

#SAFESEX – THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AS AMBASSADORS OF SEXUAL HEALTH BEHAVIOR

LOES JANSSEN¹, ALEXANDER P. SCHOUTEN¹ & EMMELYN A. J. CROES¹

¹ Tilburg University, Tilburg center for Cognition and Communication, Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg, the Netherlands, e-mail: l.janssen@tilburguniversity.edu, a.p.schouten@tilburguniversity.edu, e.a.j.croes@tilburguniversity.edu

Abstract Institutions for health promotion are increasingly investing in social media campaigns. As an example, the Dutch institution for sexual health, Soa Aids Nederland, regularly collaborates with ‘social media influencers’ to inform and advise young adults about safe sex in YouTube vlogs. Based on the commercial success of influencer recommendations, integrating health messages in entertaining video content seems a promising instrument to stimulate young adults’ health behavior. However, no research to date has investigated this phenomenon. The present research presents a content analysis investigating which strategies (e.g., humor and self-disclosure) influencers use in vlogs to communicate with a young adult audience about sexual health behavior, and how these relate to the engagement that the vlogs generate. Engagement with social media (e.g., views, likes, and comments) serves as an indicator for attitudinal and behavioral effects, and this study provides a crucial first step for systematically investigating the effectiveness of influencer-endorsed health information.

Keywords:

social media, influencer, sexual health, content analysis, vlog, digital health communication



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1 Introduction

The digital transformation of society has changed the way in which health organizations are reaching out to their target groups. To reach young adults (18-25 yrs.), institutions for health promotion increasingly invest in health interventions via social media such as YouTube and Instagram. As a leading example, the Dutch institution for sexual health, Soa Aids Nederland, regularly collaborates with ‘social media influencers’. In online prevention campaigns (e.g., see ‘Britt Talk’ on Sense.info), these youngsters who share their daily lives and interests with a large peer audience on social media, mostly in the form of short video diaries (‘vlogs’), provide advice about topics such as contraceptives to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and hiv.

Although health organizations like Soa Aids Nederland have been investing in influencer campaigns since 2011, it remains unclear whether social media influencers are an effective instrument to inform and advise a young adult audience about health topics like safe sex. Whereas a growing body of research suggests that influencer recommendations have a significant impact on young adults’ attitudes and behavior, these investigations have all been performed in the domain of influencer marketing, focusing on brand attitudes and purchase intentions (e.g., Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019). To the knowledge of the authors, no academic research to date has investigated whether the popularity of influencer-generated content, which is attributed to its relatability and trustworthiness, can be effectively harnessed to stimulate young adults’ health behavior.

To shed more light on the effectiveness of social media influencers as ambassadors of health behavior, and specifically sexual health behavior, the present research project of Tilburg University in collaboration with Soa Aids Nederland investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: Which strategies are currently being used in influencer vlogs to communicate with a young adult audience about sexual health behavior?

RQ2: How do the employed communication strategies and characteristics of the influencers relate to generated audience engagement (e.g., views, likes, and comments)?

By answering these initial questions, the project aims to provide input for systematically testing the impact of influencer, message, and receiver characteristics that may contribute to the effectiveness of influencer-endorsed health information, and the processes via which these effects occur. In addition, the project aims to contribute to the development of an advisory instrument for health promoting organizations on how to effectively involve social media influencers in future health campaigns.

2 Theoretical framework

In the Netherlands, yearly tens of thousands of individuals are diagnosed with an STI (such as chlamydia and gonorrhea), and over 800 people get infected with hiv (RIVM, 2018; Soa Aids Nederland, 2019). Most STIs are contracted by young adults between the age of 18 and 25 years, who are discovering their first sexual relationships (RIVM, 2018). Ever since 2012, condom use among Dutch youngsters is declining, leading to increased risk of contracting STIs, increased chance of unwanted pregnancy (Seks onder je 25e, 2017), and a need to invest in targeted health interventions.

Acknowledging young adults' fervent use of digital technology, Soa Aids Nederland invests in online prevention campaigns to inform and advise about sexual health behavior. Via their online platform Sense.info (in collaboration with Rutgers for sexual and reproductive health and rights, the Public Health Service, and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport), they try to involve and stimulate conversation about sexual health topics, such as using contraceptives and getting STI and hiv check-ups. To create content for the Sense social media channels (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat), Soa Aids Nederland regularly collaborates with social media influencers.

Social media influencers are creative content creators who commonly operate within a specific ‘niche’, such as food, fitness, beauty, or gaming. Influencers use social media to strategically construct an authentic personal brand through blogging or vlogging about their lives and thereby building a large fan base (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Given the popularity of social media platforms like Instagram, it is not surprising that social influencers have become the new opinion leaders among young people, and marketers have embraced them as spokespersons for their brands, endorsing an endless range of products and services (Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018).

Influencers are perceived as authentic and accessible ‘superpeers’ that young adults are able to identify with and whose lifestyles they aspire (Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Youngsters are more likely to trust the information and advice that is provided by their peers, as compared to company-provided information (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), and both credibility and identification appear to play an important role in influencer endorsement effects (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019). By stimulating interaction with their followers and building so-called parasocial relationships, influencers are able to generate online (and offline) engagement around a topic or brand (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Influencers thus seem to be a powerful persuasive instrument, and just as commercial marketers, health communication professionals have tried to harness influencers’ unique characteristics to promote healthy behaviors, such as practicing safe sex. Previous campaigns and research have demonstrated that influencers can activate young adults to discuss topics like sex, STIs and hiv in an online environment, share information among their online networks, and break taboos surrounding these topics (Lutkenhaus, Jansz, & Bouman, 2019; Wu et al., 2019). However, it remains unclear to what extent influencer-endorsed health information on social media can actually contribute to more healthy attitudes and behavior, and via which processes these effects occur. The present research project addresses both a scientific, as well as a practical need for knowledge on how these digital health interventions can be most effectively used to stimulate young adults to take care of their own sexual well-being.

3 The present research

To answer our initial research questions as part of a larger research project, we are currently conducting a content analysis on a corpus of 200 Dutch, UK, and US YouTube influencer vlogs about sexual health behavior. With this content analysis we aim to identify which communication strategies the influencers use to inform, advise and entertain their audience, and how these strategies as well as their personal characteristics relate to the online engagement that the vlogs generate. Engagement with social media is a crucial first step affecting audience's attitudes and behaviors and thus serves as an indicator for the effectiveness of influencer-endorsed health information in social media posts (Kabadayi & Price, 2014).

The codebook is currently being developed, starting from a list of communication strategies based on literature on online health communication, influencer marketing, persuasive communication, and self-presentation on social media. Specifically, in the content analysis we will focus on the persuasive appeal strategies used in the message (e.g., humor; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2009; threat; Paek, Kim, & Hove, 2010; argumentation type; Cornelis, Cauberghe, & De Pelsmacker, 2013), the self-presentation strategies that the influencers employ (e.g., self-disclosure; Utz, 2015), the narrative content of the vlog (e.g., message integration, interactivity; Shen, Sheer & Li, 2015), and the technical and visual features of the vlog (e.g., camera angles; image quality; Molyneaux, Gibson, O'Donnell, & Singer, 2007). In addition, we will code influencer characteristics (e.g., age, gender, lifestyle, popularity), and to measure engagement, we will code the number of views, likes, dislikes, and comments in response to the vlogs. Moreover, we will analyze the content of the comments: we employ sentiment analysis to get an indication of a viewer's attitude towards the topic discussed in the vlog, and we use automated content analysis to measure behavioral intention (i.e., people acknowledging condom use).

At the BLED conference, we will present the results of our content analysis and show to what extent specific strategies and influencer characteristics are related to engagement. Based on the content analysis, we aim to identify the communication strategies that are most effective in promoting health behavior among young adults. The effects of these strategies on attitudes and behavior will be subsequently tested among a large sample of young adults.

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