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Microcelebrity and Digital Media

ABSTRACT:

The paper deals with the phenomenon of microcelebrity as a transformation of celebrity culture stimulated by an evolution in the media. Digitalization and technological convergence enforced possibilities of self-presentation of individuals online. Most often this category includes bloggers and vloggers, who use their online contributions to gain online fame, or so called microfame and aspire to celebrity status. These personalities are important not only for media, but they are also marketing phenomena associated with a number of innovations in the process of interaction with the target groups.

KEYWORDS: microcelebrity, microfame, online celebrity, digital media, marketing

STRESZCZENIE:

Microcelebryci a media cyfrowe

Praca dotyczy zjawiska mikrocelebrity jako transformacji w płaszczyźnie kultury celebrytów stymulowanej rozwojem mediów. Digitalizacja i technologiczna konwergencja wspomagają możliwości autoprezentacji osób online. Najczęściej jest to grupa blogerów czy vlogerów, którzy zyskują w ten sposób sławę online, ewentualnie mikroslawę i aspirują do statusu gwiazdy. Osobistości te reprezentują nie tylko

medialne, ale również marketingowe fenomeny związane z dużą ilością innowacji w procesie interakcji z grupami docelowymi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: mikrocelebryta, mikroślawka, celebryta w internecie, media cyfrowe, marketing

Introduction

Celebrities as a specific subject of the media and marketing communication have become really widespread, constantly progressing and developing phenomenon. The development of various forms of communication transfer and interaction with customers moves from traditional media to the new or online media. This evolution supports the transfer of „traditional“ ways of communication to the forms using the newest digital technologies. Accordingly, we can point to transformation and innovation in a field of celebrity endorsement. This progress is also reflected in many fields of celebrities' occurrence, eg. in the celebrity culture which is modified as a result of continual development of media as well as digitalization. So called online celebrities, digital celebrities or online social media influencers can be generally labeled as microcelebrities. This type of celebrities represents the last and current modification of the celebrity concept. Until now, this phenomenon has been analyzed only by a few studies and scientific papers, which motivated us to prepare the study focused on theoretical and practical determination of phenomenon of the microcelebrities in the age of digital media.

The Genesis of Celebrity Culture: from the beginning of the celebrity worship to microcelebrities

Many concepts associate culture of celebrities directly with a cult of celebrity.¹ According to relevant authors (eg. Lawrence, 2009; Harland, Moser, 2008) it has a social roots, as these famous and well known people represent a way of entertainment and they also work as sources of inspiration for various social discussions. Rojek (2001) explains the importance

1 According to Harland and Moser, the formation of celebrity cult is the result of fragmentation of religious and the faith, which creates new worship culture focusing on celebrity. Celebrities become real and “accessible” idols. Authors believe, that the basic essence of this concept lies in human DNA: “We were created for worship” (2008, p. 46).

of popular people to ordinary people's lives on the background of political and ideological exchange within the shared content. For traditional media, celebrities pose as a vehicle of humanization and dramatization of presented emotions.²

The interest in the lives of celebrities is connected with the era of mass media rise entitled as Graphic Revolution (Boorstin, 1992). Boorstin also emphasizes that the expansion of celebrity culture has begun in the 20's of 20th century (*ibid.*, 1992), when a massive improvement/development of popular magazines had started and people focused their attention to entertainment and sport personalities (McQuail, 2009). Technological and social development of society supported the spread of information, thus the gossip columns in newspapers have step by step transformed into whole magazines. Nevertheless, the press was not the only mass medium of this decade, because really important role was achieved also by broadcasting media, radio, television and a few decades later also by new media and multimedia. This development is so far culminating by the internet, however it is necessary to emphasize that each new platform presented a step to continuing celebrity cult development and extension.

The Cambridge Dictionary explanation of the term celebrity underlines the shift in perception of celebrities from national or cultural significant personalities to people achieving their success through media presence. Moreover, celebrity is understood as a person mostly known and popular in a field of entertainment industry (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016). According to Jeffreys and Allatson (2015), contemporary celebrities have (thanks to broadcasting media) wide possibilities for their presentation, and this fact is crucial for their global popularity. The most modern media dispose huge potential for communication and self-presentation and they offer the opportunity to target the audience, so that the communication is effectively directed with the increase of its impact. In this perspective, contemporary famous personalities can use a wide scale of mass media, traditional or new ones, such as social media represented also by social networking sites. Jeffreys and Allatson (2015, p. 6) add that contemporary celebrity production is considered as commercially coordinated media process. Celebrity is nothing more than a commodity with a number of social functions. Authors also suggest that this trend is especially common in western cultures, as these personalities impersonate values reflected in the way of western people's thinking (*ibid.*, 2015).

2 Rojek consider celebrities as cultural fabrications, because they appear to be intimate and spontaneous; however they are mediated through the attraction (Rojek, 2001, p. 10).

In its early days, celebrity culture has formed mostly by presentation of some personalities in privileged places under specific circumstances: theater stage, acting in film or in radio, or, little bit later, by acting in television. Nowadays, this phenomenon dramatically increases and individuals can gain their fame, popularity and cognition even from their own homes, by using their online presentations. This development has supported formation of new celebrity category – online celebrities.

In general, media produce more and more new forms taking part in production and promotion of traditional media celebrities, but also pseudo-celebrities³ and, finally, they create non-traditional fame seekers, such as online based ones. In light of the current status of social networking phenomenon of pseudo-celebrities, Stratton confirms that the basis of achieving happiness, successes and fame means „ ... to be at the right time in the right YouTube Video“ (2010, p. 57). This idea suggests the increasing importance of the internet and new media in process of formation and representation of celebrities, because the last development shows significant social increase of interest in the internet stars.

Microcelebrities, or bloggers, vloggers and youtubers, produce online messages that gain attention of public. Particularly they are famous in younger age cohorts, eg. adolescents. Their popularity supported with a nature of online media environment transforms themselves into a specific kind of celebrities. The online success is determined by number of web site visitors, video views or number of subscribers. Microcelebrity (Sorgatz, 2008) is often connected with term of social media influencer (Harris, 2015; Kuchler and Bond, 2015; Freberg et al., 2011). Terms of microcelebrity and microfame used by Sorgatz should be considered as a chain between the two important phenomena – celebrity and social media influencer (Leslie, 2011; Rojek, 2001). Consequently, microfame is a specific form of fame achieved through opportunities of the internet and microcelebrity is an individual who achieved microfame by his/her talent, charisma, presentation and online skills.

Celebrities in a digital media

One of the important steps in the evolution of the internet is the increase of social media platforms that allows internet users to collaborate, communicate, and publish authentic content in the form of blogs, videos, Wikipedia contributions, reviews and photos (Boyd, Ellison, 2007). The advancing

3 This personalities represent an individual category of celebrities called celotoids (Rojek, 2001).

development in the possibilities of the internet and its various platforms allows literary every part of social life to be lived not only offline, but also online, which is supported by almost immediate and continuous ability of internet services to communicate without time and space barriers, and with the addition of many other aspects of communication, such as photos, videos or interlinks to other sites.

Designation of social networking site mainly refers to web application allowing users to place and share content. In accordance with Popesku we consider Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, Foursquare and Flickr to be the most important services (Popesku, 2014). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social networking services can be classified into the six categories: social networks, blogs, virtual social worlds, collaborative projects, content communities and virtual gamer worlds. Category of social media presents an extensive set of media associating, developing and promoting communication between people, or more specifically registered users, so this whole group bears predispositions of celebrity production emerging in the online environment.

Opportunities associated with the development of online communication unquestionably bring new impulses to the celebrity culture, by encouraging faster, easier and more massive production of global celebrities. The significance and the expansion of the phenomenon of social media influencers ignited also an attention of digital media professionals. The results of original study have shown the existence of three stages of social media influencers' evolution, namely: Newbies, Rising Stars and Socialites (Yahoo, 2016). The difference between the various stages relates to the construction of personal brands, in the form and type of activities carried out as well as scale of efforts to build partnerships with other brands. More concrete description can be found in Table 2.

Newbies	Rising Stars	Socialites
Building of followers' and subscribers' base	Fresh definition of own personal brand	Peculiar brand created and launched
Improving of skills and abilities	Effective exposing of personal brand	Active participation on the monetization of personal brand
Constantly gathering feedback	Efforts to monetize the brand (not on the priority level)	Constantly monitoring opportunities for collaboration with brands

Table 1. Dimensions of social media influencers' development (adaptation of Yahoo, 2016 by authors)

Importance of influencers on social media lies precisely in direct communication with the target audience. WOM (word of mouth) marketing which is in a center of social media is considered to be one of the most effective tools of marketing communications (Grimes, 2012). Recommendations from friends, acquaintances and family members are among the most credible source of product information. According to Nielsen's Global Trust in Advertising Report (2012), recommendations from people someone knows and consumer opinions posted online belong to the most trustful forms of contemporary advertising. Persons, whose preferences, attitudes and opinions are important for shaping purchasing decisions and consumer behavior, are called influential authorities. Business Dictionary defines them by power to change purchasing behavior, based on their own authority, knowledge, position or relationship. In the level of consumers' typology we can talk about members of reference groups, as well as peers (Business Dictionary, 2016). Similarly, influential authority are defined by the Intuitive Cialdini Influencers' Credibility Test consisting of two items: (1) Does the person have authority to speak on the subject? (2) How trustworthy are they likely to be? Do they have a vested interest? (Brown, Hayes, 2008). Marketing reflection of influencers is offered by the Augure company findings. According to them, influencers are individuals able to make a profit and produce a reaction in the framework of discourse on particular subjects, and their advantage lies in sufficiently large base of followers with significant participation in communication (emarketer, 2015).

Microfame: synergy of online environment and popularity of personality

Growing amount of online communities and opportunities arising under the label of social media bring a unique opportunity for self-presentation. In this framework, the individual gets into public awareness by number of activities: blogging, vlogging, or wide range of content creation in popular social networking services such as Facebook or Twitter.

The success of this phenomenon undoubtedly lies in the predilection of young people in self-presentation, which is due to previously described development becoming easier. According to concept of social media by Garca, Daly and Sanchez-Cabezudo (2016), the basic attributes of this directness of communication are as follows: directness, delayed feedback and disperse characteristics of the recipient. These attributes are supported by technologies optimizing interactive nature of the communication.

The implication of this transformation lies in the fact that traditional media institutions are no longer essential communications centers and distribution channels necessary for achieving individual fame, but they are gradually replaced by online digital platforms. This modification is heading to the formation of a new definition of fame based on disparity between incoming and outgoing attention (Shirky, 2009, p. 91).

A term of microfame refers to a characteristic form of fame enabled by the internet. Contrary to traditional ways of fame, microfame is not based on mass popularity, but the reputation and well-known position in the smaller, but more interconnected groups of recipients, readers, fans, followers or subscribers. According to Sorgatz, the mitigation gap between the position of celebrities and their supporters is becoming one of the essential expressions of microfame (2008).

Engaging of social media influencers in marketing communications is foreseeable result of their popularity. There's a lot of evidence available, let us briefly present several examples of endorsing banking institutions by Slovak youtubers. One of the strongest domestic banks, Slovenská sporiteľňa, engaged well-known youtuber GoGo⁴ to promote a product titled "Space", which was specifically targeted on young and independent people. Another example is the cooperation between others leading Slovak youtubers (Expl0ited, Moma, Asimister and Matúš) and Tatra banka, again in the product category of youth banking accounts "Tatra academy".

Significance of microcelebrities or social media influencers is highlighted by opening topics that are irrelevant to them at the first sight, but actually having cultural, national or social relevance. According to Mikušovič, youtubers (besides their own topics) pay attention to political, cultural and health issues such as the issue of the Roma, increasing eating problems among children, bullying classmates, etc. (2016). That is why we believe that the importance of microcelebrities is higher than it could look like from a first sight, as they can effectively communicate even serious matters to the young age segments. However, a majority of youtubers launched their online careers by gaming videos, called Let's play, which, according to Mikušovič still form the mainstream in this area. As the author points out, over time, portfolio expanded their own talk shows and sketches, and even one-man shows and standup comedies.

4 In 2016, Gogo produced the most watched video out of all Slovak youtubers, while 3 other of his videos were in TOP 5 (Mikušovič, 2016).



Figure 1: Gogo Man TV : Nepochovajme Slovensko (Let's do not bury Slovakia).

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Edf11ErUO0E>

In particular, topics related to politics are kind of sensitive for young people. Contemporary studies point to the decrease of interest in politics leading to decreasing voting percentage of young people in Slovakia (see Polačková, 2012). Engagement of microcelebrities is a promising way to overcome ignorance of political discourse by young age groups. In Slovakia, one can find several examples where the successful youtubers showed public interest on the politics. For example, already mentioned youtuber Gogo created a music video prior March parliamentary elections titled *Nepochovajme Slovensko (Let's do not bury Slovakia)* (Figure 1), which had more than 294 thousand views.

Conclusions

According to Lenhart (Lenhart, 2015), expansion and success of online personalities can be inferred from the outflow of adolescents from traditional media, and their adherence to the digital media. This situation resulted in transformation of celebrities and their shift to the online media, where they interact and communicate with their fans and general audience.

The internet is not only the place where online celebrities come alive, moreover, it is still more and more attractive and effective communication tool for traditional media personalities. Digitalization and customer accommodation to opportunities and advantages of digital media have resulted in formation of on-line generation of consumers (Vrabec, 2009). This transformation has supported the stable position of social media influencers in genuine concept of celebrity culture. For now, the microfame

and microcelebrities are rarely discussed phenomena, though their media and marketing importance is increasing.

As we point in the paper, online celebrities represent high prospective tool for commercial companies as well as for non-profit organizations. Marketers should use their benefits by aiming primarily at adolescents who spend lots of their time online and thus they are typical readers, followers or subscribers of famous online personalities. We can suppose that transformation of celebrity culture caused by digitalization has started the era of new celebrity of endorsement practice.

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