The Rise of the Micro-Influencer as a new Form of Marketing in Neoliberal Times

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In late modern times, a social media 'influencer' is considered an individual who has a large follower count with the ability to convince their followers that they should purchase the products that they received for free. Marketers state, according to Dean Hund (2019: 80), that 'the minimum number of followers across their combined social networks is 50,000 before we consider them'. This implies that social media profiles are only of any value to brands when they have a large follower count. But what if this is no longer the case? Brands have now evolved so that even online presences with small followings, or nano-influencers, are being utilised with the purpose of influencing others to buy into their personal and cultural interests. Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020: 14) found that nano-influencers 'tend to have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers on each platform' and 'often have a small audience but high engagement in relativity'. This essay will explore the rise of the nano-influencer using both sociological theories and concepts to explain how the commodification of relationships is being utilised by brands to maximise profits.

Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) defined three types of influencers who are relevant to this contribution. These definitions are unofficial but are a widely used classification. Firstly, there are macro influencers who typically has a large audience of between 100,000 and 1,000,000 followers. These tend to be the most widely recognised type of influencer. Secondly, there are micro influencers, who has between 1000 to 100,000 followers per platform. This is a broader definition in comparison to that given for the macro influencer, which makes it difficult to reference the type of influencer that this essay is analysing. Finally, Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) identified the nano influencer. The nano influencer has between 1000 and 10,000 followers per platform, which is a much smaller and close-knit audience in comparison to the macro influencer.

However, micro and nano influencers have high engagement levels in relation to their follower count. In 2020, *Instagram* influencers (micro influencers) had the highest engagement rates of 3.86 percent (Statista Research Department, 2021) whilst the average branded engagement rate is around 1.22 percent (Rival IQ, 2020). Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) identified three key determinants of audience engagement among nano and micro influencers: perceived pleasantness, perceived credibility and transmission of emotions which is underpinned by authenticity as an important contributing factor to

each of these three traits to maintain high audience engagement.

Perceived pleasantness is measured by how efficiently influencers present themselves as authentic and relatable through their methods of promoting commodities. For example, nano and micro influencers often claim that they would only ever positively review products or brands that they would use themselves and are openly critical about any flaws in the products they review as a way to build trust between themselves and their audience. Relatability is also a crucial factor that contributes to perceived pleasantness as the influencer's own interests align with those of their audience.

Brands use nano and micro influencers to capitalise on the commodification of relationships within the culture industry. The culture industry includes activities partaken by all classes, but in the following I will focus on the cultural interests of the working-class masses, particularly lifestyle, fashion and beauty. Due to nano influencers having small audiences, they tend to have a sub-cultured audience with a mutual set of niche interests.

Subcultures are traditionally defined as specific groups of people who reject society's mainstream norms and values and instead conform to their own. As previously mentioned, followers of micro/nano influencers tend to all share common cultural interests and are all interconnected by one, or several, of these influencers. By assuming that subcultures still reject society's norms and values, the existence of micro/nano influencers means that all audiences are catered for . Therefore 'something is provided for all so none may escape' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944: 43) from the culture

industry, including those who are not consciously looking to buy commodities. Brands do this by placing their advertising in the hands of micro/nano influencers due to their advantageous position as presenting themselves and their lives as candid and authentic, replicating a friendship between themselves and their followers. Klein (2001: 28) holds that 'advertising wasn't just scientific; it was also spiritual… brands could conjure a feeling'. Similarly, brands are able to use influencer-consumer relationships to make the audience feel like they belong to a community.

Gill (2007: 163) argues that neoliberalism is 'increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors'. This can be applied to the rise of the micro and nano influencer because they are profiting from their perceived online identity, which is a contemporary execution on neoliberal capitalism through free market and privatisation. Self-branding aligns with neoliberal norms and values, as it encourages the entrepreneurial self to rely on their own arduous work as a means to be successful. It reinforces the narrative that both the influencer and the consumer can choose whether to participate within a neoliberal capitalist framework, whilst promoting or purchasing commodities that align with their personal interests. However, Marwick (2013: 1) argues that despite this, the self-branding practises 'reinforce the existing hierarchies of class, gender,

aesthetics, and tastes' and therefore are not as centred around free choice as they appear.

According to Macdonald (1953), audiences of mass culture are passive consumers and are limited to the choice to buy or not to buy. Furthermore, self-branding micro/nano influencers still face pressure to maintain high engagement whilst also generating profit, which means they must cater to the taste and need of the mainstream market in order to do this (Liu and Su, 2017). The fact that influencers face pressure in their profession contradicts Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro's (2020) idea that authenticity of micro and nano influencers is essential to their success, because by adhering to mainstream trends they are more likely to be approached by brands for paid collaborations. Consequently, it can be argued that the products which are being promoted by these influencers may align with their personal interests and aesthetic, but that does not necessarily mean that these products are actually used by the influencer outside of promoted posts.

Winch (2015) acknowledged that friendship, as a marketing strategy, is assembled with the aim to create networks around, with and through brands. There are a range of distinct aspects required to achieve this, such as 'empathy, sympathy, sympathy, generosity, thoughtfulness and attentiveness' (ibid.: 230). Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) also identified that transmission of emotions is one of the three key traits of a micro influencer, which could be considered a form of liquid love (Bauman, 2003). Winch (2015) also found that there has been a change within the influencer industry in which the audience are decreasingly wanting to look like the influencer and are increasingly wanting to become

friends with them. This is especially relevant to the rise of micro influencers as their small follower count allows this perceived friendship to be utilised by brands as they have no personal responsibility to establish a relationship of trust with the consumer, as this has already been achieved by the micro influencer.

The gynaeopticon (Winch, 2015) can be applied to the concept of micro-influencers as they are predominantly women with a large female audience. Due to the transparent nature of their influencing technique, they document every aspect of their life and are constantly being surveilled via their social media profile. However, the neoliberal gynaeopticon concept assumes that the female individual only receives her large audience and value due to the 'correct maintenance of sexuality' (Winch, 2015: 229-230). Whilst this might relate to beauty and fashion micro influencers, it is too deterministic to apply to every type of micro influencer across the culture industry as there are too many subgroups and cultural interests, some of which have no relation to sexuality at all (e.g. cooking, music, politics, art, reading). Brands are increasingly cramming into the smallest of crevices of the consumer's life (Klein, 2001), and are now capitalising from the commodification of relationships because of nano and micro influencers' feminine traits for their own personal gain.

However, not all micro influencers operate within the gynaeoptican (Winch, 2015) concept. Female video game streamers tend to have low follower count in comparison to their high engagement rates, but in contrast to the gynaeoptican (Winch, 2015), their audience is predominantly male. They most commonly livestream themselves playing video games on platforms such as Twitch, whilst simultaneously engaging with their overwhelmingly male audience by responding to comments and donations in real time. The most popular female streamers mainly appear on screen styled in sexually revealing clothing with their hair and makeup done. Gaming related brands have gravitated towards female streamers to promote their products as they not only provide the three successful traits of a micro influencer (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro, 2020) but also cater to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), all while reaching their target audience of male gamers.

To conclude, corporations and brands have realised that large audiences are not the key ingredient to making profit in a contemporary society. They have taken the compulsory human need for social interaction and moulded relationships into a neoliberal form of marketing. It can be argued that the brands that engage in micro and nano influencer sponsorships only have intentions for profit and greed, but this innovative approach gives more freedom to the consumer and allows them to choose to consume content and advertisements that are at the very least relevant to their personal interests and culture. However, it can be counter-argued that micro influencing gives a false sense of control to the audience by manipulating them into buying a product because their 'friend' convinced them to do so, despite the consumer and influencer being complete strangers.

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