

Chapter 13

Self–Presenting Virtually for Remote Social Influence: Peer Lessons About Social Following and Being Followed

ABSTRACT

On the Social Web, social influencers have outsized effects on their peer followers and can influence worldviews, political decisions, aspirations, lifestyles, and buying-and-selling behaviors for varying periods of time. Social influencers attain their influence based on various factors (or combinations): the sharing of insider knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) or information; entertainment; charisma, personality, appearance, communications; engaging storytelling; social identity building for the followers; and parasocial relationship building. This work explores how social influencers self-present to attract and maintain a mass-scale remote audience in a competitive virtual popularity game. This explores “peer lessons” about social influence by masters, based on observed strategic and tactical communications from social video, in a particular target domain, namely survival in the more remote reaches of Alaska.

INTRODUCTION

Research from biological, historical, psychological, and other disciplines suggests that people are social creatures who generally fall in line behind the leadership of “alphas.” The traditional social structures that people create tend to be hierarchical. Even in the social networks that are supposedly less stratified and more democratic, there are individual nodes (egos), motifs (small groups), and larger sub-networks (entities) that have outsized influence on those around them (ego neighborhoods) and beyond. A form of “alphas” on the Web 2.0 are “social influencers,” those who inspire and lead their followers in particular aspirations and endeavors, with positive and negative effects. “Social influence” is generally thought of as affecting others to be like the self through various types of social reproduction with others with whom one is in relationship. Different fields like psychology and the information sciences have different

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definitions of “influence.” Social influencers are also known as “opinion leaders” or “anyone whose voice is strongly regarded in the media” (De Las Heras, Jan. 2019, p. 6). Social influencers are known by a variety of descriptors: “human brands attaching to followers” (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020, p. 1); “popular social network users” (Lutu, 2019, p. 155); “astonishing beings” who “oscillate between intimacy and publicity, authenticity and commercialization, ingratiation and critical distance” (Borchers, 2019, p. 255); “boundary crossers” in their mixed strategic communications skills (Borchers, 2019, p. 256); and “a new type of independent, third-party endorser” who can “shape an audience’s attitudes through blogs, tweets, and use of other social media channels (Freberg, et al., 2010, as cited in Glucksmann, 2017, p. 78). Social media influencers may be seen as “gateways” or “key players controlling the bottlenecks of influence propagation” (Li, Lin, & Shan, 2011, p. 75); as gatekeepers, they control and mediate the spread of information. In part, social influencers can get past the ad blocking technologies used by many (Zietek, 2016, p. 1). The messaging of social influencers is often considered a form of “native advertising” through peer word-of-mouth (Bannigan & Shane, 2019, p. 248). It is more home-grown and less commercially slick. Those in the younger demographics focused more on social media and not watching as much television, so going with social influencer marketing is about meeting the consumers where they are. (Meyers, 2017, p. 1)

Some characterize social media influencers by followership-scale: nano-influencer (0 to 10,000 followers); micro-influencer (10,000 – 100,000 followers); macro-influencer (100,000 – 1 million followers), mega-influencer (1 million+ followers), and celebrity influencer (1 million+ followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 471). In another conceptualization, micro-influencers are those with fewer than the 100,000 but still have “extremely dedicated” followers while social media “stars” are those with over 100,000 followers (Wissman, 2018, as cited in De Las Heras, Jan. 2019, p. 6). Micro-influencers are defined as “individuals within a consumer’s social graph, whose commentary, based on the personal nature of their relationship and communications, has a direct impact on the behavior of that consumer” (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 83). Some “nano-celebrities” on social media can transcend nations (Hai-Jew, 2020) and go global because of the appeal of their messaging and informational share. Yet another term was also found in the literature with its own meaning. “Meso-celebrities” are conceptualized as those who apply a professional approach to blogging and maintain “a structured relationship with the media and companies” and are nationally visible (in Italy) (Pedroni, 2016, p. 103). They stand in the gap between the formal industry and the general public. The innovative idea of this intermediate category of meso-celebrity “distances them both from the few celebrities in the field and the thousands of micro-celebrities who live in the shadows of the web” (Pedroni, 2016, p. 117). One researcher calls social influencers “social butterflies” and “the new celebrity endorsement” (Burke, 2017, p. 34).

To be clear, the “relationships” are mostly imagined based on the one-to-many broadcast communications of the social influencers. The ICT capabilities of conveying information in multimodal and immersive ways results in the “immersive parasocial” (Hai-Jew, Sept. 2009), where relating is reified and imagined by the followee.

“Influencer marketing” is “a nonpromotional approach to marketing in which brands focus their efforts on opinion leaders, as opposed to direct target marketing touchpoints” (Hall, 2016, as cited in Veissi, 2017, p. 3). This marketing is a kind of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing (Veissi, 2017, p. 2), in which the company engages in indirect outreach to an influential person with some expertise with the product (Hall, 2016, as cited in Veissi, 2017, p. 3). Word-of-mouth marketing has long been propagated through social networks (Doyle, 2007, p. 61). The commercial purpose of WOM is to raise awareness and create “social desire, commercial desire, as well as perceived behavior control” (PBC) on shopping

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