

# This is Why I Like Them: Exploring the Perceived Appeal of Social Media Influencers vs. Traditional Mass Media

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## ABSTRACT

Social-media influencers (SMIs) have created a wide range of content and research has shown that SMIs are perceived as credible by media consumers, and advertising by them can lead to higher user engagement than traditional advertising generally achieves. However, the factors that render SMIs more appealing than traditional media from an audience perspective have been underexplored. Using a grounded approach, we looked at the perceived appeal of SMIs of various types vs. traditional media by conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 of the former's audience members. Our preliminary findings suggest that such appeal can be divided into four types: 1) initiative to summarize takeaways from multiple sources, 2) high independence and low interference, 3) distinctive and diverse networks and connections, and 4) relatability and applicability. This typology of appeal uncovers how SMIs have formed new media use patterns, and hopefully inform the design opportunities of social media platforms.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Understanding how users perceive and consume content on various social media platforms has been an important research focus in HCI and CSCW. As social-media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok increasingly become primary means of self-expression and encourage participation [10, 25, 33], more and more individuals

on these platforms have begun to actively create content, either as an amateur, a “professionalising amateur”, or a professional [5, 11]. As of 2021, the number of content creators had reportedly reached 37.8 million [1], and 43% of the global internet users had become regular audiences for their content on a daily basis [6]. Among the large population of content creators, many of them have gathered a large number of followers and regular viewers, who adopt and are influenced by their produced contents. These “ordinary” celebrities (a calling in contrast to traditional celebrities [2]), including YouTubers [5, 24], vloggers [28], Instagram influencers [31], etc., are often referred to as social media stars [15], micro-celebrities [23], and social-media influencers (SMIs) [14] because of their influence on their follower bases and their stardom that arises within the social media platforms. Compared with traditional celebrities, these influential content creators (for simplicity, hereinafter referred to as SMIs) are distinct in the sense that they were formerly ordinary people who built their reputation and follower base by regularly creating contents on social media platforms [17, 20]. According to the scales of their follower bases, these SMIs have been classified into several levels [8], from celebrity influencer (>1 million followers) to nano-influencer (< 10,000 followers). Despite their smaller follower-bases, these “smaller-scale” SMIs sometimes are more persuasive and influential than those with larger follower-bases and traditional celebrities due to their higher perceived authenticity, reliability, and similarity [4, 13, 26].

The significant growth of these SMIs and their influence on social media users, not unexpectedly, has drawn considerable research attention, with a primary focus on to what extent and how SMIs can be leveraged for effective marketing, advertising, and strategic communication [3, 17, 32]. Nevertheless, while much research attention is on the marketing opportunities these SMIs have created, they also have produced a variety of contents that are consumed and liked by media audience to fulfill their various gratifications including information, entertainment, learning, and social interaction [5, 7, 18], for which the reasons for their increasing popularity and dominance on social media platforms [5] have been less discussed in the literature. One of the well-established theories for understanding people's media choice – uses and gratifications theory (U & G) – holds that media users expect gratification from media, and stay with a particular media once they have obtained it (e.g., [29]). It also proposes that media can effectively compete against each other provided that they offer similar gratifications [19]. According to the

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theory of the niche [12], if the degree to which two mediums serve the same gratification (i.e., niche overlap) is high and one medium is perceived as more superior to the other for that gratification, a new medium displaces or substitutes the older one. In this sense, if a media audience's use and consumption of the aforementioned SMIs' content for one gratification substitutes or reduces their use of the content for the same gratification from traditional media (e.g., TV, radio, newspapers), it is likely that the audience perceives the contents produced by the SMIs in some sense as superior to those produced by traditional media. However, what characteristics these SMIs and their contents are perceived to possess that make them attractive, or even superior to those of traditional media, for the audience to fulfill their various gratifications remains unclear.

To fill this research gap, we adopted a grounded approach [9] to explore the perceived appeal of SMIs for fulfilling various gratifications. Our analysis of interview data from 20 interviewees resulted in four types of characteristics that they perceived as particularly attractive and favorable about SMIs as compared to traditional media, including the former's 1) initiatives to filter, synthesize, and summarize information from multiple sources, 2) high independence and low interference, 3) distinct and diverse networks and connections, and 4) reliability and applicability. As well as being of interest from a theoretical perspective, we hope that this breakdown of SMIs' appeal will help inform the new design opportunities for social media sites.

## 2 METHODS

We adopted a grounded approach [9] and conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 study participants (8 male and 12 female) who reported following at least one SMIs on social media platforms, and consuming their content at least two times a week. We initially recruited interviewees with diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender, occupation, and self-reported frequency of consuming media, favorite sites, and preferred genres of SMIs (e.g., education vs. non-educational information provision vs. entertainment) on social networking sites popular in Taiwan (E.g., Facebook, PTT). Our aim of the initial recruitment was to explore a wide range of characteristics of SMIs and domains that were important to pursue. Later when we had identified important theoretical code categories to investigate further, we followed the theoretical sampling approach suggested by [9] to sought study participants whose experiences in viewing SMIs' content allowed us to examine saturation of the properties of the code categories. Though we did not restrict the age range in our recruiting strategy, our current interviewees were relatively young, i.e., all aged 20 to 44, possibly because it is more likely to reach the younger audience through the initial recruitment channels.

Each interviewee was interviewed via Google Meet<sup>1</sup> or Jitsi Meet<sup>2</sup>, and each session lasted approximately two hours. In each interview, the researcher started with questions about the interviewee's practices and choices of media and platforms, both in recent days and typically. Given that we were interested in exploring the perceived appeals of a wide range of types of SMIs, the researcher

did not define SMIs or explain their different levels [8] in the interview; instead, the researcher let the interviewees share and reflect on any kind and levels of content creators and/or SMIs as they wanted to. Using Whimsical<sup>3</sup>, the researcher also showed the interviewee pre-prepared cards listing the names of popular media and platforms as a memory aid. Then, based on the answers received, the researcher inquired about the interviewee's choices of and preferences for media, platforms, and SMIs, as well as about how these choices/preferences varied according to their various gratifications and circumstances. Next, the researcher asked follow-up questions, primarily focused on the reasons behind the interviewee's choices and on the contrasts between SMIs and traditional media in various settings. The researcher concluded the interview by asking the interviewee to reflect upon various aspects of the differences between SMIs and traditional media.

Transcription and data coding were conducted in parallel with data collection as a means of distinguishing between, on the one hand, topics for which data had reached saturation, and on the other, those for which more inputs from new interviewees were needed. Specifically, three authors of the research team used Atlas.ti<sup>4</sup>, an online collaborative qualitative-analysis tool, to separately code the same transcripts and discussed their codes and refined them iteratively until consensus had been reached. This process commenced with open-coding of the initial dataset to generate the initial set of codes and categories related to SMIs, the content they create, and the affordances of social media platforms. As more data were collected, the team iteratively discussed, revised, and refined the codebook to identify important new categories emerging from the data as well as the connections among them and the previously identified categories. Along the process, the fourth researcher met with the coding team regularly to discuss which code categories to focus and to further examine data and concept saturation. Below, we report our preliminary answers to our research question and other insights.

## 3 FINDINGS

Our preliminary findings indicate that four distinct sets of characteristics of SMIs and of the content they create/deliver led our interviewees to choose them over traditional media.

### 3.1 SMIs' Having Initiatives to Help Filter, Synthesize, and Summarize Information

Many interviewees mentioned liking that SMIs have initiatives and ability to help them survey, select and gather relevant or crucial information about a topic or news event from various data sources; and/or that SMIs would synthesize, organize, and summarize such information in a succinct manner so that audience members could quickly "get the point". That is, as opposed to traditional media, which our interviewees perceived as primarily reporting huge volumes of not necessarily relevant data that they had collected at first hand, SMIs were seen as saving them the time that might otherwise be spent surfing the Internet and digesting the information

<sup>1</sup>Google Meet is a video-communication service developed by Google: <https://apps.google.com/meet/>.

<sup>2</sup>Jitsi Meet is a free, open-source multiplatform voice, video-conferencing and instant-messaging application: <https://meet.jit.si/>.

<sup>3</sup>Whimsical is a visual workspace for thinking and collaboration, combining flowcharts, wireframes, sticky notes, mind maps and docs: <https://whimsical.com/>.

<sup>4</sup>Atlas.ti is a computer program used in qualitative research or qualitative data analysis: <https://atlasti.com>.

found there, instead giving them key “takeaway” messages and allowing them to decide for themselves whether to dive deeper into the details.

The interviewees appeared to particularly appreciate SMIs’ information summaries when they perceived that the topic being summarized was complex and disputable. For example, P1 commented on why he wanted to see an SMI’s video summary analyzing the pros and cons of building a nuclear plant in his country: *“I will absolutely read the summarized version [provided by the SMI]. How would I have time to investigate this nuclear-power topic?”* Beyond efficiency, our interviewees also perceived that SMIs’ syntheses of data usually took account of multiple data sources and incorporated perspectives from multiple parties, making their content seem *“neutral and even-handed”* (P1). This, they thought, differentiated SMIs from traditional media, which they perceived as mainly (or merely) using a narrow range of sources and thus tending to be one-sided. Importantly, the interviewees’ belief that SMIs were capable of effectively filtering, synthesizing, and summarizing information for them shaped their daily news-consumption behaviors. Several interviewees reported that SMIs’ syntheses and summaries served as their primary, or *only* entry point to news in their daily lives. This, according to them, was due to a perception that SMIs delivered only what was worthwhile for their audiences to read, and conversely, that what SMIs chose not to deliver was irrelevant to them.

### 3.2 SMIs Perceived as Authentic and Independent, with Less Interfered-with and Manufactured Content

Most of our interviewees perceived that traditional media was ideologically and politically biased, and thus likely to be subject to institutional interference, making their content inauthentic and biased. P2, for example, provided the following observation of the difference between how a public issue would be reported in traditional media vs. by SMIs: *“TV stations certainly have their own backgrounds. For example, a news agency controlled by the government would absolutely take the police’s side, saying that the citizens were attacking the police that day. [...] But like [videos] on Facebook and YouTube, which are similar, [people] hold cameras and keep live-streaming. You could continually watch what’s going on, it’s more authentic and unbiased.”* In addition, coupled with their broadly negative perceptions of the traditional media companies’ business models, this also led them to expect that content delivered by such media would be biased, untruthful, or even “manufactured”. In contrast, they deemed some SMIs’ content – despite recognizing it as sponsored or financially motivated in many cases – to be relatively independent; and they saw individual SMIs not only as more autonomous than their traditional-media counterparts, but also as more motivated to protect their own reputations, making them highly selective about the content to they deliver. Authenticity has been suggested to be one of the important favored characteristics of SMIs [21, 22, 27]. Here, we also found our interviewees preferred many SMIs’ contents due to their authenticity. Some of our interviewees acknowledged that this difference was conceivably due to the main difference in how SMIs and traditional media make profits and sustain themselves. For example, SMIs’ product introductions

were widely perceived as distinct from traditional media’s, in part because they *“would not worry about hiding or avoiding speaking of the cons of a product”* (P16), whereas official brand channels would. This, several interviewees speculated, was because these SMIs cared about *“attracting traffic”* (P6), which makes sustaining their reputations necessary. However, one interviewee mentioned that some SMIs had expanded to become companies, and that she thus suspected their content was now less authentic (P11).

### 3.3 SMIs Having Their Own Distinct and Diverse Networks and Connections

The third favorable characteristic of SMIs was the relatively diverse range of their information sources, as compared to traditional media. Specifically, the interviewees perceived that traditional media companies have established their own information sources, personnel, and affiliations from which they gather almost all of their data. In contrast, SMIs – though acknowledged as not having the same scale of resources and networks – were seen as having their own distinct and diverse networks and connections. This, in turn, enabled them to reach pools of individuals with specific backgrounds, experience, and expertise that traditional media companies would not have been able to. Various interviewees noted that SMIs might seem ordinary, as compared to celebrities, but in spite of or perhaps because of this, their words and performances were more valuable, convincing, realistic, and interesting. As P5 put it, because of an SMI’s previous experience, *“he had built connections with local chefs [...] So he’s able to access that restaurant and take video inside to show us how it operates.”* P18, who was a fan of professional basketball teams, also thought SMIs provided unique, unofficial news that was not announced by teams’ official channels: *“They have their own connections to find and post such information. I want to learn [from them] if there is anything that would affect the team I’m supporting.”* In addition, as compared to seeing the same group of people repeatedly showing up on traditional media, seeing SMIs bringing in various novel individuals from their own networks allowed our interviewees access to “something different”.

### 3.4 SMIs’ Content Seen as More Relevant, Actionable, and Useful in Specific Domains

Finally, many of our interviewees reported that they liked SMI content because it was often directly relevant to their own current life situations. The content they especially liked for this reason tended to be themed around careers and self-development. This finding well resonates with some prior works that indicate media users like SMIs whom they perceive as relatable and similar to them (e.g., [16, 30]). The interviewees who mentioned such content as being useful to them specified that, because some SMIs’ career stages and experiences were similar to theirs, the content the SMIs delivered was more applicable to them than general media content was. As P12 explained, *“They would describe their lessons learned from what they had done [in their work roles], or their thoughts about failures in the process of pursuing a job. This kind of stuff was really useful to me.”* In addition, several interviewees noted that SMIs were free to talk about certain niche and specialized topics that traditional media would not have taken any interest in.

SIMs were also perceived as aspirational: i.e., as highlighting goals that, while not immediately achievable by their audience members, could nevertheless provide useful guidance over the long term. P14, for instance, said that she hoped to work in other countries, but that due to Covid-19, she was back in Taiwan. “I think that’s why I started to follow some Taiwanese in different countries, watching them sharing their experience in the countries they stayed in.” A similar example was presented by P4: “The reason I was attracted by Mr. George was [...] that his level was what I wanted to reach, which is working in an international company”. To sum up, unlike celebrities or traditional media, SIMs were mostly ordinary people, which not only made their content more accessible, but their visions for future success seem more achievable.

#### 4 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this study, we investigated the appeal of SIMs to their audience members. Currently, our preliminary findings indicate four categories, 1) having initiatives to filter, synthesize, and summarize information from multiple sources; 2) relatively high independence from political and commercial interests; 3) distinct and diverse networks and connections; and 4) high relatability and applicability to audience members’ own lives. In addition to these findings pertain mostly to the characteristics of the content delivered by SIMs, we also observed personal and platform characteristics that appeared to play important roles, and plan to dig deeper into these in our future analysis. We have started recruiting more participants who use different platforms, are in different age groups, and show different patterns of interaction with SIMs, with a hope to reach saturation of our theoretical code categories.

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