

## **Are social media engagers outgrowing the reach of the eponymous ‘influencer’?**

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### **Abstract**

**Background scientific research:** Introduced in 2005 as a simple video sharing platform, YouTube is now the third most visited website and the second most used search engine on the internet. As a global phenomenon, the all-inclusive platform allows individuals to create the content they consume. The participatory nature not only encourages individuals to interact with one another but makes the task of creating and sharing content accessible (Nadagiri & Philip, 2018) . From news, information, music to documents and comedy, the platform is a space for digital freedom and expression. The website has an eclectic mix of videos available and consequently a heterogeneous range of content creators who have built successful careers from posting videos online (influencers) (Yu et al., 2014) . A further purpose of the medium is its ability of creating online communities where users with similar interests can come together to share their passions (engagers). Research suggests that through different levels of affinity and information exchange engagers are able to seek YouTubers who are similar in personality. According to Hu et al. (2017) this mediated encounter is said to impact and influence the lives of consumers on numerous levels and is specifically prominent in the context of beauty YouTubers (Forbes, 2016).

**Research issue to be addressed:** This exploratory study aimed to evaluate YouTube beyond its purpose as a social media platform, exploring the website as an incipient resource for community building. Focusing on culturally related influencers, the study assessed the

relationships which engagers are constructing with influential YouTube personalities using elements of the Para social Interaction (PSI) Theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956). It further investigates how, in particular, beauty YouTubers have become such credible and trustworthy sources in their field of expertise (Ko and Wu, 2017) and the importance of affiliation when there is a convergence in terms of culture.

**Methodology used:** Data was gathered using focus groups which contained an experimental intervention related to the viewing of specific You tube video extracts enabling focused discussion to emerge determined by the research aim (Creswell, 2007). The sample was purposefully small and consisted of 10 respondents who were active engagers with specific influencers (it was important to consider and take into account the cultural match of the participants with the influencer in order to understand the community building aspect within this area) between the ages of 18-34 (highest engagement age range related to beauty You tubers). Due to the introspective nature of the data that was being sought by the research, the focus groups were limited to a maximum of 5 participants to enable deep, rich data to emerge. This ethnographic approach, with a restricted number of participants in a smaller group environment is supported by researchers such as Small (2009) when the topic of investigation is within certain fields of research (such as sociology or psychology for example) but mainly when the topic implies a certain level of participant identity exposure. It is argued that the current engagement of young people with the cosmetic and make-up industry is directly linked with the development of self-identity (Davis, 2014). The Braun and Clarke (2006) framework of analysis was used to contextualise the findings and determine themes related to the engagement of the participants with the influencers and the significance of source credibility, trust, the entertainment value of the video, the level of self-affiliation with the influencer and the role of culture within that.

**Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice:** YouTube's unique nature classifies consumers as an active audience rather than a captive audience which is often the case on other social platforms or video sharing sites. The two-way communication flow was expected to create online communities, yet the research results suggested otherwise as a large proportion of respondents did not buy into the community aspect of the offering and were more interested in the utilitarian and practical application of the experience. It was concluded that information retrieval was more valued than interactivity, however, the level of information expected depended on the content which was being consumed, especially in the beauty context. Despite the co-creation of a consumer-to-consumer

environment, it was clearly demonstrated that source credibility was pivotal when selecting content as through lack of regulation and YouTube's pre-rehearsed nature, some YouTubers were less trusted than others. In terms of the elements related to the PSI theory, where the framework was used to determine the extent and reach of the one sided relationships consumers built with influencers and the importance of culture within that, it seems that the current social media user of influencer and informational videos has grown up and is clearly aware of the pitfalls related to trust and credibility as does not rely on this media to create lasting communities but rather functional ones which can be discarded when no longer useful or outgrown. In terms of engagement with the media, it was found that consumers generally use YouTube for both entertainment and information, and content which is entertainment focused in contrast to purely product focused is more highly valued. This exploratory research divulges a potential new phase of two-way social media interaction where on-line community building, which, until recently, was a primary outcome of this type of engagement, and therefore hugely valuable for brands and companies, has started to shift into a more mature relationship. The 'engager' now has heightened awareness of the functionality of the offering and is not easily integrated into a brand discourse through the use of more or less credible influencers or so easily linked to a community based environment which nurtured their self-identity. Brands may now have to envisage complementary ways of engaging their consumers with the next phenomena related to social media.

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