
Maria Carolina Zanette
is studying for a PhD at FGV-
EAESP in Brazil.

Eliane Pereira Zamith Brito
has more than 15 years of
management experience in
consumer goods companies. With
a PhD from Manchester Business
School, England, Brito is a
Professor at FGV-EAESP in
Brazil focusing on co-operation,
trust and reputation in
relationships.

Marcelo Coutinho
is a Professor of strategy and
communication at FGV-EAESP
in Brazil and director of market
intelligence for Terra Networks.

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Bloggers attract followers through their personas

Maria Carolina Zanette, Fundação
Getúlio Vargas-EAESP, Av. 9 de Julho,
2029, Bela Vista, São Paulo, SP |
01313-902, Brazil
Tel: (+55 11) 3799-7883.
E-mail: carolzanette@gmail.com

New influentials: An exploratory study on blogs

*Maria Carolina Zanette, Eliane Pereira Zamith Brito and
Marcelo Coutinho*

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Abstract

Influentials are individuals whose opinions and behaviours affect other people's choices, and online influentials include bloggers. The authors performed exploratory research to understand how bloggers use their influence to support commercial interventions in their online space. They collected and analysed longitudinal data from three blog sites and interviewed the author of each. In selecting the cases to study, they considered the diversity of the narratives and the existence of communication related to products in the blog. Results indicate that blogs are a means for bloggers to disclose aspects of themselves through the blog narrative. Readers develop ties with both the blog and the blogger, while homophilic traits are relevant to explaining readers' choice of blog affiliation. Commercial intervention on blogs generates buzz if aligned with the blog's language, if the message content fits the blog's narrative, and if the product is close to the blog's subject of interest. *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice* (2013) **15**, 36–46. doi:10.1057/ddmp.2013.45

Introduction

Online social media is a recent new element in the marketing promotional mix¹ that provides resources for consumers to engage in sharing content,² reviewing products,³ playing virtual games,⁴ engaging with brands and products,⁵ expressing themselves⁶ or advocating causes that are important to them.⁷

Among several types of social media, blogs play an important role in the online environment. Blogs are online communities⁸ controlled by one individual or a small number of individuals who write entries that are listed in reverse chronological order. A recent Nielsen⁹ report indicated that Blogger, Google's platform for blogs, is the second most-viewed social networking site in the United States, reaching over 58 million unique users. Bloggers tend to gather followers around their personas, being considered opinion leaders, hubs or influentials¹⁰ who conduct conversations in their online spaces.

It is unsurprising that companies wish to join in with this blog conversation. However, as stated in the literature,^{1,11} the communication paradigm has changed with and within online communities such as blogs because commercial information now flows in a multidirectional way, being co-created and exchanged by consumers. Thus, marketing

Emerging markets concentrate millions of social media users

promotions in these online spaces are communally based marketing promotions.¹¹

This paradigm change in marketing communication is occurring not only in developed countries: emerging markets that have recently entered the marketing research¹² and practice¹³ agenda concentrate millions of social media users. A survey by ComScore in 2012 reported that the proportion of internet users who visit blogs in Brazil (88.1 per cent) is the second largest in the world. Furthermore, the average time those users spend on blogs is 37.8 min per month, which ranks Brazil fourth in world rankings.¹⁴

Many studies have been conducted into online communities that are centred on brands^{15,16} or personal stories.¹¹ However, there are still several questions beyond the scope of these earlier studies that companies must face when promoting communally based marketing promotions in blogs. For example:

- How does the process of influence work?
- Are there different reactions on the part of consumers when commercial interventions, which are forms of marketing communication inserted in blogs' narratives, appear in a blog's narrative?
- Do these reactions affect the blogger's power to influence his or her readers?

In the present study, we use the classic concept of personal influence¹⁷ to conduct exploratory research to understand how this concept works in blogs with different themes (political advocacy, celebrities and consumption) and how bloggers are dealing with commercial interventions. We propose a framework that classifies types of commercial interventions in blogs in relation to their narratives and product-blog alignment.

Personal influence

Influentials have access to more information

Personal influence is the same as opinion leadership:^{17,18} personal influence represents the power that one individual has in changing the opinion of others who come to him (or her) for a reference.¹⁹

Influentials are individuals who have access to more information than the rest of a community, either because they are in touch with diverse social groups, nurturing more weak ties,²⁰ or because of their social position.²¹ When in touch with different social groups, the influential gathers and spreads this additional information.²² When in a privileged position regarding information, the influential becomes a source of referrals for other people, acting as a gatekeeper. Furthermore, inside any specific group, people tend to nurture strong ties (meaning that this specific relationship is important) with each other²⁰ and to share similar characteristics and values, being in homophilic relations with each other.²³ People in the same homophilic groups tend to have similar consumption patterns²⁴ and are more frequently sought as opinion sources.²² Marketing literature has explored this process under the word-of-mouth (WOM) terminology.

Using influencers for marketing promotions is a classic strategy

Using influencers to promote certain brands and products is neither a new phenomenon nor limited to the online sphere.²⁵ Procter and Gamble maintains a programme that distributes its products to influential mothers and teenagers, expecting them to spread the information to their friends, for example. This marketing practice tends to be effective because information sent by other consumers is perceived as more credible than mass media communication.²⁶ In the online world, however, personal interactions and information access are different: the relevance of physical space decreases abruptly and consumers are able to look for groups with which they identify.²⁷

Blogs are online communities where consumers express themselves

Blogs

Blogs are a type of community⁸ in which individuals present themselves online.⁶ Within this process, bloggers use speeches, symbols, signs, objects of consumption, brands, bands and links to other sites to express a desired identity.^{28,29} The internet is the medium that provides the resources to enable this expression of identity and affiliation of bloggers (and readers) in a given virtual space.⁶ With the recent increase in the importance of marketing communications, blogs have become spaces both for consumers who wish to express themselves and consumers/producers who sell their influence in that community.

WOM on blogs depends on the nature of the product or brand

Kozinets and colleagues¹¹ suggest that WOM marketing communications in blogs, which make use of the influence of the blogger, are affected by four important factors:

- (1) character narratives, which are the bloggers' personal stories and provide readers with an archetypal pattern;
- (2) a communication forum or the 'theme' of the blogs, such as celebrities or cosmetics;
- (3) communal norms, which are tacit norms among bloggers and readers that govern the creation and transmission of meanings; and
- (4) the nature of the product or brand promoted in the campaign.

These four factors stimulate different reactions from consumers regarding the brand and the blog.

Choosing blogs with large comment volumes

Methodology

We selected three blogs, aiming to ensure diversity and sufficient elements to explore the phenomenon of interest. For the selection of blogs, we considered the flow of comments that had to be large enough to allow authors to understand the blogger's purpose, how people interacted with the blog and its commercial interventions. Furthermore, we analysed the data collected using Google Ad Planner for all blogs, indicating content categories, the profile of readers and readers' interests regarding websites and blogs, according to words searched by readers that led to the blog.

Permission was requested from the bloggers to run analyses and at least one blogger from each case was interviewed in a semi-structured fashion.

In the interviews, we examined issues that complemented the data from their blogs. Furthermore, findings regarding the phenomenon of interest were discussed with bloggers.

The period of analysis of each blog was determined by the speed with which content was posted. After 15 blog posts each, we perceived a reduction in new elements for the comprehension of the phenomenon of interest. Thus, we decided to study approximately 20 posts from each blog. The data were collected from May 2011 to August 2011, with a total of 114,941 words, 15 videos, 221 pictures and 64 post entries.

The analysis consisted of coding the theoretical elements presented in the previous sections. These were:

- Social ties
- Homophily
- Communication forums
- Communal norms
- Character narratives

We did not restrict the possibility of the emergence of new concepts and situations from the data. Furthermore, we used previous concepts that emerged from one set of data to interpret the subsequent set.³⁰

Data analysis

The first blog, 'Cleycianne', is about the life and ideas of a fictitious woman, named Cleycianne, who is a religious Pentecostal protestant fanatic. Thiago, her creator, portrays Cleycianne as a parody of someone who follows biblical rules particularly strictly, especially rules regarding sexual behaviour. However, he does not overtly disclose the fact that she is just a fictitious character.

Cleycianne comments on celebrities' behaviour, tells stories about her church, reports on her former sexual experiences and very ironically describes appropriate sexual conduct. Because Cleycianne, by means of humour, criticizes the behaviour of religious fanatics who fight against homosexual rights, she has gathered around her a community of people who fight for these very rights. 'Cleycianne' has a great number of followers, both on Twitter (111,313) and Facebook (57,056), social networks that are integrated in terms of content with the blog itself.

Cleycianne's character is built through stories about her, particularly her former 'mundane' life, when she used to behave in a promiscuous sexual manner that she now strictly condemns based on biblical principles. Her readers endorse her anti-conservative values by pretending to be religious people themselves and posting as though they were following the same principles. Therefore, Cleycianne is to be interpreted as a parody, a stereotype that shows the outrageousness of the behaviour of the group she criticizes. The result is a homophilic cohesive community.

In this cohesive community, we noticed that people create ties with the blog itself, though not necessarily with Thiago, who wishes to maintain a distance from his readers. Nonetheless, the blog and the character have a

Blog descriptions and traits of influence

Cleycianne commenting on sexuality

Cosmetics acts as a gatekeeper

great deal of influence: Cleycianne has a fan club and readers interact with her by suggesting subjects to be discussed in the blog.

Julia and Livia, who are two middle-aged Brazilian women, write the second blog – ‘Cosmetics’. The blog has 1,769 followers on Twitter. Despite the smaller number of followers, the interaction between bloggers and readers is most intense on this blog. Both bloggers are frequently invited to product testing events and receive cosmetics samples. They exchange samples with other influential bloggers and are gatekeepers of information first published on American and British blogs.

The bloggers on ‘Cosmetics’ discuss beauty products in both technical and personal ways while describing their experiences with these products. The bloggers say they wish to establish a proper identity within their blog, unlike other blogs that address beauty products, which they consider superficial and generally target teenage girls. Livia and Julia want their blog to be read by mature and wealthier women. These readers respond to these values and confirm their preference for Livia and Julia’s blog.

Readers have a great deal of interaction with the authors of ‘Cosmetics’, indicating that there are strong ties between them. Readers share their personal experiences with products the bloggers have written about as well as with other products. Many readers appear to be influentials themselves. People wish to be part of this ‘community of experts’ on cosmetics, although Livia and Julia reject ‘spammers’ or people who just comment on the blog to promote their own blogs or even brands. Because this blog is a space for experts or for women who wish to be experts, the blog has become a homophilic environment. Therefore, readers create ties with the bloggers and the blog itself.

I died in a white swimsuit comments on celebrities

The third blog analysed is ‘I Died in a White Swimsuit’ (IDIWS), written by Bic, Ravel and Pasqualotto. The bloggers talk primarily about celebrities, with a great deal of humour, judging their behaviours through the bloggers’ moral sense. They have 54,494 followers on Facebook and 52,830 followers on Twitter.

The bloggers are not producers of information, but rather gatekeepers of celebrity gossip websites. The bloggers have often been invited to important, televised events. They also include particular features on the blog, such as the ‘hate scale’, which rates characters on television shows as soon as the names of these actors or participants are released. They can be considered to be influential people (indeed, they consider themselves as such, as noted in the interview conducted with Ravel).

Behaviour of those leaving comments

As we analysed the blogs, we noticed that readers want their names to be written on blog posts that contain news recommended by them. We also noticed that readers show strong ties with the blog by manifesting anxiety regarding the ‘raw’ nature of the feature posts. A sense of cohesiveness appears when detractors or ‘trolls’ invade the blog, criticize the bloggers or comment on what they consider to be offensive comments about celebrities or cultural practices they support. In addition, readers adopt the bloggers’ language in the comments box.

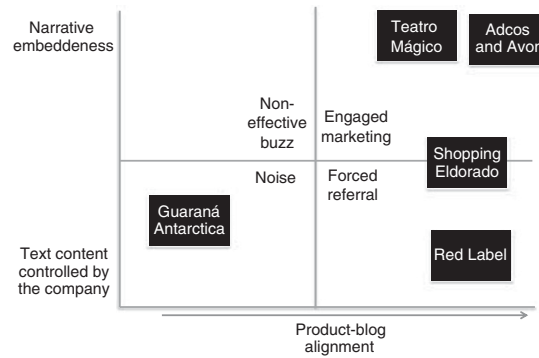


Figure 1: A two-dimensional representation of the characteristics of commercial interventions in blogs and their effects

Classifying readers' reactions

Commercial intervention on blogs

After analysing the blogs and commercial interventions posted in them, we developed a framework (see Figure 1) classifying readers' reaction to these commercial interventions on blogs.

The reaction of readers to commercial intervention partially depends on the blog's communal norms, and is influenced by:

- (1) the narratives by which the blogger presents himself or herself and his or her interests;
- (2) the alignment between the blogger's and readers' interests, opinions, behaviours and discourses and the product being announced; and
- (3) the extent to which commercial intervention is embedded in the blog narrative or is controlled by the company sponsoring it and which determines what the content of that specific blog post should be.

Two dimensions of influence

In Figure 1, the first dimension represents the degree to which the intervention content is embedded in the blog's narrative. At one extreme, there is a message that is detached from the blog narrative, mainly due to it being controlled by the company sponsoring the intervention. It defines the message according to the regular style of communication used in other media. At the other extreme, bloggers are free to build the argument and immerse themselves in the blog's narrative style. The second dimension exhibits the alignment between the product in the communication and the blog's subject of interest.

Influence is dependent on the creation of ties through a homophilic process. However, if there is a commercial intermediary, particularly one that controls the content posted, readers will notice the strange element that is now in their community, and an intervention is thus likely to be successful only when in harmony with the narratives of the blog.

This harmony between the blog's content and the advertisement allows for consumers to discuss the product in the comments box and to share the discussion with their friends on social networks, cementing the figure of the blogger as an opinion leader, and generating engaged marketing. For instance, in Cleycianne's blog a commercial intervention about a band

(Teatro Mágico) was presented as a list of reasons ‘not to listen to Teatro Mágico’. Thus, Cleycianne criticized the group as against her moral standards. This intervention was the most successful of all studied: 944 people shared the post on Facebook and 217 shared it on Twitter. In addition, 253 readers posted comments, generating a polemical discussion with visitors standing up for the band or siding with Cleycianne (many readers who were on the blog for the first time appeared not to know about Cleycianne’s fictitious personality).

Communications aligned with the blog are more effective

In ‘Cosmetics’, the bloggers reject the practice of being paid (financially) for reviewing products because they think it affects their credibility as cosmetics experts. However, they engage in seeding campaigns and referrals of products that have been presented to them by the companies, as long as they test these products personally. In the period covered by our analysis, product reviews from brands Adcos and Avon generated a lot of engagement on the part of readers who commented and shared these reviews, confirming the narrative embeddedness of the referral and the bloggers’ opinion leadership.

When there is product alignment with the blog, but text content is controlled by the company, the chances of sharing are also great. However, since the chances of participative behaviour on the part of consumers decrease considerably, we term this action a forced referral. Bloggers advertise a product and readers share — however, readers do not engage in discussions or endorse the product.

Johnnie Walker and Shopping Eldorado

This was the case in both commercial interventions studied in IDIWS. The first advertised Johnnie Walker Red Label whisky. In this post, the bloggers provided information about a campaign run by the brand (informing readers that there would be promotions for the product on specific days), which was not at all embedded in the blog’s narrative. The post received 44 shares on Facebook and 15 shares on Twitter. The second example was a post about a shopping mall in São Paulo, entitled ‘Shopping Eldorado’. Here, the bloggers listed 30 reasons to go to the mall, inserting in their text jokes about celebrities and references to pop culture, in line with the blog’s narrative. This post received 53 shares on Facebook and 13 shares on Twitter. The comments box was left closed in both interventions.

Although the commercial interventions studied did not outperform regular posts in terms of shares, they did not show bad results either. In the Shopping Eldorado post, the language and elements of the narrative were used to direct people’s interest towards stores in the mall. In the case of the Red Label whisky, even though the narrative style was not used, it seems to us that the product was very aligned with the blog’s communication forum, so people shared the ad and generated marketing buzz.

Lack of alignment sees soft drink content fail to get shared

If the text is controlled by a company, contrasting with the blog’s communal norms and communication forum, and if the product itself does not call the attention of the consumers, readers will primarily tend to see the text as noise. For instance, in a commercial intervention by a soft drink, Cleycianne presented herself merely as a loving mother who liked to gossip with friends from her church. No politically incorrect language or mentions of homosexuality appeared in this post. Consumers with

homophilic value traits precisely in line with these issues simply ignored the advertorial (only seven people shared the post on Twitter, no one shared the post on Facebook and the comments box was closed).

Lastly, even though we did not study any cases such as this, we believe that it is plausible to assume that a product that is inserted in the narrative but which is misaligned with the blog would generate ineffective buzz because the attention would not be focused on the product.

Discussion

Readers are loyal to bloggers with which they identify

The three blogs considered differ in a number of ways, and their comparison is relevant to the comprehension of the phenomenon we are studying. The blogs create narratives that make them go beyond their intended communication forum. Cleycianne discusses celebrities; however, as she does so, she reveals the author's true intentions of criticizing religious fanaticism. In 'IDIWS', while the bloggers comment on issues of celebrity, they determine which public behaviours are acceptable and which are not. Lastly, Livia and Julia reinforce the authenticity of their advice, acting as a consumption blog without being a commercial one.

The narrative discourse and communication forum of the blog are important with respect to attracting people who, using this content, will connect with both the blog³¹ and the blogger,¹¹ developing ties (social or emotional) and recognizing the blog as a homophilic environment. Influence is constructed only after people enter the 'space' of the blogger. Readers come to the blog while pursuing issues related to its communication forum and by clicking on links from friends on social networks and through online search tools. However, readers remain on the blog only if they can identify with it and if there is group homophily. To build these interesting narratives the blogger, in turn, needs to be a gatekeeper, gathering information from different sources among which is information from his or her own readers. Thus, the process of online personal influence relies on the construction of a character through character narratives.

Each blog reflects its creator

Each blog has its own *geist*. Each blogger exerts his or her influence in a particular way, weaving a network of followers and exclusive contacts and dealing with them in his or her own manner. Given these peculiarities, reactions to commercial interventions are also different: interventions may be frowned upon or simply ignored, as shown in the framework depicted in Figure 1.

In terms of confirming our objectives, we found that processes of influence in blogs are related to the blogs' narratives and, when these narratives are abruptly changed or disturbed, consumers' reactions may vary between apathy and rejection. However, when the product promoted is aligned with the blog's communication forum and coherent with its narrative, consumers' reactions reflect their engagement³² with the blog.

Nevertheless, a misplaced commercial intervention does not appear to disturb bloggers' influence or consumers' ties with the blog, except in cases where the sole purpose of the blog is to review products. There were

no cases of promoted products whose brands are associated³³ directly with values that contradict the blog's narratives. In that scenario, there is the possibility that consumers could distrust the attachment of the blogger with his or her ideals or they could feel threatened by an excess of commercial intervention.

Advertisers need to research blogs thoroughly

Practical implications

We have seen how companies have attempted to restrict narratives in advertisements, and the analysed data show that this practice is not a fruitful one because it might create noise or forced referrals. We believe that companies could more thoroughly research the narratives of the blogs they are investing in to align their products with the blogs' spirit. Furthermore, the bloggers interviewed said that when they make commercial insertions in their blogs, they prefer not to allow consumers to leave comments.

On the basis of our data and on the co-creative nature of the internet,⁸ we suggest that companies should let consumers talk. Although this open communication leaves the products open to the risk of criticism, there is also the possibility that consumers will endorse and promote the brand. In addition, criticism should not be directly considered in terms of loss of value, but rather as information that companies can use in their future strategies. Consumers are now part of a participatory culture,³⁴ where brand meanings are appropriated and modified by consumers. Alignment and openness are the best strategies.

Bloggers do not behave as mass media agents

It is important for companies to consider that influential bloggers occasionally have a mass audience but do not behave like someone from the mass media. Furthermore, the cost of promoting in blogs is increasing. A recent story in *Folha de São Paulo*, a major Brazilian newspaper, stated that bloggers may earn as much as US\$40,000 monthly publishing commercial interventions in their narratives.³⁵

Furthermore, even if our data did not show anti-commercial reactions on the part of consumers, there is still controversy in the blogosphere around commercial interventions, particularly regarding their disclosure. This issue is a matter of interest for both marketers and policymakers because undisclosed marketing communications might be harmful for consumers and have consequences for the company's reputation.³⁶

Need to explore differences between readers

Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations, leading to opportunities for future research. The first of these limitations is the absence of interviews or direct contact with readers. Future studies could explore the differences between readers, such as those who often comment versus those who comment sporadically. Furthermore, future studies could explore the motivations that cause readers to develop ties with these blogs. Moreover, our data were first collected and then analysed — there was no period of time spent following an online community day to day, which would help to characterize the community's 'nethnography'.³⁷

We believe that this study offers several insights, in addition to those previously mentioned regarding readers. When searching, we found similar linguistic codes in different blogs and saw that advertisements subvert these codes to a language that differs from that used, that is, there is a code-switching process.³⁸ Exploring how this change affects the communication codes of companies in the online environment would be interesting with respect to improving the effectiveness of communication. In addition, there are indications that various subcultures³⁹ are developing online. Obtaining an understanding of these subcultures would be valuable in terms of allowing for companies to communicate with consumers.

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