



I promise this is my favorite brand! A digital ethnography of the person-as-brand as expressed in sponsored, affiliate, and non-sponsored beauty videos on YouTube

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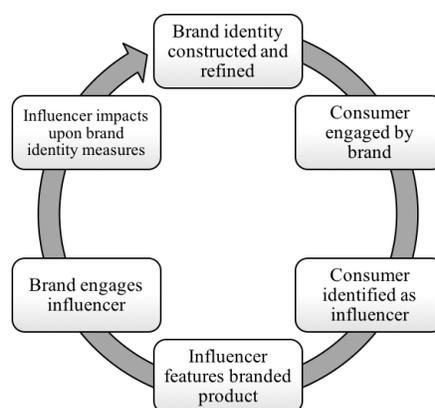
When Aaker (1996) proposed brands could build a strong identity through innovation, by identifying patterns to clarify, enrich, and differentiate their brand through various perspectives, he suggested one means to do this was to classify the brand as person. By anthropomorphizing the brand, individuals could relate brand aspects to their own self-images, often mirroring brand personalities to their own, through developing consumer-brand relationships (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fennis & Pruyn, 2007). This was further magnified with the advent of sites such as YouTube, a video sharing social media platform, where digital relationships could be built through both verbal and nonverbal cues. The development of communities on YouTube prompted the era of the digital influencer, an individual on the Internet who has gained a heightened digital presence through the affordances of the network, such as being able to speak directly to viewers or connect with them through emotional appeals (Spencer, Harding, & Sheahan, 2014). This connection prompted brands to view these individuals as a key to entering often closed digital communities. They allow for a person-as-brand, an individual who can speak directly to the community through the trust and reciprocity they have gained as a member, but one who may also act on behalf of the brand, extending the identity of the brand into the community. However, the sustainability of this concept has been relatively unexplored. As digital influencers leverage their position for personal gain, through monetization of content and brand partnerships, it is unknown how the community responds to these practices.

This research utilized a digital ethnography theoretical framework, specifically an inductive content analysis methodology, to explore how branding practices were displayed in and received by YouTube beauty communities (Caliandro, 2016). The selection of beauty communities was purposeful due to their expansive digital presence, with over 78 “how-to and lifestyle” YouTube channels amassing more than 2,000,000 subscribers each (VidStatsX, 2016). Beauty influencers have launched their own cosmetic brands, partnered with companies internationally to create products, and have even been featured on television shows and magazine covers based on their digital notoriety (Mosendz & Bhasin, 2016; Richtman, 2015).

Three beauty influencers were selected for inclusion in this study, based on parameters defined by the study and for feasibility purposes. Data collection occurred in a single phase. Based on a set of parameters defined by the context of this study, fifteen videos for each influencer were selected across a one-year time period: five videos featuring paid sponsored posts for brands, five videos featuring affiliated free-products received from brands, and five videos with no sponsored or affiliate content. These parameters allowed for a cross-level comparison of monetization activities in the YouTube beauty community. Once videos were captured, each was

then coded individually using a framework analysis model. Elements of branding were coded inductively, as a reflection of the beauty influencers role in the community through sponsored, affiliate, and non-sponsored videos, functioning as an element of brand personality utilizing Aaker's (1996) model of brand identity. Textual analysis of the top ten most liked comments for each video served as a point of triangulation for constructs of branding within the community.

The results of this research suggest that influencers may serve as an essential part of the brand identity, through providing a person-as-brand element of connectivity, however, the brand-influencer relationship must develop organically to ensure that community members do not perceive the interaction as being non-genuine. Therefore, it is suggested this relationship occur organically, through a cyclical process, which recognizes the affordances of partnering with an influencer to maintain a brand identity, not build it.



If brands have built a noticeable connection to the influencer, through the cyclical nature of non-sponsored, affiliate/free product, and sponsored content, then the relationship was seen by viewers as being honest and lasting. If influencers mentioned a product a single time in a sponsored video and then never featured it again, these findings suggested viewers were quick to question whether these products truly do have a place in influencers' lives or whether they are suggested based solely on the monetization the influencer was receiving. In contrast, if an influencer built a reputation for engaging with the brand's products in the past, over an appropriate length of time and consistent interaction, these results showed viewers were more likely to commend influencers for their opportunity to work with the brand through sponsorships, as the relationship between the influencer and brand was seen as being genuine.

Through this relationship, influencers are able to provide actual human personality traits to the brand, connecting a face to the product. As the brand has purposefully chosen these influencers, it was assumed they feel these individuals align with their chosen brand identity, providing similar personality traits and communicative factors as pre-defined by the brand. Therefore, if the brand is able to develop a lasting relationship with the influencer, it can benefit from maintaining its brand identity through the person-as-brand.

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