

WHAT MARKETERS AND BUSINESS LEADERS CAN LEARN FROM THE GROWTH OF VLOGGERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become so widespread across cultures, social classes, and income levels around the world. This paper aims to reveal the undiscovered potential social networks have in reaching customers, employees and generating revenues for businesses, through a phenomenon called social contagion. Using the concept of viral marketing and diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory as a moderator, this paper will explain what motivates opinion leaders to diffuse information, and what they get in return for their efforts. This paper will also explain how the most popular vloggers on social networks have garnered success over time, by demonstrating the one true trait of authentic leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In this new era, ideas go viral like an infectious disease. The Internet has played a fundamental role in spiraling content out of control, in real time. The rise of social networking platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat has only added oxygen to this flame. User generated content is now the talk of town as people tune into these platforms more than the television, radio, or newspaper. This paper aims to explain how this happens through the core elements of viral marketing, in particular how seeding strategies can essentially do a marketers job. It will also evaluate the route to success of several young, yet immensely popular beauty and travel vloggers of today, using the diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory. More so, business leaders today have many lessons to learn from the ordinary individuals, situated in their comfort zones, and speaking to a camera as they now have an unimaginable impact on the minds of consumers far and wide. Through traits of authentic leadership, vloggers have brought an exponential spin to word of mouth behaviors, and business leaders too can use their success stories in bringing about such changes and evoking such behaviors in their organizations.

Scholars have not tapped into the growth of social media, and its importance in marketing and brand building yet. This paper aims to fill this gap in literature by shedding light on the potential of brand building through viral marketing, left solely in the hands of consumers. In doing so it develops several potential avenues for further research by marketers, psychologists and academic researchers.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HUMAN INTERACTION

Social media has changed the way humans and organizations interact with one another and within themselves, however there is little academic literature that thoroughly explains how the vlogger fits into this new age communication model. In addition, the increasing use of search engines for even the most basic, low-risk consumption decisions has further increased the attraction between the mass public to vloggers, and it can be said that people today trust alternative sources of media a lot more than they did as little as a decade ago [9]. It was found that 13.4% of U.S. adults online create 80% of the content that

influences people, and 6.2% of these web users are responsible for 80% of social media influence.” [10]. This is a significantly large number, and the fact that academia has not explored this avenue further presents a greater calling for authors to contribute their thoughts as well.

Today, it is no longer necessary for an opinion leader to be associated with an elite organization, in fact, YouTube has created a new kind of opinion leader; one that creates his/her own content and wins the trust of the public [8]. Opinion leaders are defined as “individuals who possess cultural capital that is regarded as novel and useful by their followers.” [8]. As vloggers disperse marketing messages willingly, they constitute the most attractive promotional campaign in the face of marketers [7]. A new phenomenon known as social contagion has emerged. Social contagion can be defined as the event, which “occurs when adoption is a function of exposure to other people’s knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors.” [12]. Social contagion arises when people in a social structure rely on one another to manage uncertainty regarding future purchase decisions [6]. Even in today’s dynamic world, individuals from around the world are bound by their respective social structures. This has always been the case, as human beings have always had the need for belonging, but social networks today have made this affiliation a lot easier, not to mention global. Social structures are now more accessible to individuals across vast geographical boundaries.

In less than a decade, several young, inspirational ladies have made their mark through social networks such as, YouTube and Facebook. Some of the many successful beauty gurus out there are Jaclyn Hill, Carli Bybel, Michelle Phan, Zoella and Bethany Mota. All of these young ladies began at ground zero, with just their creativity behind them, and a lens in front. In just a few years time, they have been able to reach a fan base of millions worldwide. The idea of average individuals being able to accomplish such vast social networks over the Internet, all by themselves, was simply unimaginable a few years ago. However, the widespread use of social media has opened the floodgates and made this an accomplishable goal for creative individuals for years to come.

VIRAL MARKETING

Viral Marketing can be defined as “the phenomenon by which consumers mutually share and spread marketing-relevant information in the form of emails, YouTube videos, and social media postings,” viral marketing has taken over information systems today like an infectious disease [9]. The initial content is sent out by marketing executives at companies to initiate and monetize on word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviors, which lead to an exponential growth in the outreach of the message [13]. Word-of-mouth behaviors are best explained when people begin to talk about a product or event, just because everybody else is doing it. As human beings, we all want to feel a sense of belonging to that which is new, to show our peers our abilities to keep up with current events, and of course to gain popularity. Viral marketing is far less expensive than traditional mass-media advertising as it “leaves the dispersion of marketing messages up to consumers.” [7]. Social contagion has become the basic premise for the success of viral marketing. The early adopters are actively influencing the purchasing decisions of the late adopters and laggards.

Critical Success Factors of Viral Campaigns

Every successful viral campaign needs four supporting pillars. (1) *Easily Memorable Content* [3]: Almost all of the famous vloggers today, speak about content such as makeup, products, destinations, food, or celebrity inspired events that is easy to remember. They articulate themselves in the simplest conversational style, and present themselves as the most ordinary, approachable and modest individuals. Their speeches are not rehearsed; they are informal and conversational, and have mistakes too. (2)

Underlying Social Network [2]: Vloggers use YouTube, along with Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat as their main digital social networks to communicate with, and engage their followers. Moreover, YouTube's partnership program with several affiliates allows these individuals to tap into other social networks such as CBS, and VEVO [9]. As long as the underlying social network is easily accessible by a vast majority of the population, the viral campaign is likely to be fruitful. (3) *Word of Mouth Pressures* [1]: Vloggers have similar personality traits that they use to evoke certain behavioral characteristics in their recipients minds. These behaviors urge the audience to think about the vloggers' opinions, and to share them in their own social networks, creating the diffusion of information. The concept of diffusion of information is explained further in the next section. (4) *Seeding Strategy* [4]: This is the most important critical success factor. Research shows that seeding the right target audience initially can lead to eight times the referrals than seeding the wrong ones [7]. It is extremely important to seed the most well-connected people as they are the ones who actively participate in evoking word-of-mouth pressures amongst the mass public.

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION THEORY

Innovation diffusion is "a process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system." [11] Innovation of information allows individuals to adjust the levels of various forms of capital, i.e. cultural, social, economic, symbolic and political, which they then disseminate in their network [8]. Cultural capital is the knowledge, ideas and products possessed by the person, which are usually related to academic and professional qualifications. Social capital is dependent on the total number of ties, the strength of these ties, and the presence of both strong and weak ties in the network. Economic capital is the financial resources tied to his or her cultural capital. Symbolic capital is defined as the respect [and prestige] the person receives from the members of his or her social network. Lastly, political capital is the ability of individual to influence others to act in ways that one desires and asserts that the exchange process begins with cultural capital and moves towards social, economic and then to symbolic capital [8]. Interestingly, some individuals willingly share their knowledge, expertise, ideas or technologies with others because it allows them to fulfill their self-actualization needs, and gain a higher social status in their social system by adjusting the aforementioned forms of capital [4].

The Capital Exchange Process

Leung [8] argues that social exchange is not restricted to the mere exchange of money or goods, but also extends to the exchange of symbolic status for political power, and social connections for greater political influence. This greatly explains the ideology of YouTube beauty gurus, and other vloggers as they do not start their careers with the mindset to dominate the world with the mere exchange of money and goods as businesses do. They enter their social network with the goal of exchanging the various forms of capital for the statuses they desire. There are four cycles in the capital exchange process during innovation diffusion. The first cycle begins with the opinion leader sharing his/her cultural capital with the followers. The followers then react favorably to the information delivered, and this improves the social position of the opinion leader. Once the incoming feedback has stagnated, the opinion leader reinvests in his/her cultural capital and the cycle repeats itself.

A simple example of this comes from the ever so popular "Monthly Favorites" videos these YouTube beauty gurus film occasionally. The content of the video is simple: the vlogger sits down to speak to followers about five to ten products she has loved using the past month, and which she recommends highly. The followers then remember this content, and during their next trip to the local drugstore, or the mall, they stop by the beauty section to try out the recommended products, and most do make

purchases. Once the followers make this effort to investigate the products recommended, the social position of the opinion leader immediately improves. Whether or not the follower likes this particular product, is a separate story. The opinion leader has now achieved a higher social status by simply motivating people to make an effort and make that extra walk to the beauty section, where they are likely to be visually bombarded with many other products, and make more purchases. This has positive spillover effects for the other products located near to the much talked about product. Moreover, because these individuals are not out to take over the world with false impressions and spend their own money purchasing the products; their opinions are mostly, if not always, accurate. Sitting in the comfort of their bedrooms, physically hidden from the mass public, these individuals find no harm in staying true to themselves, and sharing their true opinions. More importantly, their followers appreciate this, for it is this authenticity that brings them back to their YouTube channel each time. Once the feedback from the first video simmers down, the beauty guru films another monthly favorites video at the start of the new month and the cycle repeats itself.

Another example can be drawn from Emirates Airlines' recent Globalista campaign. Emirates Airline has selected six individuals, all employees of the company, who have a distinct passion associated with traveling; be it food, fashion, cultural exploration, nature, extreme sports, or anything for that matter. They have allotted these individuals the titles of "Social Media Brand Ambassadors" and have equipped them with state of the art videography and photography tools, before sending them out to exotic destinations around the world. Not only is this campaign hoping to raise awareness of the airline's global outreach, but also to encourage customer and employee engagement – a substantial resource as Emirates has over 84,000 employees alone. These ordinary individuals travel to various destinations and post about their trips actively on their social media networks (share their cultural capital), which their followers see, and share within their own circles. This evokes a sense of familiarity within potential consumers: once they see someone visiting these destinations, and doing out of the ordinary things; simple, yet manageable things, they too feel comfortable with the idea of venturing out to these destinations and doing the same. Traveling after all, is about sharing an experience; sharing a story. Moreover, Emirates has gone the extra mile to monetize from this generation of online traffic by offering a coupon code for customers to purchase tickets to those destinations for a limited amount of time through a microsite created specifically for this campaign. Once the buzz from one Globalista's trip dies down, another is already filming his/her own experience of his/her own travel related passion. This just goes to show the impact social networks can have in large corporations. The underlying value being tapped into by Emirates Airline is priceless. Within just five days of the campaign running, the first video of the first Globalista's trip to Bali had over 2 million views. It is evident that online followers prefer interacting with personal experiences of their opinion leaders, rather than with television ads and radio infomercials. Individuals are truly motivated to follow these leaders' opinions, if they see themselves just as capable of being able to do so.

This also goes to show how important it is for companies to plant the seed in the right spot. Just like Emirates has selected its inspirational Globalistas, and marketers continue to select their beauty gurus, it is equally important for any company initiating a viral marketing campaign to pick the right opinion leaders. Emirates had a competition at its headquarters in Dubai, where it invited its employees from around the world to come forth and present to the judges, their distinct passions through a one-minute video. The judges then picked the contestants they felt were most influential. With simple content, such as travel vlogs, or product reviews, and an easily accessible underlying social network such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, viewers are likely to remember these experiences, and drive word-of-mouth behaviors amongst their own circles. This enhances their sense of belonging to products and services

that are new, popular, and in the case of Emirates, exceptionally prestigious. All in all, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

A few business magazine writers have picked up on this new trend of vloggers becoming opinion leaders in their own niches. Several of them have begun to explore the personality traits of these individuals to assess whether they belong to a certain personality type, or not. Interestingly enough, all of these successful beauty gurus on YouTube, and Globalistas have garnered success through the old tactic of demonstrating authentic leadership.

Authentic leaders are those who “demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads.” [5]. Authentic leaders learn from their life story; many actually confessed that their motivation resulted from a difficult phase in their life [5]. This is also true for the beauty guru vloggers as they share these experiences with their followers to tell them that their lives are not perfect – that they too have seen the darkest of days.

In the rush for power, fame, success, and fortune, many CEOs and executives today forget to find time for what it is that they truly love. Vloggers on the other hand, appreciate intrinsic fulfillment, and prioritize their passions above the superficial aspects of life that the masses are hungry for. After all, it is their very passions that drive their motivations. Above all, vloggers appreciate constructive criticism; they know how to listen to and learn from their followers’ feedback, be it positive or negative. Not only does this allow them to grow, but also engages their followers further and strengthens the leader-follower relationship [5].

Authentic leaders also know how to build their support system [5]. This comes naturally to vloggers, as sharing their experiences with the world from their comfort zones (their bedroom, kitchen, or car) allows them to be open, and build trust and confidence. Business leaders need to find their comfort zone in their organizations too as this is the starting point of network building. Networks are built over time, but once established, they evoke appreciation, acceptance, and a sense of belonging on to the leader, which intrinsically motivates him/her to stay authentic [5].

Lastly, authentic leaders know how to inspire others to lead [5]. This is precisely the message vloggers want to convey to their followers worldwide: that regardless of age, gender, race or religion, you can be exactly whom you want to be, and inspire others to do the same. They want to push others to find their passions, and live their dreams. They also want to comfort others in their time of need. Realizing the value in crossing the finish line together, these opinion leaders on virtual social networks want to make the world a better place – one of the biggest challenges and fulfillments of authentic leadership [5].

TAKEAWAYS FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

Studying the social network is a valuable place to start for marketers looking to determine their viral marketing strategy [7]. Social networks are easier to study, monitor and measure than communication intensity, quality or frequency. They advise marketers to use the appropriate socio-metric data to ensure they seed the right customers rather than the wrong ones. The advancement of technology makes it easy to view the number of subscribers a follower has, on each of the various social networks. Moreover, marketers can actually watch these videos and assess the influencing capabilities of these individuals for themselves. Social networks allow marketers to target highly influential people within each domain.

Business models of tomorrow will need to incorporate social network information in the formulation and implementation of their marketing strategies as well [7].

The main implication of this study for business leaders is to brush up their authentic leadership skills. Changes in the macroeconomic environment have surged leaders towards incorporating adaptive leadership styles - to be change initiators at heart. However, the success stories of these young beauty gurus, and globalistas, in all simplicity condone the traditional facets of authentic leadership. It seems that the competitive environment has driven businesses away from customers; despite them knowing that customers are at the heart of any successful strategy. Vloggers have monetized on this very idea by stepping in and bridging this gap left behind by large businesses in pursuit of commercial activities, by catering to the smaller, yet special needs of consumers. Business leaders should replicate these strategies in their own organizations, by being unique and remembering who they are. Leading by example is the new norm. Values should not be jeopardized for even the highest statures of success, and consumers have shown their knack to reward this tradeoff exceptionally well.

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