

David and Goliath: Micro-Influencers versus Mega-Influencers

What questions did we seek to answer?

More than 4.6 billion people actively use social media – that’s more than half of the world’s population. Social Media Influencers are people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They make regular posts about that topic and generate the followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views. Brands love influencers because influencers create trends and can be effective at encouraging their followers to buy products that they promote. Although there are different types of social media influencers, brands typically use either mega-influencers (those with > 1 million followers) or micro-influencers (those with 10k – 100k followers). We wanted to find out:

What type of social media influencers is more persuasive? When? And Why?

What did we find?

Contrary to what some companies think, micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers when they promote products, but only if the promoted product is hedonic (e.g., fashion, high-end electronics, premium hotels, restaurants) or described as hedonic (i.e., the influencer’s description of the product focuses on emotions and pleasant experiences that the product gives to consumers). There is no difference in the persuasiveness between micro-influencers and mega-influencers if the product is utilitarian (e.g., basic kitchen appliances, motels, financial services), or if it is described as utilitarian (the influencer’s product description focuses on practical aspects and usage outcomes).

Why do these differences between influencers occur?

People perceive micro-influencers as more intimate and authentic, and these positive meanings can “rub-off” onto the products that they promote, whereby such products can be also perceived as intimate and authentic. However, consumer psychology has previously taught us that “rub-off” effects usually occur only when people think about fun and pleasurable (i.e., hedonic) things and do not occur when people think about practical and serious (i.e., utilitarian) things.

What proof do we provide?

In total, we conducted four behavioural experiments that: (1) included over 700 social media users; (2) tested our predictions across diverse product categories (e.g., fashion clothing, kitchen appliances, beverages, and food); (3) utilized both imagined (in order to exclude alternative explanations) and real (to increase external validity) social media influencers; (4) were conducted in the lab settings (i.e., controlled environment) and with online participants

(i.e., a natural environment); and (5) were carried out in both Eastern and Western countries to show that it is the global phenomenon.

What are the implications for businesses arising from our research?

Lesson 1: “Big” is not always “Good” when it comes to social media influencer marketing. In fact, across all studies that we conducted, David (micro-influencers) either completely outperformed Goliath (mega-influencers) or was at least as persuasive.

Lesson 2: If your product is hedonic or you describe it as hedonic, consider working with a larger number of micro-influencers rather than a smaller number of mega-influencers.

Lesson 3: If you work with micro-influencers, think about which products you want them to promote and how – when they focus on enjoyment and fun, they are more persuasive than when they focus on practical solutions.

Lesson 4: Think about what you are trying to achieve. If you are looking to simply grow marketplace awareness, working with mega-influencers may still be the easiest option. However, if you are looking to grow sales, improve perceptions of your product, or build brand relationships – micro-influencers are more effective.