

Chapter 9

Assessing the Power of Social Media Influencers: A Comparison Between Tourism and Cultural Bloggers

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapidly increasing popularity of social media influencers and of influencer marketing, academic and managerial knowledge on this phenomenon is still limited. The purpose of this chapter is to examine to what extent cultural and tourism social media influencers are able to influence their followers' consumption decisions. In particular, the chapter provides new evidence based on data collected among 341 followers of hospitality and tourism bloggers and 208 followers of cultural bloggers in Italy. By comparing the results from the two subsamples, conclusions about the effectiveness of bloggers in the two contexts are drawn. Based on the findings, some avenues for future research and some practical guidelines for social media influencers are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, new advances in technology, and particularly the advent of social media, have changed people's daily lives, creating new phenomena such as the boom in digital influencers and influencer marketing that will be addressed in this chapter. Technological changes have familiarised people with searching for online information when they make purchase decisions of any type, from buying a new smartphone to visiting a museum. Hence, consumers have changed their role from passive subjects who are exclusive receivers of information to active subjects who give advice and information to others, making user-generated contents (UGC) a key source of information in many contexts. The expression

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7856-7.ch009

'user-generated' indicates the role of internet participants who actively communicate and share their opinions online (Van Dijck, 2009). Even if UGC pre-existed the advent of internet and social media, it was through these developments that UGC has become easily generated and widely accessible (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008; Smith, Fischer & Yongjian, 2012). As a result of this process, in the new connected world, the new media are guided more by UGC than by branded contents.

However, the idea of social media is not so recent. In fact, the ancestor of social media was Usenet, a world network created in 1979 by two American scientists, Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis, from Duke University. The network was able to connect servers all around the world and it allowed the exchange of information and messages. The social media era started with 'Open Diary', an online diary community of writers founded in 1998 by Bruce and Susan Abelson. Open Diary lasted almost 20 years. In fact, it went offline in 2014, and has been relaunched in 2018. It was during these years that the term 'weblog' was transformed into 'blog' by a writer who first used the expression 'we blog', and from then on, the term blog has become popular.

The growth of social media became exponential thanks to the advent of the second stage of the internet: the so-called Web 2.0. This new internet stage was called the participative, or social, web because it was characterised by the transition from the static webpages of Web 1.0 to dynamic UGC and also by the interoperability between systems and devices. In particular, the term 'user-generated content' defines online contents created and diffused directly by users, who are not necessarily expert professionals. In summary, Web 2.0 has multiplied the volume and exchanges of UGC. Drawing on these premises, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) defined social media as '*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange.*'

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provided the first effective classification of social media, which remains valid today, and makes a distinction between:

1. **Collaborative Projects:** Social media that allow people to simultaneously work and create contents and knowledge, and thus the most democratic type of social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) identified four types of collaborative projects:
 - a. Wikis, in which everyone can participate and add, change or delete content by simply using a web browser. The most famous example is Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia born in 2001 and created by volunteers from all over the world;
 - b. Social bookmarking, or sites providing centralised online services that allow users to collect, manage and share online resources. By using tags to the contents of a website users can save links and create bookmarks. Contents can be classified by importance using different font sizes and colours. In this way people are able to build their own taxonomy system (called folksonomy). For example, Citeulike is a free service for managing and sharing scientific references between researchers;
 - c. Internet forums or message boards, which are sites for discussion where people can post their opinions in the form of messages. In some forums, the publication of the posts is subject to the approval of a moderator;
2. **Review Sites:** These are where users can exchange opinions about goods, services and firms. One of the first review sites was TripAdvisor, which has become highly popular, where users can post reviews about hotels, restaurants and places of interest.
3. **Blogs:** These represent the first type of social media that was established (see the case mentioned above, Open Diary). In general, blogs are websites that periodically updated that can be written by

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