The Relationship Between Leadership and Influencer Culture

Alex Rodgers

Communications Department, University of North Georgia

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Caitlin Wills

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This paper will be examining the nature of influencer relationships and whether or not influencers should be considered modern day leaders.

Research Question: Should influencers be considered community leaders, or should they be viewed as standard members of the general public?

Before answering the research question, there needs to be a clear definition of what an influencer is, as well as a reason for this query in the first place. This paper will use three research methods to define whether influencers were leaders: report of research, general population survey, and influencer survey.

Background

The relationship between the general public and influencers has always been interesting. As more and more companies turn to the use of influencer marketing, it becomes necessary to examine the relationship between the two. For example, large companies such as Honey, Skill Share, Nord VPN, Raycon, and many more, utilize influencer marketing every day. Each one uses paid promotions in photos, videos, and blog posts. Companies then base any decisions using influencer marketing on two ideals. The first point considered is the influencers follower count. Most companies equate the more followers someone has, to the more money that will come from a potential partnership. The second point that is considered, is the amount of influence that an influencer actually has in their community. This is most commonly measured through an influencer's engagement on their social media platforms.

Influencer marketing is not disappearing anytime soon, and this can be shown through the projected industry growth. In 2019, the market value for influencer marketing was evaluated at $9.7 billion dollars. That is expected to increase through 2021 to an estimated market value of

$13.8 million dollars, which is almost a $4 billion-dollar growth (2021). This is occurring for a few reasons. The most important is because of the high return value that companies report that the influencer marketing produces. In 2020 it was found in a study done by Big Commerce that 89% of companies find that influencer marketing is comparable or even better to traditional marketing routs when considering the return of their investment (2021).

While influencers are used in common marketing tools by many brands, does that really mean they should be considered community leaders? The answer to the question is a firm yes. In academia, influencers and influencer relationships are often considered to be para-social relationships. These relationships are defined as instances where followers consider influencers as friends despite limited interactions. Both of these schools of thought can be easily disproven though when looking at current statistics regarding influencer marketing. It has been found that 91% of millennials will trust an influencer's opinion and reviews with the same weight as they would a review from close friend or family (2021). However, people born through generation Y, will often write off influencers as shallow social media personas. Additionally, people are not just looking for opinions on products and services. Younger generations will frequently seek out influencer's perspectives on politics, recent events, and other news stories. This then shapes the received views and attitudes of some people, as they gain their news information through the influencer's perspective. Due to this relationship, influencers should be reclassified as both community and opinion leaders.

Report of Research

Definition of "Influencer"

Before discussing the theories used to determine whether or not influencers should be considered leaders, the criteria used to define an influencer needs to be quantified. Throughout

the last five years there have been many attempts to define influencers. The most standard

definition comes from a body of research done by Farivar. This research defines influencers as,

"social media users who have received significant attention from other users and gained a

sizable network of followers" (Farivar et al., 2020). who often have between

one-hundred-thousand and one million followers. The third kind of influencers are

Micro-Influencers, and they have between one thousand and one-hundred-thousand followers.

On top of follower count, influencers in this category have high authenticity ratings and high

engagement, which make these influencers the most effective influencers when under

consideration for influencer marketing. The final category of influencers is the Nano-Influencers.

A Nano-Influencer is someone with fewer than one thousand followers, but what makes up for

their small communities is the immense amount of influence these influencers have over their

audience. (2021).

Trait Theory

The first theory I want to discuss is the trait leadership theory. According to the textbook

written by Peter Northouse, trait theory is defined as a person who both possesses and actively

cultivates exceptional skills related to 8 basic traits: intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility,

initiative, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability (Northouse, 2016). Most if not all of

modern influencers possess over half of the traits on the list, but what sets influencers apart from

the general public is their ability to cultivate their skills as the learn from their mistakes over the

years.

One of the best examples of this would be Jenna Marbles. She has been on social media

since 2010, which was a time when society had normalized and accepted a lot of racist and slut

shaming humor that was at the time made as parody humor. Since then she has made a significant effort to change her behavior, actions, and becoming an advocate for minorities. Despite all of this change she has continued to feel guilty about her problematic behavior in the past. Most of her followers on social media have let her past content go, but with the rise of cancel culture in 2020 she felt a lot of guilt and remorse over her content as so many other content creators had been "canceled" due to negative content in the far and recent past uncovered while she was being left alone. In June of 2020 she took full accountability for her action and released a public apology where she aired all of her dirty laundry and apologized for anyone she offended.

This is a really good example of how influencers represent the trait theory of leadership as it shows her ability to develop her basic leadership traits while really being representative of how reflective and insightful she is about her content and being able to take accountability for mistakes while telling her audience what she plans to do in the future in order to continue to develop herself as a leader.

Two-Step Flow Communication Model

This is a communication model that was conceptualized in 1955 by Larzarfeld and Katz that states people do not form their opinions through exposure to mass media, but instead form their opinions through exposure to opinion/thought leaders. In this model communication, information and ideas come from mass media then to opinion leaders who pass on their own interpretation of the information to their followers. Lots of things have changed since 1955 when this theory was introduced, so the definition of opinion leaders, which used to primarily male politicians, has severely changed. A study published in the Elsevier Science Direct article by three students from the institutes of Advanced Technology has come up with a proposal to update

what it means to be a public opinion leader. According to Bamakan, Nurgaliev, and Qu, opinion leaders are characterized by, "a participant with higher socioeconomic status compared to his/her followers because of great exposure to mass media and maintains a strong contact with change agents, which makes him/her an influential social participant." (Bamakan et al., 2018). In this communication model leaders are often characterized by traits such as likability, trustworthiness, influential, and self-confidence. These are all traits that influencers have, and I have discussed when establishing influencers as leader based on the trait theory of leadership.

Servant Leadership

The final leadership theory/model I wanted to discuss is servant leadership, because this is something that influencers do really well, and I think further cements the idea that influencers are leader. The most used definition for servant leadership is based on research done by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 and it states that, "Servant leaders place the good of followers over their own self-interest while emphasizing follower development" (Northouse, 2016). This is relevant to the classification of influencers as leaders because it means influencers would be recognizing their authority over their followers but choosing to use that authority to better their followers and the world around them.

An example of servant leadership where leaders have served their communities come from some of the biggest names on Youtube. Markiplier is a gaming YouTuber who host monthly charity steams and raised a collective 3 million dollars last year for charity. Last year the second largest Youtuber on the platform, Pewdipie, raised 2.5 million, but then matched that donation with his own money. The most impressive situation I want to talk about is a project called #TeamTrees created by Mr. Beast and Mark Rober and sponsored through the arbor day

foundation. This project set out to raise 20 million dollars in order to plant 20 million trees. This is a fundraiser that almost all YouTube influencers joined and donated in some way. Eventually they went over their goal, reaching 21.8 million dollars. Overall, many different influencers make a significant effort to raise money for charities and put as much money as they can afford back into their communities who support them.

Methods

General Population Survey

The first research method used was a general population survey gauging the public's opinion on whether influencers should be considered as leaders or not. This survey was created with Google Forums and initially aired on February 20, 2021. The survey was released on the highest used social media platforms in 2020 as found in a study done by RMIT University: YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok (Olanrewaju et al., 2019). In order to avoid sample-bias, the survey was released by people of many different demographics. The demographics used to disperse the survey were myself, a man and woman of racial minority, two people from the LGBT+ community, one middle aged male and female, a male and female high school student, and one elderly woman. All of the surveyors released the survey on all social media platforms listed above. The questions are listed below and can be broken down into three subsections, demographic questions, questions about user's social media usage, and questions about leadership.

- Demographics
    - How old are you?
    - What is your gender?

o   What is your ethnicity?

o   What is your highest level of education?

- Usage of Social Media

    o   Do you use social media?

    o   How many hours a week do you use social media?

    o   Do you engage with influencer content?

    o   What influencers do you engage with most frequently?

    o   Do you follow these influencers on multiple social media platforms?

- Leadership Qualifications

    o   Do you think influencers are community leaders?

    o   Why or why not?

    o   Even if an influencer is caught in a scandal, do you think they could still be considered a leader?

    o   Why or why not?

    o   What does leadership mean to you?

Influencer Survey

The second research method that was used in this research directly interreacted with influencers. In order avoid sampling, bias a three-question survey was sent to five different influencers across each of the four categories. All of the influencers were selected in order to get the most responses from the most diverse type of content creators possible. These influencers will be listed below and the content that they primarily create will be listed below.

- Mega-Influencers: Lil' Nas X (music), Elon Musk (technology), Jack Black (Actor), John Mulaney (comedy), Kylie Jenner (beauty and fashion)

- Macro-Influencers: MichaelReeves (engineering), JammiDodger (LGBT+ activist), KitchenandJornShow (trend setters), Safiya Nygaard (lifestyle), WilliamOsman (life hacks)

- Micro-Influencers: KellyKirstein (Cosplay), ThatVeganTeacher (health and wellness), DevinLytle (fashion), DanBull (Music), JamieWindsor (photographer)

- Nano-Influencers: GemOutnumbered (mom blogger) ZoliCouture (fashion and cosmetics), Claudaddy (fitness), KatieFlaves (health and wellness), Itsdejamichelle (travel)

The questions used in this survey were far more intrinsically reflective on the influencers parts to see if they considered themselves to be a leader, rather than on their community.

1. Do you think your opinions hold impact amongst your community?
2. Would you consider yourself a community leader?
3. Why or why not?

Findings

After going through all of the survey results between the influencer survey and the general population survey, it seems that the answer as to whether or not influencers are leaders is an overwhelming yes.

General Population Survey

The general population survey ran until April 13, 2021 and had a total of 267 respondents. When asked if people considered influencers to be leaders, 73% of responses

concluded that influencers are leaders. Some of the leaders that the respondents interacted with most are Jeffree Star, Markiplier, Alexa Chung, Gigi Hadid, and Rosanna Pansino. Overall there were two correlations that was interesting and notable to the findings for this research. The first strong correlation was that people who interact with influencers typically follow them across multiple different platforms rather than just one. The other interesting correlation was the age of respondents. The younger someone is, the more likely they were to view influencers as peers or friends; whereas, people over the age of 28 are those who are more likely to view influencers as leaders.

At the end of the survey there was a free response question that allowed respondents to answer why or why not people considered influencers to be leaders and this response in particular was quite well stated. This shows that some people have been considering influencers as leaders already.

"Influencers are leaders just like politicians, company CEO's, and industry experts. All of them how influence over a group of people, but at the end of the day people should realize that they (influencers) opinions should be taken and scrutinized just as you would any other kind of leader."

Influencer Survey

Despite reaching out to many different influencers only a limited number of responses were received, but they all agreed that to some extent influencers should be considered leaders. Responses were received from 3 nano-influencers, 3 micro-influencers, 1 macro-influencer, and 0 mega-influencers. Despite the limited results, it was probably the most conclusive research as there is something to say about someone's own self-identification of being a leader, as all who

responded agree that yes, they were in fact leaders. Two of the responses have been included below.

Michael Reeves

The first person to respond to my emails was Michael Reeves, a macro-influencer who creates robotics and engineering videos along with collaborating with a content production house known as OfflineTV. He said, "I mean yeah, like I just build shitty fucking robots for a living. My most recent video was just meme-ing (making fun of) on Boston Dynamics, but I see people in my comments section and on my Twitter saying how much of an impact that my videos and content has on their lives and I know that I am someone that other people look up too. Honestly, I don't really get why my content was something that got picked up, but I'd have to be blind not to see the power that I can have over people."

Kelly Kirstein

The second comment comes from USA's 2015 Miss Supranational runner-up, Kelly Kirstein, a micro-influencer who primarily exists on Instagram. Since competing in pageants, she has turned to becoming a cosplay influencer, often partnering with large companies like Cartoon Network. She said, "I appreciate all of my followers because they are who allows me to be a leader. They care about who I am and what I think, and because of that I absolutely consider myself a role model and leader in my community."

Conclusion

So, overwhelmingly the answer is yes, influencers are leaders, but why does it matter? It matters because as more and more people in oncoming generations rely on the reviews and opinions of influencers. The level of blind faith the public puts into influencers will increase unless something drastically changes. As of right now, influencer culture surrounds millennials and generation z, who rely on influencers for news about politics, products, pop culture, health, etc. The only thing that actively changing people's opinions about influencers are when they get "canceled" from the release of scandals such as sexual misconducts, racism, homophobia, or worse. These individuals are being held on pedestals as role models, while many of them are out partying amongst a global pandemic.

There needs to be some scrutiny and digression amongst who the new generations decide are role models, and the only way to do that is stop looking at influencers as insignificant parasocial relationships or even frivolous online personas. Instead, we need to look at influencers in the same way we look at politicians, experts, and CEO's. The words of influencers should not be set in stone and as a society, we need to question all of the "facts" being shared with us through influencer channels in order to make more informed decisions about the leaders od modern day.

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