

Examining the Beauty Industry's Use of Social Influencers

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Abstract

With the rise of social media, the use of social influencers has become a popular tactic in brand marketing. Research to date regarding the use of social influencers for branding has lacked specific insight regarding the beauty industry. This study identified characteristics of selected beauty social influencers to see how they are utilized in advertorials for brands on YouTube. The study used a content analysis of Maybelline's sponsored videos that three influencers produced and featured on their YouTube channels. Attribution theory and social learning theory were used for analysis of influencers' impact on viewers.

I. Introduction

In 2014, beauty was the fourth-leading industry with the largest reach of influencers in the United States (Statista, n.d.). These influencers, dubbed online as "Beauty Gurus" online, use their skills in makeup to partner with cosmetic brands, earning big bucks while building brand awareness around products. Influencers have gained popularity due to the rise of social media and their ability to connect with their consumer peers. These self-made social media celebrities are vital to brand storytelling, and their thoughts and opinions may actually be more persuasive than messaging straight from the cosmetic brands themselves. With this realization, marketers and communications professionals are seeking ways to leverage these new influencers in changing brand dialogue in the digital space.

Research has been conducted on social influencers for brands, but there is a lack of research focused specifically on influencers in the beauty industry. To gain more insight into this area, this study will dive into the world of beauty social influencers, specifically looking at the brand Maybelline. Maybelline is a top-selling cosmetic company across the globe and the leader on the Nielsen "Top 10s" Health and Beauty list with more than \$86 million in sales at the end of January 2016 (Nielsen, n.d.). Maybelline's communication strategy includes the use of social influencers to promote trends and products in the social space by the use of advertorials on YouTube. This provides a perfect case study for identifying the characteristics of influencers used by a successful cosmetic brand. This paper will study what the successful characteristics of social influencers are and how they are utilized as an advantage to the branding of Maybelline.

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II. Literature Review

This literature review will investigate who social influencers are, why they are important to brand marketing, and what kind of communication theory is behind their influence.

Who is a Social Influencer?

Social influencers represent a type of third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes (Freberg, Freberg, Graham, & McGaughey, 2010). Influencers gain popularity through their participation on social networking sites and achieve fame through online media, such as blogs and online videos on sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Influencers amass followers through the content that they cultivate themselves, allowing audiences to step into their personal narratives. They are often seen as more “organic,” with many of them leading normal lives not as established celebrities or actors, making them more relatable to the everyday consumers watching their content. One way influencers monetize their content is through advertorials; highly personalized, opinion-laden promotions of products/services that influencers personally experience for a fee (“Micro-microcelebrity”, 2015). Their contribution to word-of-mouth through posts, pictures, and messages on their social networking profiles is an advantage for marketers looking to get in on the digital dialogue surrounding their brand.

Freberg et al. (2011) identified specific influencer characteristics that appealed most to participants. The participants pinpointed verbal, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised as the most positive attributes for both the influencers and the brand they were advocating. Ideally influencers give off a sense of trust as a third-party sponsor for a product because of their consumer peer status. Their opinion on products resonates with fellow consumers, and in social posts they often take pleasure in giving advice and recommendations. Although influencers use the power of their blogs and social networking sites to leverage conversation for brands, many see it as a way to express themselves as individuals. “Bloggers consider blogging a personal medium for self-expression, community connection and sharing opinions”(Smith, 2010, p.176). Influencers who maintain this sense of identity to their communities are looked at as relatable and credible, allowing them to become important messengers for consumers looking for recommendations on products.

Selecting influencers for particular brands is determined by a number of factors, most importantly, their popularity and industries they belong to. The number of followers, friends, or fans on an influencer's profile can determine how influential they will be, as Chatterjee (2011) described, “The visible display of members of one's social network at SNSs (social networking sites) plays a signaling role in enhancing a recipient's' decision to comply with an influencer's new product recommendation” (p.88). Posting frequency, engagement rates with readers/viewers, and the number of referral links also play into how successful an influencer will be for a brand. Researchers have spent a significant amount of time creating algorithms to help companies choose who is the best for them based on how relatable they are to both the influencer's and brand's audience to ensure cost effectiveness. Finding the right influencers can help brands improve their frequent reach to target audiences, enabling greater overall campaign effectiveness.

Social Influencers for Brand Marketing

Integrating social aspects into campaigns is now vital to the survival of the brand strategy. Social influencers are a tactic of a larger brand strategy that includes social media campaigns. Brand strategy is the foundation of the communication that builds authentic relationships (Booth & Matic, 2011). Understanding where your chosen social influencer fits into your campaign is pivotal for success. Social influencers have the ability to reinforce brand strategy online by providing information that mitigates perceived risk and induce recipients to engage with the brand sponsor (Chatterjee, 2011).

With the rise of social media and the shift to a fast-paced tech world, communications professionals need to keep up with consumer conversations online. In order for brands to have a voice in this digital dialogue, many have turned to social media sites and, in turn, social influencers. Gillin (2008) found among the communications professionals surveyed, 57% said that social media tools are becoming more valuable to their activities, with blogs, online video, and social networks as the top three tools that their organization has used in a recent campaign. Within the integration of social networks, the presence of social media influencers gives brand marketers an upper hand in joining the conversation.

Consumers have always been the heart of the brand, and their opinions and attitudes toward the brand are what builds it up or leads to its demise. Social media allows for brands to directly engage in conversations that build relationships with consumers and encourage brand loyalty (Booth & Matic, 2011). Although brands do not have complete control over the conversation, they can influence it with the use of social influencers online as consumer brand advocates. Influencers who participate in advertorials allow brands to have a direct voice in the conversation, reaching consumers through their more trusted consumer peers.

Social Influencer Theory

Social learning theory helps one understand why influencers are influential in the first place. Reasoning that people can acquire new patterns of behavior by watching others, Bandura (1971) wrote, "On the basis of informative feedback, they develop thoughts or hypotheses about the types of behavior most likely to succeed. These hypotheses then serve as guides for future actions" (p.3). Bandura suggests that people's behaviors are learned either deliberately or inadvertently through example. Influencers lead by example, recommending or reinforcing products that they like through advertorials. Therefore, viewers watching these examples may be more likely to adopt those behaviors exhibited by the influencer. Brand marketers use this strategy in hopes that consumers will follow influencers' behavior as "monkeys see monkeys do."

Social influencers are masters of eWOM or electronic word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth has proven to be more effective than messages from brand marketers because consumers believe it to be more credible and trustworthy (Lee & Yuon, 2009). This can also be looked at through the lens of attribution theory, which deals with how a person attributes an observation to the external situation or the person's internal disposition (Fiske, & Taylor, 1991). "The more the consumer attributes the communicator's review about a product to that product's actual performance, the more the consumers will perceive that the communicator is credible, the more the consumer will have confidence in the accuracy of the review, the stronger the consumer's belief that the product has the attributes mentioned in the review" (Lee & Yuon, 2009, p.476). Influencers take on a strong role in forming other consumers' opinions on products and services. This is important for brand marketers looking to keep conversations online positive to persuade other consumers to try their products.

Framework For Analysis

In order to understand the attributes of successful established beauty social influencers, this study identified five characteristics based on literature review and applied them to a content analysis of videos posted by a selection of social influencers.

III. Method

Based on literature review, five characteristics were chosen to analyze YouTube beauty advertorials: relatability, knowledge, helpfulness, confidence, and articulation.

The characteristics are defined by this study as such:

- **Relatability:** The influencer shares a connection with their consumer audience. They give personal accounts and experiences that cause a sympathetic relationship with their peers.
 - **Knowledge:** The influencer has insight about the industry they are representing and is able to offer clear and certain facts about products to the consumer audience.
 - **Helpfulness:** The influencer gives advice and usable opinions that can persuade consumer decisions on a product.
 - **Confidence:** The influencer trusts in their own words and has assurance of themselves and their abilities.
 - **Articulation:** The influencer clearly communicates and presents information fluidly to help audiences understand the product, both verbally and visually.
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The cosmetic company Maybelline was chosen as a case study to apply these characteristics as defined above. Three social influencers were chosen based on highest posting frequency of sponsored content or advertorials on Maybelline's playlist "Maybelline Beauty Tutorials" on its official YouTube page for 2015. In order to capture the different makeup trends throughout the year, the sample was further broken down by season. Each season had at least two videos featuring separate influencers. Influencers have total of four videos each for analysis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Posting frequency of bloggers

| Season | Spring | Summer | Fall | Winter |
|-----------------|--------|--------|------|--------|
| Influencer | | | | |
| Shaaanxo | x | x | x | x |
| MakeupByAli | x | x | x | x |
| Jenny Clair Fox | xx | x | | x |

IV. Findings and Discussion

The three influencers had a total number of subscribers ranging from just below 0.8 million to 2 million. During each of the four seasons, the author identified a makeup trend the influencers highlighted in each video during a particular season that corresponded with a Maybelline product used in every advertorial by them, as shown in Table 2. These trends are likely given to the influencers by Maybelline as part of the brand sponsoring the influencers' content.

Table 2. Seasonal Trend and Corresponding Maybelline Product

| Season | Trend | Maybelline product |
|--------|------------------|--|
| Spring | Chaotic Lashes | Volum' Express Colossal Chaotic Lash Mascara |
| Summer | Blushed Nudes | The Blushed Nudes Eyeshadow Palette |
| Fall | Blurred Lip | Lip Studio Color Blur Lip Pencil |
| Winter | White Hot Winter | The Falsies Push Up Drama Lash Mascara |

A large number of people viewed the advertorials these bloggers posted, as shown in Table 3. It's also important to note that by law, each of these influencers does state in the description boxes below their videos that Maybelline has sponsored these particular videos along with the statement of "all opinions are my own" beside it.

Table 3. Influencers' Subscribers v. Average Views per Video

| Influencer | Subscribers | Average views per video |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Shaaanxo | 2,412,832 | 328,693 |
| MakeupByAli | 791,824 | 148,408 |
| Jenny Clair Fox | 943,470 | 77,166 |

Being Relatable Creates Connections

Being relatable comes with the territory for these influencers. It's what makes them so appealing to consumers and what builds trust in the words that they say. Each influencer had something about both their body and verbal language that this study will deem the friend factor. Their language is relaxed; informal and

feels as though you are listening to a friend teach you how to do your makeup. This allows the audience to feel a connection with these influencers right away, whereas if the brand marketers were to host these videos, the type of language would be more direct, focused on selling and, therefore, harsher and less personal. These influencers also show personality through the videos, whether it's poking fun at themselves or cracking a joke, friend-like character traits poke through the holes of the advertorial, making it feel more fun and relaxed.

One influencer does this particularly well, when she opens up the conversation and makes it a two-way dialogue between her and her viewers. Jenny Clair Fox demonstrated this during a video when she asks the audience a question as she's applying her makeup. She talks about the trend of contouring, or applying shadows and highlights to manipulate the structure of the face. She tells her viewers that she dislikes the trend, but then asks what they think and encourages them to comment their opinions below the video. This shows the influencer's effort to connect in a casual way, where she is simultaneously opening up a brand conversation about the product she is using while building a relationship with the audience.

The relatable characteristic is important for brands to consider when choosing influencers. What Fox did was show an interest in her viewer's point of view. When influencers commit to knowing their audience, they become a part of their audience, forming relationships and becoming that peer whom viewers can look to give them a voice in the brand conversation. Booth and Matic (2011) stressed, "Ownership of the brand and its reputation ha[s] always belonged to the consumer," (p.185). Using this type of brand advocate who also acts as a consumer advocate for her viewers gives Maybelline an upper hand in not only getting across its messaging, but also provides insight into the consumer conversations and valuable feedback for the brand. By using this influencer, Maybelline has now been able to connect to their consumers by simply giving them a voice through the influencer acting as a consumer advocate.

Knowledge Benefits

All of the influencers in this case study showed a high degree of knowledge in their videos. As defined in the methods section, for influencers to be considered knowledgeable, they must be able to offer clear and certain facts about products to the consumer audience. MakeupByAli demonstrated this while describing the product design details of The Falsies Push Up Drama Lash Mascara. She stated, "This applicator has a lot of mini cups on it that help push up your lashes and you get lots of impact with it." She was able to give specifics on the design of the applicator to show the audience that she has an understanding of how the product works the way it does and what consumers can expect to see from it.

All the influencers also seem to have extensive experience with the application of the products. Fox consistently gave the names of brushes and clear instructions on application methods. These clear instructions show a level of expertise that only comes with being knowledgeable about products and their specific uses. This allows the influencers to give advice about the uses of certain products. For instance, Fox talks about the Maybelline Lip Studio Color Blur Lip Pencils: "They're great if you want just a little bit of wash over your lips or what I'm doing today, which is layering them over your lip color." This helps consumers further understand what Maybelline products can be used for and in what different ways.

Being insightful about the beauty industry as a whole was another qualification of this characteristic that the selected influencers demonstrated well. For example, Shaaanxo infuses the Maybelline spring makeup trend of "Chaotic Lashes" with Korean makeup trends she is seeing in fashion and other tutorial videos by fellow influencers. This shows that this influencer pays attention to global makeup trends, not just those issued by her sponsor. This builds credibility for influencers when audience members see that their content is not just being fed to them by a sponsor, but crafted out of research and knowledge of what's currently happening in the beauty world outside of the brand an influencer is promoting. When Maybelline uses influencers who can clearly demonstrate knowledge about the industry, it's incredibly helpful to the viewers who now get a well-rounded look at the products in a larger context than just the Maybelline brand, or just their own makeup uses. It also reflects Maybelline's own desire to develop and incorporate global aspects of makeup, rather than just catering makeup to one certain market.

Helpfulness

Each video was a tutorial, which means that there was an added "how to" element within the advertorial, which allows influencers to demonstrate helpfulness within their videos with the how-to

instructions. Tutorials work well with cosmetic brands because they give instructions on how to apply the makeup and which application methods work best for what products. They also give consumers ideas on how to incorporate Maybelline products into their regular makeup routines. In the videos, all influencers disperse the Maybelline products amongst products from other brands. This helps viewers understand which other brands' products complement the Maybelline products. The influencers also include swatches, or small color samples of products in their videos seen, as shown in *Figure 1*. This allows watchers to see the color of a product out of the package, giving them a better sense of what the product will look like in real life.



Figure 1. Influencer demonstrating the swatch.

As found in the literature review, influencers love to give advice. Viewers often feel that is helpful to hear these words of wisdom from a fellow consumer, than a brand marketer. Both the consumer and the brand benefit when the influencer gives advice regarding their particular products. MakeupByAli was the most thorough in her advice and the most consistent in giving the viewer tips and tricks of how to apply the makeup more effectively to get the best use out of the product. For example, when talking about how to apply shadows from The Blush Nudes Eye Shadow Palette, she suggests a method that improves the look of the shadows. "I'm using a brush that's made for a cream product, because when you use it with a powder it's going to give you even more color impact and color payoff," she said. When consumers watch this video, it will help them understand how to apply the product better. Consumers may also learn an insightful tip that they can further use in their own makeup routines, which is another benefit to them.

Confidence is Persuasive

Influencers exhibited confidence through the assertion of specific claims they make on products throughout the videos. All influencers used words like "love" and phrases like "my favorite" to describe products that have worked for them. For example, in one instance the influencer said, "This has to be one of my favorite lipsticks of all time." These types of claims show assurance in influencer opinions and reinforce to the audience that the influencers are not wavering between certain products. They know and have confidence in the fact that this product is something that they trust and have no problem sharing with thousands of viewers that it is something they love.

Body language was another signifier of confidence. The influencers always made eye contact with the camera, sat up straight, and spoke with authority. There was also a lot posing, as seen in *Figure 2*, that goes on in the beginning and end of the advertorials to show off the final look. This type of body language gives the illusion that the influencers know what they are doing and feel confident in themselves and their abilities.



Figure 2. Influencer demonstrating posing that signifies confident body language.

Articulation Wraps Everything Together

This characteristic demonstrates the relationship between technical skills of video presentation and editing with verbal skills. Not only do influencers need to be well spoken and understandable, but also the way they visually present the verbal information can make an impact on how well it will be received by consumers. All the influencers have a significant following, which leads the viewer to believe that they are successful. However, not all have the same average number of views as seen above in Table 3. This can be attributed to how well influencers articulate the information in their videos. If influencers are hard to follow, or bounce around in their thoughts and go off on tangents, it takes away from the brand messaging in the advertorials. For the purpose of an advertorial, influencers need to be able to clearly present information. This encompasses all of the aforementioned characteristics as well as presentation ability.

The influencer who shows the best articulation was MakeupByAli. She consistently, through all of the four videos analyzed, is the most clear and fluid when presenting information. The influencer's process is very methodical. One can tell time and effort have been put into the way she structures the brand messaging while weaving in instructions and her opinions about the product. Whereas other influencers tend to bounce around in their thoughts, this influencer's clear step-by-step instruction through visual and verbal means was easy to follow and understand. She often shows the product with the application while voicing over instructions, as demonstrated in Figure 3. This approach gives the audience a clear understanding of the product. Aesthetic also comes into play with this particular trait, and her visual skills and use of space and camera contributed to a clean feeling when watching her videos. Her edits are crisp and flow nicely along with the narration, which gives the audience a pleasant viewing experience.



Figure 3. Influencer demonstrating articulation by showing product and application method in a single frame.

For Maybelline, utilizing video as a presentation method for its brand messaging helps consumers visualize themselves with the product. Advertorials on YouTube allow them to present brand messaging through a visual means while also getting the audience engaged in conversation on a social platform. The fluidity of the advertorials is like a one-stop shop for consumers where they can see products, learn how to use them, and utilize the referral links to get a further explore the product. When the influencers are articulate in their presentation of the information, Maybelline benefits by building consumer awareness and knowledge surrounding its products.

V. Discussion

The influencers chosen by Maybelline can be understood in the context of both social learning theory and attribution theory. Using YouTube and its video platform, consumers watch, listen, and read about the products all at once, through the voice of an influential, persuasive consumer. The YouTube platform makes it possible for these two theories to function in tandem, both forming and molding the behaviors and decision making of the consumer. Advertorials can arguably be the most influential on this platform for this reason.

In Bandura's social learning theory, he describes how learning by experience is reinforced by outcomes and consequences: "Knowing that a given model's behavior is effective in producing valued rewards or averting negative consequences can enhance observational learning by increasing observer's attentiveness to the model's actions" (p.9). This increase in attentiveness to a model's actions, which in this case is a Maybelline influencer, may lead to the adoption of the influencer's purchasing behaviors. In a sense, the how-to portions of the tutorials alleviate some of the expected problems that Bandura suggests, such as frustration or dissatisfaction when applying products wrong or in an ineffective way. The reward for consumers is a more positive outcome with the product; and in turn, more satisfaction in their purchasing decision. When Maybelline's influencers act out the how-to portion well, consumers learn beneficial behaviors and Maybelline gets more brand exposure.

eWOM or electronic word-of-mouth is made easy by the YouTube platform. As mentioned earlier, influencers love to give advice and refer products to their audiences. However, consumers are aware of their marketing techniques, so what they say and how they say it can make a big difference in the consumer's opinion of their review. In attribution theory, if an influencer positively reviews a product, the consumer will attribute more positive outcomes of the product; therefore, the language being used to sell the product in a positive light during the advertorials contributes to the consumer's perceived positive outcomes.

Messages of confidence and positivity could be built by influencers when they used words like “love,” “like,” “favorite,” or phrases like “highly recommend,” according to attribution theory. These casual statements regarding products, according to the theory, are persuasive in forming consumer opinions about a product because it is a review by an influential voice. When the influencers are confident and positive in their reviews and opinions, consumers will in turn be confident in their own purchasing decision and use of the product based on that review. Maybelline’s use of these influencers who exhibit confidence in their statements creates a positive conversation surrounding the brand that will then reflect in other consumer’s positive experiences with the product.

Advertorials on YouTube incorporating influencers explains why so many communications professionals are using bloggers, vloggers, and online videos as part of their campaign tactics. The reach of influencers can go beyond just the number of shares and likes, but can actually make a difference in the behaviors and opinions of consumers. There is also a peer element in both of these theories that allows for more trust and credibility and a better consumer-brand relationship to be built in an organic way, rather than through straight brand messages. This makes advertorials a highly engaging and highly effective method to reach consumer audiences.

VI. Conclusions

Maybelline has done an excellent job in selecting influencers who have shown the characteristics defined by this study. Some influencers exhibited the five characteristics better than others, but each has individual strengths that allow them to succeed in providing Maybelline a voice in the beauty conversation. Each characteristic—relatable, knowledgeable, helpful, confident, and articulate—relates back to the role of the influencers using their voice to inject Maybelline into the online dialogue. Being relatable creates openness between brand and consumer, while being knowledgeable reflects insight and awareness of the beauty world in a larger context. Being helpful builds a relationship between the consumer and brand that alleviates the stress of applying products, while self-confidence arises positivity around purchase behavior and satisfaction of the product. Articulation then pulls in all these characteristics with the ability to clearly present the material in a video format that visually engages viewers with Maybelline products.

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