with other users or product companies. More than 75% of internet users use social media platforms to find information about products, services and brands [2]. Under this trend, the influence of the Internet Celebrity Economy is also becoming increasingly prominent. Influencer marketing becomes an effective and cost-effective marketing tool because the audience is active and widely covered [3].

In the era of social media, a thing or a person that has been all over social media overnight has become a common phenomenon. An ordinary rock can be an unmissable photo spot, or a not-unique

restaurant can become an internet-famous restaurant even if its waiting list is 10 inches long. In 2023, Zibo barbecue has become a phenomenon in China (Zibo is a prefecture-level city in Shandong province). According to the official statistics, over 6 million tourists flocked into Zibo for the Barbeque dinner. Although tourism is not a prominent feature of Zibo, the low cost of travel has made many people willing to jump on the bandwagon and explore Zibo barbecue to boost their conversation with friends online and in real life.

Besides amusement, social media also provides a platform for people to participate in the discussion of serious social issues. Social media users share their tips for protecting themselves from the pandemic, discuss their views on Black Lives Matter, even participate in political protests in countries such as Peru and Indonesia. Positive or negative feedbacks regarding on those users' opinions or behaviors can be directly affected. Why does the fad of the Internet so easily sway people? Why do people follow internet influencers to the same coffee shops (and other shops and restaurants) and pose the same photos with the same angles?

This study reviewed studies focused on why social media influencers can impact their followers' cognition and behavior, and why social media users rely on the opinions of influencers as opinion leaders.

2. Theoretical Framework

Opinions from influencers (both experts and laypeople) have more sway than ever before due to the increasing usage of social media [4]. For the purpose of marketing their personal brand, Influencers share their professional opinions and experiences on a certain topic on social media, showing that they have professional knowledge in a certain area. Influencers present themselves as experts on social media platforms, conveying a certain social cachet among their followers and influencing thousands to millions of potential customers. Their large numbers of followers on social media platforms treat them as celebrities and experts in a specific field. Compared with celebrities in the traditional concept, influencers are closer to the lives of ordinary people; they are more like friends with similar interests and values to netizens. By sharing details of their lives, social media influencers provide followers with the sense that they already know them well, so their decisions (shopping or other consuming aspects) will be more easily influenced by followers. When influencers endorse products on social media channels, they attach their own social status and personal brand back to themselves [5]. For social media influencers, authenticity is a critical success aspect [6]. According to the findings of Janssen et al., influencer tweets with a significant number of followers are viewed as more credible if the recommended products and services reflect the influencer's profile [7]. Their true and honest insights about a product or service that influencers share on social media are generally not viewed as advertising by other consumers. People identify with social media influencers more strongly than other celebrities [8]. Therefore, user-generated content (UGC) is increasingly important in the digital world because people are more likely to trust and follow the recommendations of these influencers than brand advertising. The rise of influencers has transformed the way brands show themselves, from merely promoting themselves on their own company's website to spreading virally on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms and improving target group engagement. McKinsey's ongoing global survey shows that 34% of respondents take influencer recommendations for services and products. Companies prefer influencers to be brand ambassadors for their products and services because their endorsement costs are lower than those of traditional celebrities. Influencers would have a greater impact on consumers because a lot of them are still consistently opting for digital, reduced-contact ways to shop.

The changing marketing policies inspired researchers to study of the relationship between influencers and followers has grown, with various emphases. Lin et al. revealed how to exploit the link between influencers and followers for brand marketing by using the influence on utilitarianism

and hedonism of the influencer. Kim & Kim, concentrating on the view of social media users, looked into the structural relationship between the characteristics of social media influencers, including perceived friendship, psychological well-being, loyalty, and perceived social responsibilities [9]. Their research identified characteristics which led to loyalty to social media influencers, including similarity in language and interests, frequency of interactions, and self-disclosure, and it looked at the effects of each characteristic on perceived friendship and mental health. Quite a number of researchers studying the function of influencers in brand marketing focus on how influencers have an impact on their followers and how to leverage this influence to boost the benefit of brand marketing [3][6]. Many scholars have discussed users' engagement behavior on social media platforms from the perspectives of psychology, education, management, marketing, information system, etc. In their research, Shahbaznezhad et al. studied the unique influence of social media content (rational, emotional, and transactional) and content context (platform type and content format) [10]. The conclusion is that social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) play an important role in promoting social media engagement behavior and that different types of content formats (such as rational, emotional, or transactional) have an impact on the impact that publishers have on their content. Different patterns of user engagement behavior had a significant positive effect on posts within a company's fan page and that net sentiment had a significant negative effect on the number of comments on company posts. Hudders et al. have narrowed the scope of their research to investigate the actions influencers should take in response to adverse user comments [11]. Their study revealed that when it comes to the subjective dislike of authorized products, defensive responses might lessen the impact of trustworthiness, leading to negative impressions of the product or service.

The enormous marketing potential created by social media's quick growth has been thoroughly researched, particularly in terms of the impact of influencers' recommendations on the decisions of their followers. There is still a scarcity of research examining the factors that impact followers of influencers. An explanation for the high engagement of social media is that it satisfies one of the most fundamental needs of humans: social support and self-expression [12]. The main driving force behind the use of social media platforms is that they satisfy users' psychological needs for self-expression, self-empowerment, and self-actualization. This can lead to positive experiences that can foster and motivate users to spend more time on social platforms [13]. Influencers have become more convincing because they have become the new opinion leaders. The term "opinion leader," first proposed by Austrian American sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld in the 1940s, refers to those who often provide information for others in the interpersonal communication network, constitute an important source of information and influence in the team, exert influence on others, and influence the attitude tendency of most people. They play an important intermediary or filtering role in the formation of the mass communication effect, through which they spread information to the audience. With the development of social networking, people who can influence others' opinions and have an impact on others are regarded as opinion leaders. Whether advising people on health or giving advice on fashion, these online influencers should be considered opinion leaders. The definition of an opinion leader is no longer limited to political or public issues. Weinlich y Semeradova demonstrated that emotion in influencer marketing is a key factor by evaluating the role of emotion in generating emotional, cognitive and symbiotic responses [14]. People tend to compare themselves with similar people, such as those of similar age or similar social status. When opinions are vague, people focus on whether they have the "right" opinions. When the idea is clear, people frequently seek out "peers" who hold similar views, thus increasing their confidence in the idea. When influencers successfully market themselves through social approval, their actions and opinions have a deep and widespread impact on their followers. When the situation is ambiguous, people are most likely to be influenced by others. The more uncertain the situation is, the more dependent people will be. Thus, the more expertise and

knowledge one has, the more valuable it is to act as a guide in ambiguous situations. That's how influencers make an impact as opinion leaders on social media platforms.

The parasocial relationship is another critical factor which simultaneously impacts the effectiveness of influencer marketing [15]. The parasocial relationship satisfies the need for belonging. Social media users are more likely to communicate with others who share the same language styles and interests on specific topics more frequently and effectively [9]. We see ourselves through the eyes of others; indeed, our "self" is partly our relationship with others and the groups with which we identify ourselves. We present ourselves and create a self-image that is reflected in the relationships and groups we embed. Tajfel introduced the concept of "social identity" in 1970s, which refers to an individual's knowledge of belonging to a particular social group and their feelings and values due to group membership. Social identity refers to the self-image content derived from the social category to which an individual thinks he belongs [16]. People in the same subculture who agree on the same values instinctively align themselves with the group. In the meantime, making choices consistent with the influencers can give followers the feeling that they have unique tastes, which also satisfies users' social and emotional needs. These perceptions reshape the followers' cognitions and affect the relationship between influencers and their followers. This need for belonging drives conformity, which is the result of gaining the social approval of others. People are in a submissive position and desire the "right" behavior and the "right" response. When people need clarification about the proper response, they tend to conform to the attitudes and behaviors of the majority of the group or specific individuals [17]. German sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has also proved this point of view. According to the "spiral of silence" model raised by Noelle-Neumann (1974), people will actively participate in expressing their opinions and ideas if they see that those opinions they agree with are popular. Such opinions become bolder and spread, and then they find that no one or a few people pay attention to an idea, or a group attacks them. Even if they agree, they keep silent. The silence of one side of an opinion leads to the growth of the other side of an opinion in the development process, in which the voice of one side becomes more robust and the voice of the other becomes silent.

3. Discussion

Currently, most of the studies focused on the reaction of younger groups to the influencer impact. The influence of Internet celebrities on teenagers is significant, but research on the influence of older groups (such as people over 65) still needs to be completed. It is worthwhile to study the influence of Internet celebrities on ageing people from a psychological perspective. In addition, the impact on users caused by personal preference is not under discussion because there is no way to eliminate this influence factor.

However, as mentioned above, there are no studies that delve into the effect of influencers on different age groups. The judgment of adults may be less affected than that of minors due to their maturity, but even at the same age, the degree of influence of different personalities may be significantly different. These will be the focus of further research. Furthermore, growth in businesses is the primary emphasis of influencer marketing at the moment. Influencer marketing's potential in public utilities has not yet been completely realized. Researchers are starting to focus on how influencers affect young people's eating habits and health awareness [18]. In order to further analyze the positive effects of influencer marketing, follow-up research may further integrate influencer marketing with public utilities.

4. Conclusion

The rapid rise of social media allows influencers to rapidly expand their influence today. Social media platforms play a significant role in encouraging social media engagement behavior in various content

formats. Chasing lucrative opportunities drives influencers to maximize their influence by building prestige. Both influencers and followers fulfill their psychological demands for self-expression, self-empowerment, and self-actualization by looking for "peers" who share their viewpoints. The social and emotional needs of this parasocial relationship connect influencers and their followers more closely.

Theories such as social impact theory and consumer socialization explain why influencers have such a widespread influence. The interaction of social media satisfies the mutual emotional identification of influencers and followers, thus promoting the development of subculture, which in turn influences the influence of influencers and finally forms a marketing model driven by emotional capital. By buying a certain product or service recommended by influencers, followers intend to identify the community circle to which they belong and to show their psychological identity through material expression. Consumption behavior in influencer marketing is not only influenced by the power of consumption but also reflects its value trend and identity action. Social factors, such as the opinions of peers or families, have an important influence on the consumer himself or herself.

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