

Social Media Influencers: Creators, Celebrity, Content, Audiences, Brands

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“Social media influencers” (SMIs) use social media to attract audiences—unlike other celebrities who, having gained fame elsewhere, use social media to connect with fans—and are paid by advertisers (“brands”) to “influence” their audiences to buy.

Brands’ use of SMIs runs the gamut of advertising strategies: product placements and mentions (e.g., vlogger [Tyler Oakley](#) eating a Taco Bell taco), brand integrations (beauty vlogger [Jen Chae](#) demonstrating a cosmetics brand), custom content (musician [Joe Penna](#) performing an original song about Pop Tarts), multiplatform campaigns (dancer [D-Trix](#) choreographing Mountain Dew content on YouTube and Snapchat), and new product design (beauty vlogger [Michelle Phan](#) partnering with L’Oreal for her own products).

At first glance, brands’ use of SMIs is simply a new version of celebrity endorsements (once called “[testimonials](#)”). In fact it is far more complicated.

First, branded content by SMIs blurs the conventional boundaries between a “commercial” and a “program.” The [FTC](#) has issued guidelines for advertiser-funded social media content, such as using hashtags (“#ad” or “#sponsored”), yet much SMI branded content is not so labeled. Brands pay SMIs to promote their brand without annoying audiences; obvious labeling of content as an “ad” may defeat this purpose.

Second, although brands have always sought to associate themselves with celebrities, the explosion of micro-celebrity SMIs has complicated this strategy. Many SMIs are famous to niche audiences only, which may or may not be valuable to the brand. Specialized “[influencer](#)” [talent agencies](#) have emerged to help brands find the right SMIs.

Because of the rapid expansion, diversity, and confusion of this new marketplace, pricing for “influence” lacks any clear standard. No one knows just who or what is valuable. There are no SAG or AFTRA minimums for performers. While some SMIs exploit brands’ desperation to connect with their audiences by charging high fees, others sell themselves quite cheaply. SMIs have no box office receipts or TV ratings; they have “followers” or “engagements” (e.g., likes, shares, retweets), the value of which is unclear. Advertisers debate whether to reach “a lot” of consumers or the “right” consumers—and how to measure either.

Fourth, brands and SMIs struggle with the problem of “authenticity.” Because audiences ignore “paid” commercial interruptions, brands want messages integrated into an admired SMI’s content. Yet SMIs risk diluting their authenticity or losing audience acceptance if their deals with brands are too obvious or not well aligned with the SMI’s own personal “brand.” And the advertiser, of course, always risks a negative audience reaction if the SMI content is not “brand friendly” or appears inauthentic.

Fifth, if brands are paying SMIs to produce content, who then “owns” that content? Back in the “old time radio” era, advertisers owned the program (e.g., *Kraft Music Hall*). Are SMIs only work-for-hire commercial producers who specialize in niche markets on social media rather than 30-second TV spots on national networks? Some SMI content exists only to promote a brand—appearing as innovative commercials in the flow of social media posts (e.g., *Kickstart* videos by D-Trix and others). But other SMIs view themselves as content producers who happen to allow some brands to subsidize their own creative expression. Tyler Oakley insists that he, not the brand, decides how to integrate the brand, and so, for example, in the middle of a *vlog* he will mention in passing some product he likes, so that the pitch is naturalized as part of his overall communication with his fans rather than a glossy commercial interruption.

As brands move away from “advertising” that interrupts the “content” that audiences want to watch, will we in the future be able to see a difference between “commercial” and “program”? We may want to consider how artificial such distinctions always have been. Historically commercially supported media have provided content closely allied to advertisers’ needs: for example, it was no accident that magazine articles aimed at housewives appeared next to soap and food ads. The apparent textual separation of traditional media “editorial”/“program” from “ads”/“commercials” may be a convention in decline as brands and content producers increasingly integrate.

In closing, I suggest that we media scholars closely watch the emerging power struggles over SMIs. Many mediators, including talent agencies, multichannel networks, platforms such as YouTube and Snapchat, and content producers (all publishers and networks), are currently fighting for a slice of the SMI revenue pie. Rather than selling ad space or time, they are seeking to sell influence over their audiences. The outcome of these power struggles, and the trajectory of the micro-celebrity SMIs, will help shape the future of the media industries.