Research in brief

Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Social media influencers (SMIs) represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media. A mature public relations literature has identified the characteristics of effective spokespersons, but relatively little is known about audience perceptions of the SMI. A q-sort technique identified core perceived attributes of four sample SMIs. A better understanding of the perceived personality of SMIs provides tools for optimizing an organization's SMI capital.

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1. Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs) represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media. Although some scholars appear to view SMIs as competing, possibly hostile voices (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009), others recognize the possibilities of forging alliances with SMIs to promote a brand or organization. Just as the contribution of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to an organization's bottom line can be referred to as CEO capital (Gaines-Ross, 2003), we propose that an analogous "SMI capital" exists. To maximize organizational SMI capital requires methods that provide precise information about relevant influencers and how they are perceived by audiences.

Because of the persuasive power of social media influencers, technologies have been developed to identify and track the influencers relevant to a brand or organization. Most of these efforts to identify SMIs rely on factors such as number of daily hits on a blog, number of times a post is shared, or number of followers. Given the recognition that online influence is about quality, not quantity, these methods should be viewed as a starting place only (Basille, 2009; Straley, 2010). Public relations

practitioners need additional tools to evaluate the quality and relevance of particular SMIs to their organizations and brands and to compare audience impressions of one SMI relative to others.

The California Q-sort (CAQ; Block, 1961, 2008) allows researchers to quantify and compare participants' subjective impressions of people or entities by ranking a set of 100 attributes standardized and validated over more than 50 years of use by the scientific community. To demonstrate the potential of the CAQ for evaluating audience perceptions of SMIs, we asked participants to respond to four sample SMIs selected by the researchers: Brian Solis, Deirdre Breakenridge, Charlene Li, and Jeremiah Owyang.

2. Method

Biographical fact sheets consisting of a color photograph and publicly available information were prepared for each of the four sample social media influencers. YouTube videos featuring each social media influencer were selected on the basis of comparable length and context. After viewing the fact sheets and videos, 32 college undergraduates attending a large public university completed the CAQ for one of the four SMIs. According to Block (2008), 8 participants are sufficient for constructing a reliable and valid prototype for a person, concept, or entity.

The California Q-sort (CAQ) gives a participant a series of 100 attributes to rank order depending on how well the attribute describes the target. Attributes were sorted into nine categories (1 = *least characteristic or salient* to 9 = *most characteristic or salient)* using the following quasi-normal distribution of items per category: 5, 8, 12, 16, 18, 16, 12, 8, and 5. All statistical analyses were conducted using PASW18 with the bootstrapping module. The default value of 1000 bootstrap samples was used for each analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Inter-judge reliability

Overall SMI Profiles were constructed by averaging the responses of all 32 judges for each of the 100 attributes across the four targets. Especially considering the diversity represented by the targets (2 males, 2 females; 1 Hispanic, 1 non-Hispanic Caucasian, and 2 Asians), inter-judge reliability for the profile was strong (Spearman's rho = .48, p < .01).

Profiles for each individual SMI were constructed by averaging the responses of the relevant 8 judges for each of the 100 attributes. Once again, the resulting profiles enjoyed a high degree of inter-judge reliability. The mean correlation (Spearman's rho) among judges was .53 for Solis, .458 for Breakenridge, .524 for Li, and .42 for Owyang. The profiles of the individual SMIs were highly correlated with each other (Spearman rho ranged from .818 to .889, all p's < .001).

3.2. SMI prototype

To construct a prototype from the profile, mean item scores were computed and then transformed by a requeuing process (Block, 2008; Reise & Oliver, 1994; Reise & Wink, 1995). Specifically, the 5 items with the lowest means were assigned a value of 1, the next 8 items were assigned a value of 2, and so on according to the number of items allowed in each category for all 100 CAQ items. According to Block (2008), a prototype can be constructed by assembling the top 13 most characteristic attributes (8's and 9's) and the bottom 13 least characteristic attributes (1's and 2's). Based on the resulting overall SMI Prototype, participants viewed the SMIs as verbal, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised. The attributes that were seen as least characteristic of SMIs were self-pitying, indecisive, easily frustrated, self-defeating, and lacking meaning in life.

3.3. Comparisons between SMI and CEO prototypes

Because CEOs and other internal leaders often play the role of official spokespersons for their organizations, we compared the SMI profile with a CEO profile constructed using the same methodology for a previous study (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2010). Because the SMIs selected for this study are also high-ranking executives in their respective firms, the significant overlap between the two profiles (Spearman's rho = .846, p < .01) was not surprising. The SMIs and CEOs were perceived as smart, ambitious, productive, poised, power-oriented, candid, and dependable. The SMIs and CEOs were perceived as NOT being victimized, likely to give up, self-defeating, lacking meaning in life, doubting adequacy, submissive, fearful, anxious, and thin-skinned.

Possibly more interesting to practitioners' evaluation of influencers are the discriminate properties of the SMI and CEO Profiles, which were evaluated using an analysis of absolute differences described by Reise and Oliver (1994). An absolute difference score between two ranks (1 through 9) is computed for each attribute in the CAQ. An absolute difference of 3 or more units between ranks was used as a criterion for considering an item to be a discriminate attribute (Block, 1961; Reise & Oliver, 1994). Three attributes in the current comparison between CEOs and SMIs met the criteria for discriminates. CEOs were viewed as more critical, skeptical, and difficult to impress than SMIs. SMIs were viewed as more likely to be sought out for advice and reassurance and more likely to give advice than CEOs.

4. Discussion

The California Q-sort (CAQ; Block, 2008) successfully quantified subjective perceptions of four demonstration social media influencers (SMIs), allowing reliable comparisons to be made between this group and entities of interest such as a sample of CEOs. Obtaining detailed subjective audience impressions of an SMI adds a new dimension to practitioners' abilities to assess SMI capital, which heretofore has relied heavily on less precise measures such as number of followers. Once salient SMIs for a brand or organization have been identified, the CAQ provides practitioners with a method for evaluating and comparing the subjective impressions of relevant audiences to each SMI.

The current results confirmed the perception of trade analysts that SMIs take pleasure in offering advice (Straley, 2010). Two CAQ attributes relevant to advice (gives advice, is turned to for advice) were viewed as quite characteristic and salient for SMIs. In contrast, scores for CEOs on these attributes (Freberg et al., 2010) were 4 and 5, or neutral. Practitioners evaluating the impact of messages from traditional spokespersons, such as a CEO, versus an SMI might wish to consider this perceived difference. Further research on the relationships between spokesperson credibility and being perceived as willing and interested in sharing advice, as opposed to appearing relatively close-lipped, could be potentially very useful.

Although our focus has been on SMI capital, or the benefits of SMIs to brands, there are also instances in which an SMI can have a negative effect on a brand, perhaps by writing a negative review (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). In these cases, it could be useful to understand how this particular SMI is perceived by audiences before crafting a response. A highly credible, positively perceived SMI would warrant a different response than one without those qualities.

The current study was viewed as preliminary and exploratory, and thus made use of an arbitrary choice of SMIs for demonstration purposes, as well as a convenience sample of university students. Although representative of an important marketing demographic, the participants in this study cannot be considered fully representative of the public at large. In particular, due to their age and familiarity with social media, their responses to SMIs might be significantly different than people in different age and education demographics. Practitioners interested in this method would be expected to identify their own relevant SMIs and audiences.

Acknowledgements

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