Authenticity Under Threat: When Social Media Influencers Need to Go Beyond Passion

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Brands are increasingly promoting their products through partnerships with social media influencers (SMIs). Through qualitative approaches—a netnography of SMI posts and interviews with SMIs—we explore how SMIs manage their authenticity while partnering with brands. Results suggest that SMIs implement two potentially complementary strategies: passionate authenticity and/or informational authenticity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent research has pointed out the emergence of new online actors, “social media influencers” or SMIs (Etter et al. forthcoming). SMIs are defined as “people who possess greater than average potential to influence others due to such attributes as frequency of communication, personal persuasiveness or size of—and centrality to—a social network.” With the growing success of many SMIs, companies are intensifying their investment in “word-of-mouth marketing” or WOMM (Kozinets et al. 2010). One of the reasons brands partner with SMIs is that they are considered trustworthy and “one of the few forms of real, authentic communication” (Scott 2015, 295). However, sometimes collaborating with brands may question this authenticity as SMIs’ inner desires to focus on products they are passionate about are challenged by commercial opportunities to showcase brands that they would not ordinary like. Despite growing research on influencers and acknowledged pressure of pursuing financial gains, past research has overlooked the challenges to remain authentic when collaborating with brands. As such, this research focuses on the question: What are the strategies of SMIs to maintain authenticity while they are under commercial pressure?

SMIs often start as non-professional contributors who share their daily life and respond to fan comments (Colliander and Erlandsson 2015). However, over time SMIs become professionals with a mass audience of followers and gain competence in generating sophisticated content such as creation of stories, videos, visuals, etc. (McQuarrie, Miller, and Philips 2013). In turn, SMIs leverage their online influence to partner with brands and negotiate with sponsors. Their credibility might then be questioned as the persuasive effect of their messages is often attributed to their perceived noncommercial nature contrasting with branded advertisements. Recent research started to investigate bloggers’ authenticity under commercial pressure (Savignac, Parmentier, and Marcoux 2012), but the analysis considered solely online self-presentation without considering how influencers communicate about brands, products, and collaborations.

Authenticity is recognized in the marketing literature as an important attribute, as prior research suggests that consumers increasingly desire authenticity in the products and brands they consume (Chronis and Hampton 2008). One particular notion of authenticity has been gaining acceptance, which revolves on whether an individual or brand expresses their true self (Guidry Moulard, Raggio, and Folse 2016). In this body of research, authenticity is linked to the distinction between intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations. Holt (2002, 83) notes, “to be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value”.

We chose the context of fashion, beauty and lifestyle, as it is one of the most successful and visible domains of digital production (Duffy and Hund 2015). We analyze posts from 49 influencers participating in 9 brand campaigns that employed multiple SMIs simultaneously. These observations are complemented with 27 interviews with SMIs varying in audience size to understand “behind the scene” goals pursued to project this authenticity.

From the posts about the campaign, we identified main topics, perspective towards the campaign and rapport with ones’ experience. The analysis allowed for identification of 2 distinct patterns for expressing authenticity under commercial pressure: 1) expressing inner self and being passionate even when involved in a collaboration; 2) proving what is said, reflects the truth about the partnership, the influencer or the products promoted.

Interviews confirm that SMIs manage authenticity both through communicating passion and giving a true report of reality. We label these two potentially complementary strategies as: passionate authenticity and/or informational authenticity. The notion of passionate authenticity has been established in the previous literature (Guidry Moulard et al. 2016) but we identify a new form of authenticity, which is about being consistent with the facts and not lying, that we name informational authenticity. It refers to the degree to which what is claimed is consistent with reality about the commercial partnership with the brand, the SMI and the products. These two strategies are sometimes considered as an optimal goal, rather than a systematic rule of conduct. Also, SMI often seem to use them sequentially. SMIs start out of genuine passion but, with growing recognition, they are tempted to accept partnership with brands they are not passionate about. Reflecting on the tension between their inner passions and financial gains, SMIs then implement a strategy of informational authenticity and communicate more transparent information to their audience.

Informational authenticity may have links to Grayson and Martinec indexical authenticity “when an object is believed to be ‘the original’ or ‘the real thing’” (2004, 297) and “it has the spatio-temporal link that is claimed” (2004, 298). However, authors focus on objects as indexically authentic while we show how it applies to individuals. Informational authenticity can be also associated with the notions of having integrity and being professionally ethical. Mohnart et al. (2015) suggest that one component of brand authenticity is integrity. We complement their research by adding the notion of sincerity in what is claimed. Napoli et al. (2014) identify a related notion of sincerity, as one component of brand authenticity, but do not offer a definition of their sincerity concept.

Our findings should also help SMIs manage their authenticity under threat as it suggest that they can either use Passion or Information. SMIs should be cautious to report the reality of the partnership and the product in the WOMM contents. Similarly, they should keep producing noncommercial messages about brands they are really passionate about. In the same vein, managers should be attentive to let SMIs selects products in order to increase enthusiasm for the brand and minimize constraints to give room for personalized communication aligned with SMI’s style and opinions.

REFERENCES


