

pISSN: 1906 - 3296 © 2020 AU-GSB e-Journal.
eISSN: 2773 – 868x © 2021 AU-GSB e-Journal.
<http://www.assumptionjournal.au.edu/index.php/AU-GSB/index>

The Parasocial Relationships Between Homosexual YouTubers and Their Followers That Affect Influencer Marketing

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Received: September 8, 2022. Revised: April 5, 2023. Accepted: May 10, 2023.

Abstract

In influencer marketing, the most important factor impacting the effectiveness of sponsored videos is the credibility of the influencer, and one of the drivers of this credibility is the parasocial relationship between the influencer and their followers. The influencer's self-disclosure is essential for viewers to develop strong feelings, and the disclosure of sensitive matters, such as sexual orientation, is thought to create a very strong connection between social media figures and their followers with the same orientation. Accordingly, sales promotion videos posted by homosexual influencers may have a more positive impact on their viewers. In this study, we aimed to determine how followers feel about homosexual influencers' sponsored videos. Using a qualitative open coding method, we analysed 6,256 viewer comments posted on 72 sponsored videos on the YouTube channels of 13 homosexual content creators and found that the viewers' comments could be categorised into five types: empathy, admiration, encouragement, sharing and disillusionment. We found that influencer marketing is essentially risky because, other than admiration comments, most comments regarding sponsored videos are not completely positive. To reduce the risks of influencer marketing, it is essential for brands to understand the target community and to be willing to consider the community culture during product development.

Keywords : Parasocial relationships, Homosexual, YouTubers, Influencer Marketing, Self-disclosure

JEL Classification Code: M30, M31, M37

1. Introduction

With the spread of the internet, advertising has shifted from TV and printed media to digital media. In particular, social network services (SNSs) are attracting attention as an advertising medium. Among the various SNSs, YouTube has the second largest number of users after LINE in Japan and

is expected to replace TV as the media with the highest usage rate among all generations in the near future (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, 2021). Due to its strong ability to spread information, SNSs are highly utilised as marketing platforms. According to the Digital Report by We Are Social (2022), it is estimated that YouTube ads reach 102 million users over the age of 18

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years in Japan. In addition to the usual video ads, brands and companies have often used YouTube influencers for influencer marketing in recent years. ‘Influencer’ is defined as a person who has the ability to influence people and their buying decisions through digital communication platforms, including SNSs such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (Yesiloglu & Costello, 2020). Influencers create promotional content for client brands and companies and post it on their social network accounts. The content encourages the purchase of the promoted products or services and increases brand awareness. In the case of YouTube, influencers typically create videos in collaboration with their client brands and companies. In Japan, such sponsored videos are called *Anken Dôga* (案件動画), and influencer marketing on YouTube has become a popular advertising method. YouTube-sponsored videos have a number of advantages, including the ability to appeal to YouTubers’ fans, to generate increased buzz by using popular YouTubers, to reduce man-hours for the client company by entrusting YouTubers with the entire process of filming, editing, and uploading the videos, and to remain on the channel for a longer period of time (Marke-driven, 2022). YouTube influencer marketing is used for a wide variety of products and services, from household goods and health foods to cosmetics and even cosmetic surgery.

Alongside the growing number of practical examples, influencer marketing has gained academic attention. Numerous studies have been conducted on influencer marketing on YouTube worldwide. Previous studies have found that the most important factor impacting the effectiveness of sponsored videos is the credibility of the influencer (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020), and one of the drivers of this credibility is the parasocial relationship (PSR) between the influencer and their followers (Munnukka et al., 2019). The influencer’s self-disclosure is essential for viewers to develop strong feelings (Kim & Song, 2016), and the disclosure of sensitive matters, such as sexual orientation, is thought to create a very strong connection between social media figures and their followers with the same orientation (Green et al., 2015). Accordingly, sales promotion videos posted by homosexual influencers may have a more positive impact on their viewers. It is possible that stronger PSRs may be established between homosexual influencers and their followers, especially in a country like Japan where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) people have yet to gain civil rights (JobRainbow, 2022).

There are many popular YouTubers in Japan who have come out as LGBTQ, and the number of LGBTQ YouTubers is steadily increasing (JobRainbow, 2021). Some LGBTQ YouTubers engage in influencer marketing, but surprisingly

few studies have addressed this population. According to Heinz et al. (2002), LGBTQs constitute different communities depending on their identities. While LGB is based on sexual orientation, and T is based on gender identity, Q can relate to both sexual orientation and gender identity. It would therefore be difficult to analyse LGBTQ people as a single group. This study therefore focused on Japan-based homosexual (lesbian and gay) YouTubers to determine how the PSRs between them and their followers affect influencer marketing.

2. Literature Review

Influencer marketing in social media has received considerable academic and practical attention in recent years. Many previous studies have attempted to identify the underlying drivers of success in influencer marketing. Taillon et al. (2020), who studied the success factors in social media influencer marketing, found that the more attractive an influencer is to their followers, the more positive their followers’ attitudes will be towards the influencer and the more likely they are to buy products promoted by the influencer. Janssen et al. (2022) similarly suggested that the more likable the influencer, the more likely their followers would be to buy the products they promote via Instagram influencer marketing. Closeness and credibility have also been found to affect attractiveness and likeability (Janssen et al., 2022; Taillon et al., 2020).

Along with Instagram, YouTube is the leading social media platform used for influencer marketing (Taillon et al., 2020), and a number of studies have been conducted on influencer marketing on YouTube. Such studies have noted that the most important factor related to the effectiveness of sponsored videos is the credibility of the influencer (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2019). Some studies have found that the drivers of their credibility are previous experience with endorsers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), the disclosure of sponsored content (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Hwang & Jeong, 2016), the way in which the influencer uses self-disclosure (Huang, 2015) and the PSRs between the influencers and their followers (Munnukka et al., 2019). Among these drivers, PSRs have been noted in many studies as having a significant impact on successful influencer marketing (e.g. Aw & Chuah, 2021; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Leite & Baptista, 2022).

Parasocial relationships are defined as unilaterally intimate psychological relationships built by media users towards media characters (Rubin & Step, 2000). PSRs in social media occur in the context of interactive interactions between content creators and viewers online, or witnessing these interactions (Labrecque, 2014). The more viewers are added to a channel, the more illusory and non-reciprocal their social relationships become (Lueck, 2015; Tsiotsou,

2015). Even if the viewer is just one of a large viewership for the influencer, the viewer's feelings about the influencer are very intimate and can be described as traditional connections, such as 'lover,' 'friend,' or 'parent' (Stever, 2017). The influencer's self-disclosure is essential for viewers to develop such strong feelings (Kim & Song, 2016). Parasocial interaction has been shown to increase when viewers find commonality in the personality traits and attributes of social media figures (Stever, 2017).

Kurtin et al. (2018) explained how PSRs between YouTubers and their followers can develop, with three factors having a positive impact on the development of such PSRs, namely, the social and physical attraction to, and task attraction of, the social media figure. Social attraction means the degree to which the YouTuber and the viewer are similar or would like to be friends, physical attraction refers to how physically attracted the viewer is to the YouTuber, and task attraction indicates how competent, credible and trustworthy the viewer feels the YouTuber is. Kim and Song (2016) found that the influencer's self-disclosure is essential for viewers to develop strong parasocial feelings towards social media figures, while Stever (2017) noted that parasocial interaction increases when viewers find similarities between their personality traits and attributes and those of social media figures. In short, influencers' self-disclosure is the key to successful influencer marketing (Huang, 2015; Kim & Song, 2016; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Among the three factors, social attraction and task attraction seem strongly connected to self-disclosure.

On the other hand, YouTube is also known as a medium that is used by sexual minorities to come out (Drushel, 2010; Lazzara, 2010). The disclosure of sensitive matters, such as sexual orientation, can put individuals at risk of negative feedback (Herek, 1996; Wells & Kline, 1987). However, according to Green et al. (2015), who studied LGBTQ people's use of YouTube, it is possible to gain empathy and encouragement when coming out within LGBTQ YouTube communities. LGBTQ content creators seek friendship and support and provide empathy through self-disclosure (Green et al., 2015). Rotman and Preece (2010) indicated that YouTube users see YouTube not simply as a place to broadcast and watch content, but as a community where they can communicate and interact with others. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that homosexual viewers identify with such homosexual content creators and build high PSRs. This may be especially true in countries, including Japan, where the rights of sexual minorities remain restricted, and LGBTQ people cannot disclose their sexual orientation openly. Sales promotion videos by homosexual influencers may therefore have a more positive impact on their viewers. However, it is not yet clear whether the homosexual content creators receive empathy from their viewers through text-based communication (Green et al., 2015). Since the

relationships are established through the sensitive connection of sexual orientation, some viewers may feel uncomfortable with the content creators making sponsored videos. Lovelock (2017) stated that homosexual influencers use their queer identity to build their self-brand, while Abidin (2019) argued that homosexual influencers experience different pressures, including consideration of their effects on their followers and their obligations to sponsors and clients. Based on the above discussion, we set the following as a research question:

RQ: What kinds of feelings do followers of homosexual influencers have towards sponsored videos?

3. Methodology

We analysed comments posted on homosexual content creators' sponsored videos. Comments were chosen because comment sections are used to increase viewers' PSRs and express their feelings of support for content creators (Reinikainen et al., 2020). The comments of other users also serve as an important source of information for those in the same community (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

To select the channels to be studied, we first used YouTube's search function to find channels operated by Japan-based lesbian and gay YouTubers (individuals, couples and groups). To identify the channel as a lesbian or gay channel, we used hashtags such as #lesbian, #gay, #LGBT and #homosexuality. From the search results, we checked each channel's self-introductory video and past video titles to confirm that the channel was about homosexuality. We decided not to select channels that did not actively deal with homosexuality, even if the YouTubers themselves were homosexual.

Once we had identified the channels, we extracted those with more than 10,000 followers. When the number of subscribers exceeds 10,000 people, the channel is given a Bronze rank by YouTube. In other words, Bronze is the first level at which an influencer is provided with recognition. We therefore decided to choose YouTube channels with more than 10,000 subscribers.

As a result of the selection process, we identified a total of 23 channels (11 lesbian channels and 12 gay channels) which were still active on a regular basis as at the end of October 2021 when this study began. All the videos on each channel were reviewed, and it was found that 13 (six lesbian and seven gay) channels were involved in sponsored videos. All 72 of their videos were clearly marked as sponsored videos on the screen or in the creator's comment section. A total of 6,256 viewer comments had been posted to the videos. First, the videos were viewed and the comments carefully read. Second, the comments were qualitatively analysed using an open coding method. The analysis was conducted multiple times and triangulated to ensure the internal validity of the

results. The information regarding the selected channels is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The selected list of six lesbian channels and seven gay channels

Lesbian	Channel Name	First Video	Subscribers	Total No. of Videos	PR Videos	No. of comments for PR videos
1	Lbian TV	30/10/2018	107,000	480	22	2,151
2	Ukapeko Channel	22/05/2019	68,000	210	9	397
3	Pitachannel	03/04/2020	11,800	90	2	117
4	Erika Aitamu	03/12/2019	17,300	148	4	83
5	Oba bian CHANNEL	10/04/2020	13,000	151	3	82
6	#LTube	02/05/2020	13,800	177	1	14
			TOTAL	1256	41	2,844
Gay	Channel Name	First Video	Subscribers	Total No. of Videos	PR Videos	No. of comments for PR videos
1	2 Street	31/07/2017	287,000	883	15	1,832
2	FutariPapa	16/09/2016	155,000	176	3	891
3	Moa and More	13/02/2016	107,000	363	6	321
4	Shintaka	21/01/2021	47,800	75	4	210
5	ShoRyo Channel	31/10/2018	27,900	326	1	70
6	Nozomi & Micky	07/05/2019	10,900	101	1	48
7	Yusaku World	21/07/2019	56,500	171	1	40
			TOTAL	2095	31	3,412

Note: As of October 2021

4. Results

The most common products and services in the sponsored videos analysed in our study were promotions of websites and applications, such as e-commerce and gay dating applications (12). This was followed by beauty products such as serums and creams (11), diet products (9) and cosmetic surgery services (9). After analysing the comments posted on a total of 72 sponsored videos, we found that the viewers' comments could be categorised into five types.

4.1 Empathy

The empathy comments expressed sympathy for the influencer or the influencer's story, not for the product. Even when influencers talked about their own experiences in connection with the products they were promoting, the viewers often responded more to the stories and rarely mentioned the products. The viewers who posted this type of comment may have felt a parasocial friendship with the influencer. For example, the comments below were classified as empathetic.

In a sponsored video of cosmetic surgery services: 'I hope the plastic surgery will help you get rid of some of the things that have been bothering you. I will continue to support you.'
In a sponsored video of cosmetics for men: 'I don't know what to say . . . it has nothing to do with prejudice against gays.

I kind of think that by making a video like this, prejudice and such will disappear.'

4.2 Admiration

Words such as cute, cool, envious and amazing were the most common expressions among the admiration comments. While there was a strong sense of friendship and being a member of the same community, many posts also treated the content creators as celebrities and expressed their fandom for them. Since they were attracted to the content creators, they wanted to use the products the creators were promoting. This can be described as parasocial affection. The comments below are examples of this type.

In a sponsored video of teeth whitening: 'Reiyan looks so sleepy!! So cute! I'm jealous of her beautiful skin. I'm curious about the whitening treatment. . . !!!!'

In a sponsored video of skincare products: 'You both have such beautiful skin, and your faces are just too cute to look at. You two are always so close. Thank you for another happy video today. I have only used LUSH's bath salts, but I want to use this product so badly.'

4.3 Encouragement

The comments categorised as encouragement expressed happiness for the content creator that they had either been offered sponsorship by a company or had been praised for their work. Comment examples included 'Congratulations on the offer' and 'Your product description is better than before'. Making a sponsored video means that content creators have joined the ranks of influencers. For the viewers who had followed the content creator from the time before they had sponsorships, it would seem to be tempting to comment with words of congratulations. For example, we

classified the comments below as encouragement.

'Wow! You were offered a sponsored product!'
'Yuki, you have become very good at explaining sponsored products.'

4.4 Sharing

In the sharing type of comments, the viewer shared their own experience regarding the story or the product introduced in the video. Alternatively, they commented by stating their own problem or situation regardless of the content in the video. Several came out about their sexual orientation in the comments. They felt that the influencers were like respected school seniors and wanted them to understand their circumstances and experiences. The example below is a sharing comment.

'I am a lesbian, and my girlfriend and I are in a long-distance relationship between Hyogo and Shizuoka. I'm afraid to tell my mother about this. How can I tell her when I'm not even allowed to have an online relationship? What should I do? I don't have the courage. Do I have to break up with my girlfriend?'

4.5 Disillusionment

Disillusionment describes disappointment with the sponsored video, such as 'Oh, it's sponsored. . .'. When it was the first time or there were only a few sponsored videos, there were many encouraging comments like 'Congratulations!' When the number of sponsored videos increased, however, the comments became more and more disillusioned. There were also comments that criticised the video just because it was sponsored. It seems that the strong feeling of intimacy with the content creator was the reason people rejected the sponsored videos.

In a sponsored video of a gift e-commerce site: 'I wonder if it's a fake when it's sponsored ...I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, but I felt a little disappointed that it was sponsored although it's a very nice anniversary video.'

In a sponsored video of skincare products: 'This serum is introduced by various YouTubers ... Crappy sponsored video.'

It should be noted that each follower did not always write only one type of comment consistently. Depending on the video, some followers posted different types of comments, and sometimes two types were contained in one comment.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we found that PSRs such as friendship and affection were established between homosexual content

creators and their viewers. The comments were written by people from the same community or heterosexuals who were understanding of the homosexual community and provided supportive words. There seemed to be an unspoken rule in the comments section, namely, 'Don't disturb the good atmosphere here!' The comment types 1 to 4 followed that rule, and the viewers were mostly positive about the videos. If viewers wrote about their own negative experiences, it was common for them to add a word of apology, such as 'Sorry for talking about myself'. However, comment type 5 conveyed a candid expression of dissatisfaction with the sponsored video. There were many comments that were just one word. It seemed as if the viewers were rejecting the video simply because it was promotional. Janssen et al. (2022) stated that for influencer marketing to work positively, the promoted product must fit the influencer's self-branded image. In the case of the homosexual influencers in our study, if the product was ethical or had a strong association with the content creator, the number of disillusioned comments decreased dramatically. For example, the comments section of a channel that introduced a subscription service for sake from Fukushima, which was damaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake, was filled with comments of admiration and praise. From the perspective of successful influencer marketing, admiration comments are likely to lead to sales. In fact, there were a plethora of comments saying, 'I'll buy it too!' or 'I bought it!' Since these viewers had a high level of trust in the content creators and always viewed their videos with a positive attitude, they tended to be happy about the sponsored videos and considered them a good source of information. The encouragement comments were also positive, but they were not entirely positive about the sponsored videos. They had the potential to turn into disillusionment as more and more videos were sponsored. It can be said that these viewers had intimate feelings for the content creators but were not certain that they would accept the sponsored products the creators had introduced.

The viewers who posted empathy comments may have seemed interested in making a purchase, but they only empathised with the story of the content creator, not with the product itself. If the story of the content creator told in the video had a considerable impact, the viewer was likely to respond to the story rather than the product. For example, in her video, a lesbian content creator talked about the complex she had about her appearance and introduced a cosmetic surgery service. She attracted more sympathy for the story of her complex than for the service. In essence, the number of video views may increase, but it would be difficult to increase the number of people who are interested in the service. As Green et al. (2015) suggested, considering that homosexual YouTubers and their followers are connected through empathy and encouragement, it is natural for

viewers to express their feelings of empathy towards content creators. However, this does not mean that they are willing to buy the promoted product or service.

The viewers' sharing comments were about their own experiences or situations, and they sought sympathy from the video creator or other viewers. Some provide content creators with information about other products. This may be a typical result of users using YouTube as a community, as indicated by Rotman and Preece (2010). Either way, the viewers were not interested in the promoted product, and the influencer marketing was unlikely to be effective.

It goes without saying that the viewers who posted disillusionment-type comments had no purchase intentions regarding the sponsored videos. In some cases, the viewers even stopped subscribing to the channel. They wanted to connect with the content creators as intimate friends, not as corporate spokespersons who wanted them to spend money. In summary, for influencer marketing to be effective, it would be better to use influencers who have a large viewership of admirers. It is important for content creators to make their viewership think that they have a lot in common with them, but at the same time, they have to make their followers think that they want to be like the influencers. However, most comments other than the admiration comments were not completely positive regarding the sponsored videos. This means that influencer marketing is essentially a risky undertaking. Hirota (2021) stated that influencer marketing may not benefit anyone if it is structured poorly. Influencers can lose popularity in exchange for sponsorship revenue, the image of the brands may be tarnished, and the followers may feel uncomfortable with promotional videos. It can truly be a lose-lose-lose situation (Hirota, 2021). To reduce the risk of influencer marketing, existing brands may need to collaborate with influencers to develop products in the first place. Moreover, brands may need to collaborate with the entire community, including influencers' followers. It is essential for brands to understand the community they are addressing and to be willing to utilise the community's culture when developing products. The market for community-oriented products may be limited; however, strategies to target small mass markets are considered necessary. Such strategies are especially important for brands in the current era of diversity.

Unlike most YouTube content that focuses on experience, opinion and information dissemination, a large volume of LGBTQ content is related to belief, empathy and exhortation (Green et al., 2015). That may explain why the PSRs between homosexual content creators and their followers are very strong. If such close relationships are to be used for marketing, brands will also need to be deeply involved in the community. Otherwise, customer relationships will be temporary and may not lead to a future success.

6. Limitations and future research

Only one of the homosexual YouTubers discussed in this study had close to 300,000 subscribers. Considering that many had relatively small channels with less than 50,000 subscribers, the comments sections of popular YouTubers with more subscribers and those who do not focus on homosexuality should also be investigated to verify our results. In addition, a limited number of comments were examined qualitatively in this study. These results should be validated by a quantitative study. In the future, increasing numbers of sponsored videos will be produced by homosexual influencers, and the number of viewers is expected to increase even more. A survey of subscribers to channels devoted to homosexuality would help validate the results of this study. Given that there seems to be an unspoken rule in the comments sections that one may not disrupt the peaceful atmosphere, it may be necessary to provide an opportunity for subscribers to express their honest opinions, such as via interviews or free writing in surveys.

On the other hand, it is important to understand why homosexual content creators accept offers for sponsored videos despite the potential for animosity from their viewers. Some homosexual YouTubers have tens of thousands of channel subscribers yet have not been involved in a single sponsored video. As Green et al. (2015) stated, if the reason homosexual YouTubers disclose personal information about themselves and their experiences in their videos is to seek friendship and support and to provide empathy, it is not reasonable for them to engage in sponsored videos. Interviewing homosexual YouTubers involved in influencer marketing regarding their intentions and objectives would therefore also be beneficial for brands and companies that hope to collaborate with them in the future.

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