Friends, likes, fake followers and cash: The impact of social media influencers on the ethical practice of public relations

Abstract

The rise of so-called social media influencers, or 'micro-celebrities' (see Senft, 2013), is a phenomenon noted across the world, particularly in South-East Asia. The practice of public relations, often described as 'relationship management' and traditionally associated with media relations, has been forever changed, as bloggers, Instagrammers, Snapchatters and YouTubers (internet influencers) become increasingly important stakeholders and 'target publics' for most organisations. For instance, YouTube's decision to drop Logan Paul, who recently gained notoriety for filming a video of an alleged dead body in Japan's Aokigahara forest – colloquially dubbed 'suicide forest' – from their top-tier advertising programme (see Shaw 2018) is emblematic of the risks present in using social media influencers for brand leverage and extension. Importantly, the public backlash and criticism surrounding the viral video (now removed) illustrate that the 'authenticity' of influencers is not merely their celebrity capital but a form of "external gratification" (Khamis, Ang & Welling 2016: 13) where "its recognition and reward [are] determined by others" (Ibid).

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) was originally framed to describe the power of mainstream media and journalists in setting the public agenda and influencing community opinion. However, social media influencers are increasingly setting the new agenda and in turn influence mainstream media. Social media influencers are painted as powerful and empowered in marketing literature (see, for example, Hamelin, 2011; Kerr et al., 2011; Kucuk, 2009; Weber, 2009), and their ability to influence consumers' behaviour, including purchasing decisions, is increasing (Sepp et al., 2011). Often starting out as 'amateurs', a select few of these social media influencers are now making a salary from their work, through a variety of avenues, including sponsored 'advertorials'. These influencers have high 'social capital' and are valuable to organisations seeking to connect and cut through advertising clutter to reach elusive audiences who are turning away from traditional media (Abidin, 2015; Ashley & Leonard, 2009; Macnamara, 2010). Agencies dedicated to representing bloggers/influencers to brands (and brands to bloggers) have sprung up in recent years.

This paper investigates the ethical challenges and ramifications of the growing social media influencer trend, now almost 10 years old. Using a qualitative approach, data from interviews with public relations practitioners in Singapore and Australia were analysed and will be accompanied with high-profile cases of influencer behaviour within the evolving media terrain. Findings show key areas of ethical concern for practitioners, influencers and regulators. These areas of ethical and other concerns include the issues around payment for posts and disclosure, trolls/critics, buying of fake followers by influencers , determining the 'authenticity' of influencers' views and reporting, assessing the ROI, and the commercialisation and/or potential exploitation of young children or other vulnerable groups for profit. The lack of strict regulations around influencer practice, including disclosure of sponsored posts, are discussed. The ramifications for practitioners and theoreticians in this evolving media-scape are also outlined and areas for further research identified.

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