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The Power of Influence: Traditional Celebrity vs Social Media Influencer

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Introduction

       The use of social media platforms has grown exponentially in the last decade. From 2008

to 2018, the percentage of the U.S. population with a social media profile has grown from 10%

to a whopping 77% (Statista, Percent of U.S. population, 2018). Social media sites such as

Facebook and Youtube hold the highest number of registered accounts, with Facebook recording

1.86 billion accounts, followed by Whatsapp and YouTube, with 1.2 billion and 1 billion users,

respectively (Statista, Percent of U.S. population, 2018). With the growing user base on these

platforms, we can notice the tremendous influence such websites and apps have in our

day-to-day life. With constant content creation, we have evolved into a world where knowledge

is at our fingertips. Anything from gaming, cooking, and DIY(do-it-yourself) crafts are available

for anyone who is looking for it. The high volume of social media users and content creators has

brought about the emergence of certain "micro-celebrities".

       Since the appearance of mass media, the notion of a celebrity and admiration of media

personas has been apparent. The influence from celebrities because of their saturation in

mainstream media has made revolutionary impacts on fashion, beauty, and lifestyle habits of the

general public. For example, we saw this happen with James Dean's popularization of jeans from

the 1950s movie *Rebel Without a Cause*. Up until the release of *Rebel Without a Cause*, no other

film had accurately depicted the confusion and alienation that teenagers felt. Because it

connected so well with teenage disillusionment, James quickly became a cultural icon (Costill,

2013). The image of James Dean in a white shirt, leather jacket, and a pair of Levi jeans has

since become one of the most legendary images in pop culture. Consumers typically replicate

styles of celebrities when they feel they relate to a them, which justifies their reasoning to buy

into the fashion trends (Stone, 2007). With the emergence of social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, this tendency is emulated to even greater extents. Since we are no longer limited to traditional celebrities, categorized as actors, musicians, and models, to influence our opinions about what we desire, consumers are exposed to and impacted by masses of influential "micro-celebrities", or non-traditional celebrities who have become famous through online media usage. These "micro-celebrities" are seen as normal everyday people who have attained thousands or even millions of followers on these social media platforms. These individuals are known to the public, and their identification is based upon elements such as admiration, association, aspiration or recognition (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013). The ability of any celebrity to influence a consumer's needs and desires is seen as very valuable within the marketing realm. With both old and emerging companies trying to bring attention to their products, being able to utilize these platforms, minimize marketing costs, and draw in large audiences is essential. Throughout this article, I will explain why marketers should focus on the new phenomenon of the "micro-celebrity" to market their products, and why this marketing strategy is more effective than trying to use the influence of a traditional celebrity to introduce new customers to their product.

Scholarly debate

The impact of celebrity endorsements as marketing communication tool has been extensively researched previously, however there is a lack of academic research on the credibility and effectiveness of different types of celebrities within these social networks. I am hoping to contribute a small piece of clarification about this topic through my findings about the

differences between YouTube and Instagram social media stars in comparison to traditional

celebrities, specifically in the context of beauty and fashion influence. With this article I seek to

contribute to the ongoing scholarly dialog in the areas of digital culture and the online celebrity.

Author's argument

Although traditional celebrities have had great influence on our society's pop culture

trends in the past, in recent years, new social media stars have been able to gain more audience

and influence pop culture to greater extents than the traditional celebrity. This is elucidated by

their ability to create communities where users feel more connected to the influencer through

higher levels of engagement, authenticity, and relatability. I argue specifically that YouTube and

Instagram stars are able to influence fashion and beauty more than traditional celebrities

primarily because of the qualities associated with an upbringing or "celebrification" on these

social media platforms, as well as social media's ability to create an interpersonal relationship

between the users and influencers. From the implications of the social media star's greater

amount of influence on consumers, I conclude that product marketing efforts should prioritize

using social media celebrities as their main advertising platform due to more efficient audience

penetration and influence to buy. This, in turn, will result in attaining a substantial grasp of

consumer attention and spending to drive higher sales and bring more attention to the company

brand.

Summary of article and points

I will analyze this topic by using qualitative research and grounded theory methodology, which is a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theory through methodic gathering and analysis of data. I will take research on the psychology of the viewers of popular beauty and fashion YouTube and Instagram accounts, such as Aspyn Ovard and Kim Kardashian, to find justifications as to why viewers seem to have a stronger bond with online celebrities and take their options in a high regard. I will also look into factors of the quality, volume, and scope of the YouTube and Instagram platforms and audiences by looking at site features, follower count, and direct interaction with the social media stars in comparison to traditional celebrities.

Background

Instagram and Youtube are two of the leading social media platforms where users have reported that they have discovered new brands and products via influencer channels through celebrity endorsements, expert bloggers, and vlogs. Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking service that allows users to upload content that can be edited with various filters, and organized with tags and location information. As of June 2018, Instagram reported more than 1 billion monthly active users worldwide, reporting daily active users at 500 million (Statista, Number of Monthly Active, 2018). With Instagram's user base of 1 billion people comes the possibility of achieving Instafame, the condition of having a relatively large number of followers on the app. Similarly, YouTube, founded in 2005, is arguably the biggest online video platform worldwide featuring a wide variety of user-generated and corporate media content that includes vlog (video documentation of a person's life), beauty and lifestyle channels, as well as

educational content. Creators on YouTube are also capable of gaining a large following of subscribers on their personal channels.

Celebrification on Instagram vs YouTube

Both Instagram and YouTube enable the everyday person to become someone who is idolized among the masses. In the era of the Internet, processes of celebrification, which according to Couldry (2004) is the transition from a non-media to popular media person, are no longer solely attached to large media corporations; by contrast, "we see the process of celebrification trickling down" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 141). According to Marshall (2016), online celebrity practices unfold in accordance with a particular temporal and spatial logic characterized by what is referred to as "narrowing of the gap" between celebrities and their fans or followers. Even though the nature of Instagram and YouTube are inherently similar, there seems to be a different sense of community culture enclosed within each one. In this section, we will analyze the similarities and differences between celebrification on the Instagram and YouTube platforms.

Becoming a microcelebrity entails "thinking of oneself as a celebrity, and treating others accordingly" (Marwick, 2013a, p. 115). Microcelebrity produces the self as brand and commodity; online processes of celebrification today merge commodification and branding smoothly with intimacy and authenticity (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2015). Both Instagram and YouTube are able to serve as platforms to attract attention and a following in these ways. The growing influx of user generated content promoted by the Instagram and Youtube services has created an "attention economy" -- a marketing perspective assigning value according to

something's capacity to attract "eyeballs" in a media-saturated, information-rich world (Fairchild 2007), where these online platforms represent a competitive arena for both aspiring and established celebrity practitioners. Even though both Instagram and YouTube participate in this "attention economy", the two platforms seem to value different qualities when it comes to fashion and beauty content.

While Instagram makes it possible for "regular people" to attract the mass audiences historically limited to broadcast media, the Instafamous tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in "cool" industries such as modeling or tattoo artistry, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars (Marwick, 2015). It is perhaps not surprising that designer goods are also central to bloggers' staging of "the glam life"; the blogs and Instagram feeds analyzed in Erin Duffy & Hund's study displayed a compendium of Valentino pumps, Chanel handbags, and Céline sunglasses, luxury goods offset by the occasional thrift store purchase or product identified with a discount retailer such as Kohl's or Old Navy (Erin Duffy & Hund, 2015). It is revealed here that Instagram celebrities focus a bit more on the luxurious aspects of life and perfection, rather than showing their authentic selves (ex. bad pictures, hardships of life), because this is what is more likely to attract more followers. Yet, even so, Instagram influencers are still able to create a relationships with their audience by directly interacting through comments, making them seem more 'real' and accessible, along with taking advantage of the Instagram user's tendency to look up to these influencers as celebrities and take their opinions into high regard.

YouTube, on the other hand, boasts a heightened ability to serve as a technology of intimacy, affording the formation of affective bonds through both the visual and communicative

elements of its interface (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The active processes of celebrification at play within YouTube's beauty community necessarily combine the social side of sharing personal information, footage of daily activities and building affective connections, with commercial aspects: namely self-branding, achieving high status and maintaining good reputations as professional, responsible and influential personalities (García-Rapp 2017). Particularly on YouTube, as a highly commercial platform based on 'delivering attention to ads' (Burgess 2011, 326), values such as authenticity and honesty are appreciated and even demanded on the platform. As we can see here, since we are able to see more of a person's personality through video rather than pictures, the YouTube platform celebrities often gain popularity because of their tasteful sense of humor or relatability.

Through analysis of these two platforms, we are able to see how even though these sites are similar they do have differences in what is seen as favorable content merely due to the nature of their platforms. For Instagram, being dominantly a photo sharing application entails that creating perfection is highly valued because of the attraction of aesthetics, in comparison to YouTube's sharing of multimedia where behind the scenes action, unique personality, and content that you can find helpful, educational, or relatable is valued. Establishing these similarities and differences will help us understand the best methods of approaching marketing strategies.

The Famous and the Fandom

We will now delve into how Instagram and Youtube influencers are able to connect and influence their audiences more than traditional celebrities because of their maintenance of interpersonal relationships, their reliability, and their authenticity.

Social media celebrities: Interpersonal relationships

Instagram and Youtube provide creators with a platform for them to design, post, and share original content. Users are then able to browse and discover new people, information, and even interact with their favorite media stars. Instagram and Youtube are both platforms that encourage user interaction. From the comment section to the like and dislike button, content creators are constantly getting feedback from their audiences in the form of questions, concerns, praise, and overall reactions. Due to this engagement creating a sense of connectedness to a content creator, we see how audiences are able to build interpersonal relationships with the influencer. Interpersonal relationships are defined as strong, deep, or close association or acquaintance between two or more people that may range in duration from brief to enduring. This association may be based on inference, love, solidarity, regular business interactions, or some other type of social commitment. This is one of the first components I will address that is encompassed by an upbringing on YouTube and Instagram. An essential part of building an audience is creating this type of relationship with your viewers. Instagram and YouTube both provide the interface necessary to enable parasocial interaction. "Parasocial interaction" is the illusion of real, face-to-face friendships with performers that is created through watching television shows or listening to music (Horton and Wohl, 1956), or in this case watching a video or viewing their pictures. In parasocial relationships, a fan responds to a media figure as if he or

she were a personal acquaintance (Giles 2002). These interactions are classified by watching

vlogs, commenting on videos and photos, or even direct messages to the influencer. In its

double-capacity as both a televisual and interactive medium, YouTube boasts a heightened

ability to serve as a technology of intimacy, affording the formation of affective bonds through

both the visual and communicative elements of its interface (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). A

personal favorite beauty, fashion, and lifestyle YouTube channel of mine is *Aspyn Ovard*. Aspyn

has 1.7 million followers on her channel and regularly posts clothing hauls and life tips. What

drew me to subscribe to her was not only her creation of well done and informative videos, but

was her second vlog channel with her husband called *Aspyn and Parker*. Having an inside look

behind the scenes of her life makes me feel, personally, as if I know her, and subsequently makes

me feel as if I have a sort of online friend. This is significant because across social network sites

an online friend becomes an effective medium for information dispersion. Any product

information communicated by potential consumers via the Internet is referred to as eWOM, or

electric word of mouth (Hennin-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, et al., 2004). EWOM on

Instagram has grown to become a persuasive and influential information source due to the

emerging popularity of this social media and accessibility via smartphones and other devices

(Thoumrungroje, 2014). Celebrity endorsements are considered credible sources in generating a

positive eWOM regarding particular products and services (Spry, Pappu, & Bettina Cornwell,

2011).

Traditional Celebrities: Interpersonal relationships

Uploading photos and videos on Instagram and YouTube does not in itself entail the claim to connectedness and direct communication with fans that, for example, most YouTubers practice on their vlogs. On the contrary, celebrities may have many, many followers, but their Instagram profiles, for example, also reveal that they seldom follow others and rarely respond to comments on their profiles. When looking at traditional celebrities and their interactions with their audience, we see that since they were not brought up to fame on these platforms, there is somewhat of a disconnect with their audience. Because interaction with their audience is not essentially what brought them into fame, most celebrities do not seem to mind the separation from their fans. Some traditional celebrities even go as far as having others run their social media accounts, which makes them even more distant to their audience. When looking at Kim Kardashian's latest post there are 1,784 comments, yet no response to any questions or concerns brought up by her followers. One comment brings up the issue that the darkest shade available on Kim's foundation line still is not dark enough to contour some dark girls' skin. With no response from Kim, it seems as if the user's concern goes unnoticed. Interpersonal relationships must be maintained in order to stay trustworthy and respected in the minds of their audience, and this is precisely where traditional celebrities are lacking.

Social media celebrities: Relatability

Next, we move onto the topic of relatability. With the rise of the 'digital' celebrity groups such as bloggers, vloggers and 'Instafamous' personalities (Chahal, 2016), online celebrities appeal to a common reference group. 'Reference group' is defined as a person/group of people

who serve as a reference to an individual in forming values and attitudes, and in so doing provide consumers with a reference in their purchasing decisions (L.G. Schiffman, Hansen, & Kanuk, 2012). Several researchers argue that information is more credible when delivered by a product reviewer/blogger than an established celebrity (Camahort, 2016, Wiley, 2014). According to Wiley (2014), traditional celebrities do not enjoy the power they once did; online bloggers' product reviews are now much more influential as they are perceived to be more authentic and accessible. As shown here, consumers feel as they can relate more to a social media star who defines themselves as merely a normal person with a passion for fashion or beauty, rather than someone of high status and wealth. When analyzing the attitudes of the typical audience of fashion and beauty content on Instagram and YouTube, being majority females aged 18-30, it is revealed that the attainability and desirability of the products promoted is an important factor in their decision making. In a study conducted for the article "Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users" (Djafarova, Elmira and Rushworth, Chloe, 2017), 18 female Instagram users aged 18-30 were interviewed and asked their opinions regarding social media product promotion. A majority of the participants reported that they valued the opinions of lower-scale 'Instafamous' and blogger-type celebrities over more traditionally famous celebrities. One user expressed that she would trust online celebrities' opinions as those celebrities were less superficial in comparison to, for example, famous Hollywood personalities. It appeared that participants were aware that some products endorsed by celebrities were overpriced and beyond their budgets, and were therefore more likely to be influenced by lower-end celebrities who endorsed more affordable brands. Respondents noted that lower-scale types of celebrities were most influential, as these categories

were perceived as more credible and relevant to female users, particularly with regard to purchase decisions as the products and services they were endorsing were more affordable to participants. Thus in selecting a brand endorser, companies must rely more upon online celebrities to whom consumers can relate. Image composition and celebrity relevance to the product are most influential, which is important to ensure success in social media advertising (Djafarova, Elmira and Rushworth, Chloe, 2017).

When looking at Youtubers and Instagrammers young women see them more as "real" people, especially when having access to their personal life vlogs or Instagram stories that show the not so prim and proper side of their lives. According to Burgess and Green (2009, 96), vlogs make up almost half of the top 30 most subscribed channels on YouTube. As Lange (2007) notes, vlogging generally involves individuals 'talk[ing] directly into a camera and relat[ing] their life experiences' (p. 39). Vloggers display this sense of an authentic self through their straight-to-camera communication, making vlogging the self-realizing result of their individual creative efforts (Jerslev, 2016). While content videos serve to constitute a YouTuber's brand and selling power, vlogs function instead as video diary entries, documenting the purportedly 'unpolished' and 'unedited' reality of YouTubers' personae and lifestyles (Berriman & Thompson, 2015; Smith, 2014). English fashion and beauty vlogger Zoella is a great example to highlight how YouTuber's attempt to stay relatable. Zoella is careful in the tutorials to communicate a sense of equality with her audience and, hence, to accentuate ordinariness. Repeatedly, she emphasizes that she is not a professional expert but simply an amateur who wants to share her personal interests. She states, for example, in the vlog "My Everyday Makeup Routine" that she is by no means an expert in make-up or an expert in fashion tutorials: "This is

my very first try. I just do my makeup, how I think I like it and I use techniques I enjoy to use, and it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to do it this way, but this is just the way I do it (Jerslev, 2016)."

Traditional Celebrities: Relatability

For celebrities, it is much more difficult to be relatable due to their fame and fortune. The difference between the Kardashians, for example, and these YouTubers is that the former are exploiting their celebrity to launch video channels, whereas the latter are using video channels to become celebrities (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). We see this with Kim Kardashian's YouTube channel. Instead of using this space to connect with her audience on a more personal level she uses her channel to promote her beauty line and other products. Because of this lack of personality shown on her channel, her subscriber count stands at just over 1.3 million, whereas her Instagram account has 117 million followers. This highlights how the nature of the Instagram and Youtube platforms is what brings these social media influencers into existence, thus leading them to maintain and abide by the expectations of the audiences on these platforms if they want to stay relevant and admired.

Social media celebrities: Authenticity

According to Marwick, authenticity as a community-defined social construct, is a fluctuating set of affective relations between individuals, audiences, and commodities' (2013, 7). In Florencia García-Rapp's article, "Come join and let's BOND': authenticity and legitimacy building on YouTube's beauty community", YouTube beauty gurus are highlighted as 'aspiring

tastemakers' (Duffy and Hund 2015, 9), and there is an important ethical guideline stating 'try (and like!) before you recommend'. This norm translates in everyday practice as having actually tried and genuinely liked the product recommended on the video (García-Rapp 2017). Moreover, to avoid being seen as dishonest, it is essential to disclose if one is being paid for a review and when posting affiliate links below one's videos. Although being authentic is often seen in opposition to self-branding and commercialization, it is relevant to note that self-promoting and online fame − together with the social and economic perks this entails − can also be seen as deserved and subsequently legitimized by the community (García-Rapp 2017).

Scholars like Duffy (2010) and Banet-Weiser (2012) make clear, popular appeals to "authenticity"—such as Dove's wildly successful Campaign for Real Beauty—double as commercially valuable forms of commodity activism that reinforce gendered/classed/racialized boundaries around what constitutes a "real woman." This reveals how not only do consumers value authenticity with recommendations and products, but also with physical appearance. The public's appeal to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty further proves how people value what's real, not just what's perfect. For example, I recently came across an athletic clothing brand called Outdoor Voices that was advertised to me on Instagram. The photo advertised was of a woman's legs showing off some light green athletic shorts. What struck me though was that the photo was not retouched. The woman's legs showed the natural bit of cellulite on her upper thigh. This was quite refreshing to me, somewhat like a breath of fresh air among all the tall and toned models I am used to seeing. As I noticed in the comment section, I was not the only one who felt this way. Comments were left reading (@molesy.f.baby): "Really proud of you all for not editing her thighs!! Thank you! Leading by example is sexy." and (@danikabrysha) "LOVE this

photoshopped image and even more so that it didn't have to be justified or the subject of the image. Well done @outdoorvoies. Nailing it", along with thousands more sharing their same reactions and paise. I do not have information from what their follower count was before and after the photo, so I can not firmly say that there was an increase in their followers after this post, but I can say that they got my follow.

Traditional Celebrities: Authenticity

Due to a disconnect with their audience celebrities are less inclined to feel held to ethical standards of only endorsing a product only if they believe in it. Referring back to the Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) study, users expressed that celebrity endorsements are more superficial and it appeared to them that some products were overpriced and beyond their budgets. Revealed in a behind the scenes clip of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* we are shown Kim's process of taking a promotional Instagram photo for the company Fit Shakes. The clip shows her mentioning how Instagram is like a job of hers and the company only asked to get a picture of her face and the product. Here it is clear that there is no regard for whether Kim actually likes the product, but rather just value the product placement and endorsement from Kim. In the clip she even says "Oh, we have to actually make it." This behind the scenes footage truly reveals how fake these sponsored celebrity posts are.

<u>Marketing implications</u>

Social media started as an entertainment tool and evolved to a powerful marketing tool. While it serves its primary purpose of connecting people, at the same time it plays a major role in

connecting marketers with current and potential customers (Statista, Social Media Marketing

Usage, 2018). This article aims to provide informative data for those looking into investing time

and money into marketing in the social media realm. Social media marketing is already proven to

be prominent in our society with spending expected to exceed 17 billion U.S. dollars in 2019 –

almost ten billion increase, compared to 2014 (Statista, Social Media Marketing Usage, 2018).

Concluded from the evidence presented in this article, it seems that a company's marketing

dollars would see the most positive effect when invested in social media influencers who have

gone through the celebrification process on the Instagram and YouTube platforms. This is

because companies now are not focusing on merely a one time purchase, but are hoping to create

relationships with their customers. From the article entitled "Move Over Kardashians: Why

Average Joes Are More Influential Than Celebrities on Social Media," the author thoughtfully

argues that a well-executed influencer program can yield higher conversions at a much lower

cost for brands than spending enormous money on traditional celebrity endorsements. As an

example, consider that to get Kim Kardashian or Kendall Jenner to post ONCE on a social

platform, the cost can be in excess of $200,000, which not only is cost prohibitive to many

brands, but is hard to justify given the changing consumer sentiment towards authenticity and

transparency (Connolly).

Conclusions

These discoveries reveal how social media influencers are able to be more impressionable

on consumers of media than traditional celebrities due their upbringing on the Instagram and

Youtube platforms. Due to the qualities of relatability and authenticity a consumer puts more

trust into the opinion of a social media influencer. These implications thus reveal how social media stars are able to have a greater impact on consumers' views and opinions on pop culture trends regarding beauty and fashion. This research in turn also is able to contribute to the business and marketing community because it reveals the importance of investing money into these outlets in order to direct attention more effectively to your product. Future research needs to be done exploring specific data collected from social media influencers to reveal how their interactions with their audience effect sales of products and promotes brands.

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