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*Social Media
Influencers as
Content Creators
in The Creative
Economy*



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ABSTRACT

Research on influencers is often falling short of fully capturing their impact on the creative economy and on media at large. Beyond their influence on consumer decisions and hence, their importance for marketing, goes their contribution as creators of enticing content often combined with entrepreneurial drive that is actually the basis for their impact. In this study based on a survey among n=46,486 influencers from seven countries we shed light on different categories of content they create. Discerning topics and characteristic formats, we derive clusters of similar content and contrast this with different degrees of professionalization and monetization. Apart from self-disclosing influencers' every day life are the most proliferant topics related to food, beauty, lifestyle, and travel – however, with differences across countries and contrasting characteristic formats per topic. The latter can at least partly be explained by the various modes of monetization or other kinds of compensation. This study on social media influencers as content creators with increasingly professional businesses shall serve a better understanding of their relevance to the future development of the creative economy at large as well as of their potential for partnering with incumbent media players.

KEYWORDS: Content creators, influencer marketing, creative economy, creative industries, media making, media business, content formats

INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers (henceforth SMI or SMIs respectively) emerged as individuals with a certain followership who endorse products or services, leveraging their influence to drive consumer behavior (Ouvrein, Pabian, Giles, Hudders, & De Backer, 2021; Koay, Cheung, Soh, & Teoh, 2022). In this they complemented traditional celebrities from entertainment and media who leverage their fame for additional revenues (Abidin, 2018; Leban, & Voyer, 2020; Brooks, Drenten, & Piskorski, 2021; Gaenssle, & Budzinski, 2021). Thereby the overall economic role of SMIs has significantly evolved over the last years (author 3).

Today, SMIs collaborate systematically with brands and promote the latter's products or services to their followers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; author 7; Tabellion & Esch, 2019; Levin, 2020). This can involve sponsored posts, product reviews, or SMI-led campaigns (Arriagada, & Ibáñez, 2020). SMIs' recommendations can have a substantial impact on consumer purchasing decisions, making them valuable marketing partners for brands (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Craig, 2019; Freberz, Smith, & Silva, 2022; Ozuem, & Willis, 2022). Hence, the rise of SMIs has given birth to a thriving influencer marketing industry and multichannel networks as service providers to it (PWC, 2014). Agencies and platforms connect brands with SMIs, facilitating collaborations and campaign management. The industry has grown rapidly (Enberg, 2022), with brands allocating significant portions of their marketing budgets to collaborations with SMI.

But SMIs are also content creators in the first place (e.g. Abidin, 2016; author 5). They produce engaging and often niche-specific content across social media platforms. They build their personal brands around specific areas of expertise (Ladhari, Massa, & Skandrani, 2020). This personal branding allows them to cultivate a loyal following and to establish themselves as thought leaders or experts in their respective fields. Some SMIs leverage their online presence to launch entrepreneurial ventures, such as e-commerce businesses, consulting services, or digital courses (author 6; Bi, & Liu, 2022; Guínez-Cabrera, & Aqueveque, 2022).

Spending for influencer marketing reached in 2021 with 13.8 bln. USD on a global level (IW Köln, 2022) and 3.9 bln. USD in the US alone (Enberg, 2022) already remarkable absolute values. On a relative scale this means globally still only about 2.0% (Zenith, 2022) and in the US about 1.5% (Business Insider 2020) of all advertising spendings. With regards to the overall revenues (goods and services) generated by the creative economy in the order of 2 trn. USD (UNCTAD 2022) this looks even more modest. However, the trend indicates further growth with an absolute value for the US at 5.0 bln. USD in 2022 (up 28% from 2021) and global CAGR over the last five years until 2021

above 50% starting at 1.7 bln. USD and a 0.3% contribution in 2016 (IW Köln, 2022 and Zenith 2022). Overall, the revenues generated by influencer marketing spendings can already finance quite a number of content creators – even after deduction of agency fees and production costs.

But the economic and social role of SMI is not limited to marketing and creating content, as at least some of them leverage their platforms to raise awareness about social causes, advocate for climate action, promote social responsibility or the sustainable development goals (see e.g. author 1). They use their influence to educate and inspire their followers, encouraging them to participate in charitable activities or support specific initiatives.

For their overall economic, social, and cultural role that is still rapidly evolving due to technological advances, changing consumer behavior, and adapting regulatory frameworks, around SMI also diverse research perspectives have developed (see also Rosengren, & Campbell, 2021; Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2023). Today, studies explore (1) the motivation of social media users to intensify their activities and to combine content about their everyday life or their specific expertise with advertising content (e.g. Duffy, 2016, 2017; author 2). Other studies investigate (2) the economic value that SMIs bring to brands and the return on investment (ROI) for influencer marketing campaigns. This includes examining the effectiveness of influencer endorsements (e.g. already Aral, & Walker, 2012; Barhorst, McLean, Brooks, & Wilson, 2019), measuring engagement metrics, and analyzing the impact on sales and brand perception. Researchers have (3) also investigated the factors influencing the selection of SMIs by brands (e.g. Santora, 2022; Borges-Tiago, Santiago, & Tiago, 2023) and the role of SMI credibility therein (e.g. Djafarova, & Trofimenko, 2019; Argyris, Muqaddam, & Miller, 2021). This includes examining how certain key performance indicators affect the economic outcomes of SMI collaborations (Gräve, 2019). Academic studies have (4) explored the influence of SMIs on consumer behavior, including how SMIs shape purchase decisions, brand attitudes, and the formation of consumer preferences (e.g. De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019; Lopes, Guarda, Victor, & Vázquez, 2020; Sokolova, & Kefi, 2020; Prasad, 2021; Mohcine, Bakach, & Ouiddad, 2022) as well as on according to which criteria consumers evaluate the quality of the created content (author 5). (5) Also the economic aspects of SMIs' monetization strategies have been examined. Researchers investigate the factors contributing to successful monetization and the income generation potential for SMIs as well as the risks of a new precarity in cultural work (Han, 2020; Duffy, 2020; Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, & Sawey, 2021). (6) Scholars have explored ethical considerations and the importance of transparency in influencer marketing (e.g. Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). This includes examining issues such as disclosure practices, potential

deception or misleading practices, and the role of regulations and legal guidelines in shaping the economic landscape of influencer marketing. (7) Less prevalent but growing are studies on the impact of content creators on (traditional) media industries (Kellogg, 2015; Bankov, 2019; Cunningham, & Craig, 2019).

However, relatively little has been researched so far on the different categories of content they create. In this study discerning topics and characteristic formats, we shall derive clusters of similar content and contrast this with different degrees of professionalization and monetization. This mapping of SMIs as content creators and increasingly professional businesses in the creative economy shall serve a better understanding of their relevance to the future development of the creative economy (Shapiro, & Aneja, 2018; Towse, 2020; Lou, Chee, & Zhou, 2023) as well as their potential for partnering with incumbent media players in specific creative industries.

In the following we shall first review related extant research, then further specify the research gap to be addressed by this study and the research questions respectively leading to the applied methodology. After a discussion of the obtained results we shall conclude this contribution by a summary of potential and factual limitations as well as by an outlook on further research and practical implications.

EXTANT RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Extant research shall be discussed in the light of theoretical considerations along the line of SMIs' role in and for the creative economy, the diversification of SMIs' formats in creating content, and the professionalization and the role of monetization of SMIs' content.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

The creative economy shall be interpreted here as an economic system that encompasses the production, distribution, and consumption of creative and cultural goods and services. It includes a wide range of industries and sectors, such as arts, design, media, entertainment, architecture, advertising, fashion, software development, and more. The creative economy is characterized by its focus on creativity, innovation, intellectual property, and cultural expression. This follows a definition by UNCTAD of the creative economy as "the interface between creativity, culture, economics, and technology as expressed in the ability to create and circulate intellectual capital, with the potential to generate income, jobs, and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity, and human development" (2022:1).

Interest among media researchers in creativity, the creative economy and related policy questions is increasing at least over the last decade

(Doyle, 2016). Although creativity is as fuzzy as a concept as is the term “creative economy”, most commentators agree that media content creation falls centrally within the ambit of the creative and the creative economy respectively (Doyle 2016). Nevertheless, research in this area is hampered by a lack of consensus about the meaning of the core terminology as already the widespread tendency to use ‘creative industries’ (e.g. Towse, 2020). and ‘cultural industries’ interchangeably (author 8) indicates. As much as agendas for research on media in Europe need to reflect on the role of media as part of the creative economy (Doyle 2016), should they also comprise the increasingly proliferant SMI and the content they create (author 6).

Content creators play already a significant role in the creative economy. As individuals or also groups they produce and distribute original content across various media platforms, including social media, video-sharing platforms, blogs, podcasts, and more. They drive innovation, create cultural value, generate economic opportunities, and transform the way content is produced, distributed, and consumed (author 3).

More specifically, SMI as content creators contribute to the cultural and artistic landscape by producing diverse forms of creative expression. They showcase different formats and topics combined to complex stories told often across several social media, helping to expand and diversify the cultural experiences available to audiences. This was enabled by the rise of digital platforms and technologies that have democratized content creation and distribution (author 4). Content creators no longer require extensive resources or gatekeepers to reach audiences. This empowerment has opened doors for a broader range of voices, perspectives, and narratives to be shared, challenging traditional media structures.

Content creation has also become a viable career path for many individuals (Duffy, 2019). Moreover, content creators often foster dedicated communities around their work. Through social media interactions, comments, and fan engagement, they establish relationships with their audiences, building a sense of community and growing a loyal following. This engagement can extend beyond the content itself, creating opportunities for collaboration, dialogue, and participation.

Content creators have disrupted traditional media and entertainment industries by providing alternative forms of content consumption and challenging established business models. They have forced traditional media outlets to adapt, innovate, and embrace new platforms and distribution channels to remain relevant in the evolving media landscape at least among the younger generations.

DIVERSIFICATION OF INFLUENCERS' FORMATS IN CREATING CONTENT

On the one hand SMI increasingly diversify their content formats in the realm of content creation, on the other hand depending on the topic also standardised approaches seem to have become established. Few studies systematize so far the different formats or styles in content creation from an academic point of view (e.g. Roma, & Aloini, 2019; Tafesse, & Wood, 2021) and not much more is covered by industry reports or marketing blogs respectively (e.g. sproutsocial, 2022; gank, 2023; influencermarketinghub, 2023).

Video has emerged as a dominant format for SMI across platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram Reels, and more. SMI create vlogs, tutorials, challenges, comedic sketches, and other video-based content to connect with their audiences in a dynamic and engaging way. With the rise of platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, SMI have embraced short-form video content formats. They create bite-sized, highly engaging videos that often rely on trends, challenges, and creative editing techniques to capture and retain audience attention in a fast-paced digital landscape. Many SMI leverage live streaming platforms like Twitch, Instagram Live, or YouTube Live to interact with their followers in real-time. Live streaming allows SMI to host Q&A sessions, gameplay streams, product launches, reaction content or behind-the-scenes content, fostering a sense of immediacy and authenticity.

In addition to video, SMI have embraced podcasting as a format to share long-form discussions, interviews, storytelling, and educational content. Podcasts enable SMI to dive deep into topics, build a dedicated audience, and establish themselves as authoritative voices in their respective fields. They also experiment with interactive content formats to actively involve their audience. This can include polls, quizzes, interactive stories, and question-and-answer sessions, allowing followers to participate and have a sense of influence over the content they consume.

Overall, SMI focus on visual storytelling techniques to convey narratives and evoke emotions. They leverage aesthetically pleasing photography, curated themes, and visually compelling content to create a cohesive and captivating brand identity. SMI not only diversify their content formats by maintaining a presence across multiple platforms. They adapt their content to suit the strengths and preferences of each platform, tailoring videos, images, captions, and engagement strategies accordingly. The diversification of content formats by SMI reflects their adaptability and responsiveness to evolving audience preferences and technological advancements.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND THE ROLE OF MONETIZATION OF INFLUENCERS' CONTENT

The discussion on professionalization in the creative industries and related sectors has a certain tradition and can be traced back to at least five main concepts or strands of research that focus in different ways on the situation of the individual amateur, his or her mode of production and the role of the amateur in producing content with a distinct authenticity or individuality (author 6). SMIs combine “the triad of creativity, opportunity and value creation” (Schulte-Holthaus, 2018, p. 100), combining an attitude of passion and creative ability as a necessary prerequisite with commercial success that is often achieved rather accidentally.

(1) An early strand of research on the professionalization of amateurs (beyond media or content production) goes back to Stebbins (1982), who coined the term “serious leisure”. Related to this - but with a media focus - are (2) recent discussions of “amateurism” (Hamilton 2013; Bryan-Wilson & Piekut, 2019) and its consequences especially for the unsatisfactory financial situation of the (often female) individual (Duffy, 2016, 2017; Archer, 2019) and the tensions created by the balancing act of remaining authentic as an amateur versus selling brands professionally (see also van Driel, & Dumitrica, 2021). (3) A more general economic perspective was taken in the academic discourse on “prosumers” (Author 4, for an overview) long before social media - or more precisely their influencers - became established terms and encompassed activities beyond media. (4) More recently, a similar debate emerged in the context of ‘user-generated content’ (UGC), which is inextricably linked to social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Green & Jenkins, 2011). Such UGC is produced by a variety of users, including prosumers. (5) Moreover, organisational research is increasingly concerned with the issue of professionalization, as claiming professional status increases the prestige of the professional collectives to which individuals belong (e.g. Cheney & Lee Ashcraft, 2007). Like Stebbins' comments on serious leisure, such organisational perspectives go beyond the media to include all kinds of arts, sports and entertainment-related activities.

Today, there is a further strand gaining momentum that is more devoted to the diversity of business models and the monetization strategies in general (if there are any). For example Zabel (2021) summarizes in a review on the business models of SMIs that they “generate value by offering community-oriented and commercial content, based on personal qualities [...] and parasocial interactions with their users.” The main business activities of SMIs include content production, content distribution (increasingly on multiple platforms) paralleled by social activities like community manage-

ment, but also cooperation processes. In doing so, SMI work in increasingly complex production environments involving multiple stakeholders (e.g. brands, agencies, production assistants, users) suggesting a service dominant logic perspective (Vargo, & Lusch, 2016) based on the concept of value co-creation (Ramaswamy, & Ozcan, 2018). Compensation is often non-monetary (e.g. product samples), whereby the importance of monetary transfers seems to increase with the professionalism and reach of SMI going hand in hand with more complexity also in the production and distribution activities (author 6). Whilst there is increasing scholarly coverage of the conceptual dimensions of monetizing the activities of SMI up to establishing business models – albeit not all of them having a longer term perspective, there is still relatively little empirical research on the prevalence of specific business models or rather modes of monetization for example across different topics of SMI content or with regards to different levels of professionalization.

RESEARCH GAP, RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

FROM RESEARCH GAPS TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THIS STUDY

The review of extant research underlines a gap in understanding the relevance of different topics, the different degrees of professionalisation therein as well as the established formats. Furthermore, business models and typical schemes for compensating SMIs seem to be underresearched with regards to a differentiated view on content categories. We therefore derive the following research questions:

RQ1: How proliferant are specific topics among SMI of different professionalization?

RQ2: How do different content topics combine into clusters of related content?

RQ3: To what extent do different formats of content show up in the diverse topics?

RQ4: How established are diverse aspects of compensation and monetization across topics?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND OVERALL METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to answer the research question and to gather insight on different categories of content creation. The survey was distributed online in collaboration with the social media agency Territory Influence. The selection of countries in our sample aimed to encompass a diverse range of SMIs from various nations with comparable

economic development but distinct media systems (Halinn, & Mancini, 2017) and cultural backgrounds (Hofstede, 2011).

SURVEY APPROACH AND QUESTIONNAIRE

The online questionnaire was sent out for the period of a month in 2020 (mid July to mid August) and encompassed different aspects of content creation in social media, including: (a) specific usage patterns of social media platforms; (b) motivations behind posting and generating content; (c) types of content created; (d) different approaches or models respectively for monetizing content creation; and (e) sociodemographic information such as age, gender, and formal education. To ensure the cross-cultural validity of the measurement instruments, the questionnaire was translated into the respective languages by native speakers and checked for comprehensibility by face validity of native co-workers of Territory Influence in the respective countries. The items in the questionnaire were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The collected data were analyzed through cluster analyses, employing the statistical software IBM SPSS 28.

DOCUMENTATION OF RESULTS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The international sample consists of $n=46,486$ SMIs from seven different countries (Germany $n=4,292$; France $n=8,979$; Italy $n=14,268$; United Kingdom $n=2,616$; Spain $n=12,460$; Poland $n=1,826$; United States $n=2,204$). For our sample characteristics we analyzed the descriptives for the content categories. Of the $n=46,486$ content creators who participated in the survey, 33,102 completed the questions considering the content categories or topics respectively (72.1%). Table 1 shows the frequency of the content categories for every country. Additionally, the “specificity” of these topics is displayed as the percentage of having ticked only one content topic in the questionnaire.

In our sample is a gender bias with female participants comprising 84.4% of the total. Furthermore, the majority of content creators in our sample have a relatively small following, with 71.9% having fewer than 1000 followers, which reflects the empirical evidence from research (author 2) and the practice experience of the agency partner of this study. Those with follower counts ranging between 1000 and 5000 make up 20.5% of the entire sample. The latter two categories capture so-called non-influencers (author 2). A small percentage of content creators, 3.9%, have a

follower count between 5000 and 10,000, while 3.6% have over 10,000 followers – both ranges still corresponding to micro-influencers (autor 2). In terms of education, 37.7% of our participants had completed secondary education, 57.2% had attained higher education qualifications, and 5.1% reported having other types of formal qualifications.

Table 1: Sample characteristics (total number of survey participants per country) and relative frequency of content categories or topics respectively (value for country with the highest value in bold), and specificity of content generated (percentage of co-mention of another topic)

	GER	UK	POL	FRA	ESP	ITA	USA	Aver.	Specif.
Participants	3358	1916	1208	6797	8690	9794	1339		
About me and private life	55.3%	55.7%	73.8%	55.7%	60.2%	56.4%	54.7%	58.8%	21.8%
Food and cooking	60.2%	56.5%	54.7%	60.2%	60.3%	63.7%	57.4%	59.0%	11.4%
Lifestyle	36.4%	53.2%	67.8%	31.1%	48.5%	47.6%	41.7%	46.6%	8.2%
Travel and outdoor	36.9%	41.3%	44.6%	34.9%	52.6%	51.7%	32.6%	42.1%	6.7%
Beauty and cosmetics	44.8%	46.9%	63.1%	50.6%	54.9%	48.7%	37.3%	49.5%	11.5%
Pets and animals	35.3%	43.8%	26.5%	43.5%	43.3%	42.1%	44.9%	39.9%	6.1%
Health and fitness	33.3%	37.2%	35.8%	32.9%	34.1%	35.2%	33.9%	34.6%	5.5%
Fashion	19.6%	38.8%	49.2%	30.0%	43.3%	35.6%	26.6%	34.7%	1.9%
Music and art	16.1%	28.7%	15.6%	23.7%	29.3%	30.8%	27.2%	24.5%	8.5%
Do-it-yourself	29.6%	34.3%	20.3%	26.6%	27.1%	33.9%	33.5%	29.3%	3.6%
Comedy and entertainment	13.5%	34.1%	13.6%	21.7%	26.8%	22.8%	32.2%	23.5%	1.7%
Gaming and games	9.9%	25.4%	4.3%	12.6%	10.6%	13.6%	15.8%	13.2%	4.1%
Science and technology	8.3%	19.0%	6.8%	10.7%	15.3%	18.3%	13.9%	13.2%	2.3%
Psychology and mindfulness	10.0%	21.3%	5.9%	10.7%	14.2%	13.5%	20.9%	13.8%	1.5%

	GER	UK	POL	FRA	ESP	ITA	USA	Aver.	Specif.
News and politics	8.2%	20.8%	4.7%	16.9%	20.1%	19.7%	22.3%	16.1%	2.6%
Business and management	4.9%	10.1%	4.6%	4.8%	8.5%	9.3%	9.6%	7.4%	1.9%
Esoteric topics	2.9%	4.2%	1.4%	5.0%	4.7%	5.5%	5.2%	4.1%	0.6%

Relative frequencies of topics differ across countries although mostly not in a striking way (with exceptions). Diversity (in terms of deviation of percentage points from the average normalized by the average) is highest for comedy and all the topics listed below it in table 1 (deviation above 30%). Countries that stand out are the

- UK for “Do-it-yourself”, “Comedy and entertainment”, “Gaming and games”, “Science and technology”, Psychology and mindfulness”, and “Business and management”
- Poland for “About me and my private life”, “Lifestyle”, Beauty and cosmetics”, and “Fashion”,
- Spain for “Travel and outdoor”,
- Italy for “ Food and cooking”, “Music and art”, and “Esoteric topics”,
- UK for “Pets and animals” and “ News and politics”

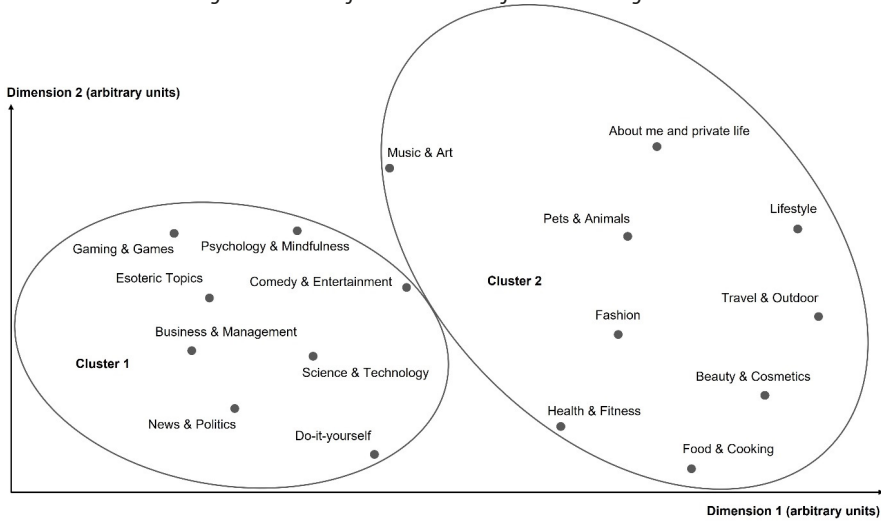
Not surprisingly, least specificity shows up with “About me and private life” followed by “Food and cooking”, and “Beauty and cosmetics”.

RELEVANCE AND COINCIDENCE OF CONTENT CATEGORIES

The results of the multidimensional scaling analysis, based on the co-occurrence of content categories per SMI, are presented in figure 1. Closeness between two topics in the diagramme signifies that the two topics are both selected by a substantial number of respondents. At first sight the topics in the clusters don’t have much in common. However, cluster 1 represents topics that require a deeper knowledge background and cluster 2 represents topics that do not require much background knowledge. Among other psychological, business or scientific topics were found to require a deeper knowledge background. The latter topics encompass a wide range of subjects that demand a certain level of expertise or understanding to fully grasp and engage with the content.

Figure 1

Multidimensional scaling on the basis of co-occurrence of content-categories



Cluster 2 topics were found to not require that much background knowledge with topics concerned with personal experiences from their private lives, lifestyle, fashion and where they travel or interact with pets or animals. These topics are more accessible and can be enjoyed or understood by individuals without extensive prior knowledge or experience in the respective domains. These results indicate that the co-occurrence patterns of content categories can be used to identify distinct clusters, representing topics that differ in terms of the knowledge background required for comprehension and engagement. Content topics also vary in their degree of monetization as well as professionalization. Both concepts are operationalized in the following and displayed in figure 2.

Professionalization (see also the section above on a theoretical characterization of influencers' professionalization) was calculated using a formula provided by a previous study (author 6). The regression weights from a logistic regression of the former study were used to determine the most relevant criteria for the level of professionalization ranging from zero to one. The independent variables included (a) the amount of time dedicated to posting, (b) presence of contractual relationships, and (c) the complexity of operations (based on the number of platforms handled). We used a quasi-metric variable to assess professionalization. This variable was calculated by relating the dichotomous variables: time spent on posting (v_1), complexity of operations (v_2), and contractual relationships (v_3). The combination was weighted by their respective

standardized beta coefficients 1 (1.43) , 2 (0.90), and 3 (0.70) from the logistic regression (1):

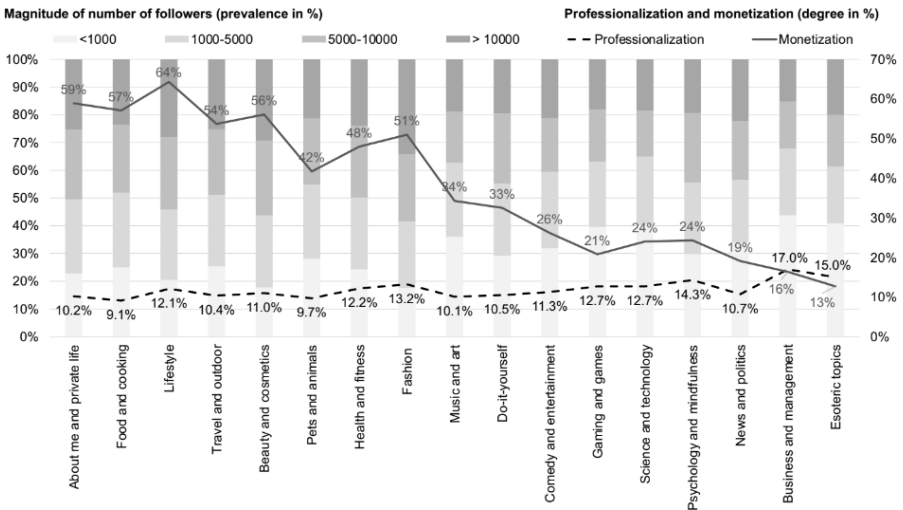
$$(1) \text{ professionalization} = \frac{\alpha_1 \cdot v_1 + \alpha_2 \cdot v_2 + \alpha_3 \cdot v_3}{\sum \alpha_i}$$

Monetization is a variable calculated from contractual relationships going beyond mere barter models and including monetary compensation.

Results in figure 2 indicate the degree of monetization is notably higher for topics related to personal life, fashion, beauty, and health compared to topics like news and politics. Topics such as business and management and esoteric subjects exhibit marginally higher levels of professionalization. The distribution of SMI across different levels of numbers of followers is fairly similar across topics and doesn't exhibit a pattern that deserves interpretation.

Figure 2

Content-categories with regards to number of followers as well as degree of professionalization and monetization



DIVERSITY OF CONTENT FORMATS

To identify common content formats, we analysed the provided data and observe patterns and similarities in the percentages across different content categories or topics respectively. Table 2 exhibits the proliferation of different content formats per topic.

The results show that content topics like fashion, beauty and cosmetics, health and fitness do have a focus in formats like 'product reviews and comparisons' combined with 'opinions and comments' and 'interaction with followers'. This suggests a focus on visually engaging content, such as makeup tutorials, fashion challenges, introducing health products or fitness trends. These formats are prone to engage the audience evolving a sense of attachment. In relation to other formats, this content is supported substantially by personal stories and regular updates on events considering their topic.

Formats related to information and opinion sharing are mainly among topics related to news, politics, business, management, and esoteric issues. The latter topics have formats like 'news content', 'opinions and rants', and 'facts and stats'. They are likely to focus on providing information, sharing opinions on current events. The SMIs present information related to their respective domains in quick visual overview sheets, for example posts with more than one picture where the audience has to swipe to the right for the next piece of information. The overviews often act as a brief introduction for further content that can be accessed via subscription.

SMIs who are focusing on personal lifestyle and self-improvement posts with topics about their private life or traveling destinations. These topics have relatively high percentages in formats like 'personal stories' in form of video blogs (vlogs) and documentations of challenges or roadtrips with. Here, SMIs do create short recap videos in form of reels and post them as highlights. The respective content creators focus more on sharing personal experiences, providing wellness tips, and showcasing travel adventures than creating awareness of educate their audience.

Another format focus can be shown for entertainment topics like comedy, and gaming, but also science and technology. The predominant formats here are 'reactions on other content', 'playful content and challenges'. Content creators comment on existing content, sharing entertaining content. This creates an entertaining edge on content that is accompanied by the voice of the SMI while interacting with their audience via chat. Predominately, such videos are posted on YouTube or live on Twitch with titles like "Reaction to..." or "(name of the influencer) reacts on". For gaming SMIs, livestreaming gameplay is very popular where the audience gains so called channel points while doing challenges or chat polls. Next to the playful content, they also inform about gaming equipment.

Table 2

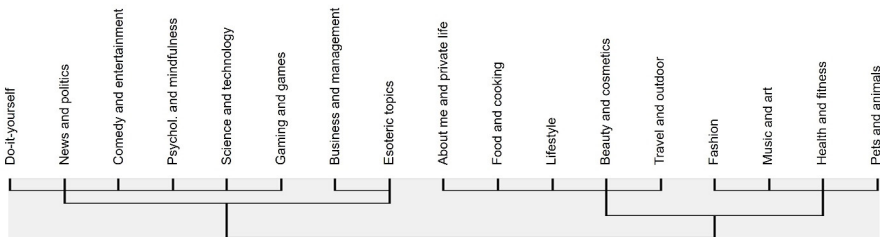
Content formats for different categories of content (the three content categories with the highest percentage are bolded in each of the columns)

	Product reviews and comparisons (e.g. tests)	Tutorials & walkthroughs (e.g. fitness guides)	Reactions on other content (e.g. reaction videos)	Playful content & challenges (e.g. contests, quizzes)	Interaction with followers (e.g. chat, surveys)	News content (e.g. about products & updates)	Opinions & rants (e.g. comments on social events)	Facts & stats (e.g. market data)	Personal stories (e.g. private events)	Virtual events (e.g. talks)	Meetups & workshops
About me & priv. life	69.7	17.2	33.9	26.0	41.2	48.4	45.2	13.1	71.7	11.9	8.1
Food and cooking	73.5	19.3	33.2	25.9	40.5	51.4	43.2	14.6	61.1	12.5	8.7
Lifestyle	76.7	20.6	38.4	28.4	43.1	50.4	50.2	14.8	62.9	13.4	9.1
Travel and outdoor	71.3	20.1	36.7	27.5	41.2	52.1	48.2	15.2	65.4	13.6	9.8
Beauty and cosmetics	82.2	21.6	33.3	26.5	45.3	52.9	44.8	14.4	60.5	13.4	9.3
Pets and animals	74.2	19.7	38.4	29.7	42.5	51.1	48.7	15.5	62.3	13.5	9.0
Health and fitness	80.2	23.1	41.9	32.0	43.8	52.5	53.2	17.4	59.9	14.8	10.2
Fashion	79.4	24.7	39.6	30.9	48.1	55.8	50.4	17.6	63.0	16.3	10.8
Music and art	72.8	21.2	44.3	33.5	41.8	53.1	55.6	17.4	65.3	15.5	10.8
Do-it-yourself	76.0	26.6	39.4	31.2	43.8	55.3	48.1	19.8	61.2	16.5	12.1
Comedy & entertain.	69.1	25.5	44.6	36.7	48.2	58.6	54.6	22.7	64.8	19.3	13.2
Gaming and games	78.7	24.6	49.4	41.2	42.1	52.0	58.3	20.0	56.6	16.3	10.1
Science & technology	74.7	27.9	49.5	37.7	43.7	59.2	61.5	25.6	56.7	18.7	12.9
Psych. & mindfulness	76.6	26.3	48.9	37.9	47.0	55.1	61.4	23.6	65.1	19.1	14.0
News and politics	66.7	24.6	46.1	34.4	44.9	66.8	63.7	26.8	59.5	19.6	12.9

	Product reviews and comparisons (e.g. tests)	Tutorials & walkthroughs (e.g. fitness guides)	Reactions on other content (e.g. reaction videos)	Playful content & challenges (e.g. contests, quizzes)	Interaction with followers (e.g. chat, surveys)	News content (e.g. about products & updates)	Opinions & rants (e.g. comments on social events)	Facts & stats (e.g. market data)	Personal stories (e.g. private events)	Virtual events (e.g. talks)	Meetups & workshops
Bus. & management	73.9	31.1	56.0	41.0	47.9	68.8	61.8	31.0	59.8	24.4	17.2
Esoteric topics	77.1	29.7	60.0	47.6	46.4	63.5	64.7	27.7	61.6	23.3	14.4
Average	74.9	23.8	43.2	33.4	44.2	55.7	53.7	19.8	62.2	16.6	11.3

We employed a hierarchical (Ward method) analysis (Punj & Stewart, 1983) to identify content clusters being similar with regards to their formats. Interpretation of the dendrogram indicated a two-cluster solution after 15 iterations characterized by their specific content category. The cluster analysis reveals (see figure 3) the same structure derived by the multidimensional scaling analysis (see figure 1).

Figure 3
Clustering categories of content according to their similarity in formats



The cluster differ concerning the necessary background for content creation within the content categories. One cluster consists of topics that require a deeper knowledge background, such as psychological, business, and scientific subjects. These topics encompass a wide range of subjects that demand expertise or understanding to fully engage with the content. In contrast, the other cluster comprised topics that do not require as much background knowledge, including personal experiences, lifestyle, fashion, and interactions with pets and animals. The latter topics are more accessible and can be

understood and enjoyed by individuals without extensive prior knowledge or experience in the respective domains.

PRODUCED CONTENT AND TYPES OF COMPENSATION FOR THE ENTREPRENEURIAL INFLUENCER

The results of the analysis on types of compensation for various content categories are presented in Table 3.

SMI utilize various models to compensate for their efforts to post content in areas of their personal expertise or with regards to their own every day life and often combining it with branded information from third parties. Not all of these models lead to a direct monetization by the latter. Some compensate by branded free goods and services, by coupons, invitations to events, or are based on direct gratifications from followers that range from monetary donations or other gifts to more subscription-like one time or regular payments.

Table 3

Role of certain types of compensation per content-category (the three content-categories with the highest percentage are bolded in each of the compensation models)

	monetary compensation	physical products or samples related to the brand	coupons to buy products/ services online or offline	invitations to events	direct compensation from audience
About me and my private life	63.5	84.2	56.8	32.6	33.1
Food and cooking	58.4	81.7	59.8	31.5	32.5
Lifestyle	70.2	84.0	57.2	34.2	34.4
Travel and outdoor	56.8	83.0	59.8	35.1	35.5
Beauty and cosmetics	61.1	83.9	58.8	33.1	33.6
Pets and animals	44.6	83.9	61.2	31.3	38.3
Health and fitness	52.9	84.8	59.9	32.3	37.4
Fashion	55.7	82.2	56.2	33.9	36.5
Music and art	35.1	81.3	61.4	33.4	42.1
Do-it-yourself	35.4	83.3	64.2	32.3	42.3
Comedy and entertainment	28.0	81.6	66.2	34.1	41.0
Gaming and games	23.3	82.8	65.6	32.8	45.5
Science and technology	26.1	81.8	67.9	36.9	48.2

	monetary compensation	physical products or samples related to the brand	coupons to buy products/ services online or offline	invitations to events	direct compensation from audience
Psychology and mindfulness	28.1	86.1	65.3	33.3	46.6
News and politics	20.3	86.9	67.6	36.6	45.5
Business and management	18.9	84.8	71.2	38.4	54.0
Esoteric Topics	15.0	83.4	68.8	38.2	58.6
Average	40.8	83.5	62.8	34.1	41.5

Content creators who create content on “Lifestyle” dominate (70.2%) when it comes to monetary compensation followed by “About me and my private life” (63.5%) and “Beauty and cosmetics” (61.1%). The dominant models in terms of monetization include SMI participating in affiliate marketing programs where they earn a commission for driving sales or leads through unique referral links or discount codes. They promote products or services and receive a percentage of the revenue generated from their affiliate links. Some SMI also have a significant following on platforms like YouTube can monetize their content through advertising. SMI then earn revenue from ads displayed on their videos or through pre-roll and mid-roll ads. Moreover, SMI may license their content, such as photos, videos, or written works, for use by brands, media outlets, or other individuals. They may also create and sell merchandise such as clothing, accessories, or digital products that align with their personal brand. SMI also often create and sell digital products, such as e-books, online courses, tutorials, or personalized services like coaching or consulting. By doing so they leverage their expertise and knowledge to provide value to their audience in exchange for a fee. Naturally, the higher the sales potential of a influencer’s sphere of influence, the greater the scope and scale for monetization.

In branded collaborations and sponsorships SMI often partner with brands to promote products or services through sponsored posts, videos, or dedicated campaigns in exchange for free samples of goods and services. The latter model does not differ much across topics and range between 80% and 90% for all of them. Coupons are most important with “Science and technology” (67.9%) and “Esoteric topics” (68.8%), but overall do not vary that much either across categories.

SMI's activities are also not restrained to their postings but often include participating in events. For some SMI a participation in an attractive event might be a compensation in its own right. Others add to their revenues by attending conferences, speaking engagements, or hosting their own workshops or meet-ups. They may also charge appearance fees or collaborate with brands to host sponsored events. Events are also most relevant for "Science and technology" (36.9%), "Business and management" (38.4%), and "Esoteric topics" (38.2%) – again with relatively little variation across topics.

Last but not least, some SMIs rely on donations by their audience. Crowdfunding platforms or fan support through platforms like Patreon or Ko-fi. They offer exclusive content or other perks in exchange for periodic or one-time gratifications. Such gratifications are the compensation corresponding to subscriptions or per use schemes known from traditional media. Direct compensation from the audience exhibit substantial differences with percentages highest for "Esoteric topics" (58.6%), "Business and management" (54.0%), and "Science and technology" (48.2%) but being for all topics from "Music and art" and below (in table 3) among the three most frequent ones.

SMI often utilize a combination of these compensation models to diversify their revenue streams and adapt to different platforms and audience preferences. The specific model chosen often depends on factors such as the SMI's niche, audience demographics, platform focus, and personal branding.

CONCLUSIONS

Content creators do take an increasing economic role in creating new possibilities to advertise products and create fruitful relationships with companies. However, content creators also develop a sense of entrepreneurship by deciding on a topic they serve. With their expertise, they often focus on specific niches, catering to their target audience's unique interests and preferences.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS ON THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With regards to RQ1 (How proliferant are content topics among SMI of different professionalization?), we observed that topics differ strikingly in their occurrence. Higher professionalization levels are predominant for content topics business, psychology, and esoteric topics depicting the general background needed to be authentic in these areas. Countries also differ in the proliferation of topics with Poland leading for lifestyle, beauty, and fashion topics, Spain for travel, Italy for food, music, arts, and esoteric topics, USA for pets but also news, and the UK for DIY content, comedy, gaming, technology, psychology as well as business. Neither France nor Germany excels in one of the content categories but rather reflect the average.

Our results for RQ2 (How do different content topics combine into clusters of related content?) also show that co-reference to two or more topics is not equally distributed. The two clusters identified differ by their necessary level of background knowledge to create content. More knowledge is necessary to serve topics like psychology or business, than this is the case with stories about oneself or preferences in fashion and lifestyle. All in all, the findings suggest content categories often co-occur and can be separated into two clusters that represent topics that vary in the level of prior knowledge needed to understand and engage with them.

Addressing RQ3 (To what extent do different formats of content show up in the diverse topics?), categories with a visual focus like beauty, fashion, and health were found to have higher percentages in formats such as product reviews, tutorials, and interactions with followers. Information and opinion-sharing media mainly concern news, politics, business, and esoteric topics. Personal lifestyle and self-improvement topics exhibited higher percentages in categories like personal stories and traveling. Entertainment-focused topics such as comedy, gaming as well as science and technology were prominent in formats like reactions to other content and play throughs with challenges for the audience.

Finally, RQ4 (How established are diverse aspects of compensation and monetization across topics?) touches upon creating content as a business or at least upon early entrepreneurial activities as an SMI. The data presented here showcases various approaches SMIs employ to compensate for their efforts to create content, whether it relates to their expertise or personal lives, and incorporates branded information from third parties. These approaches include participating in affiliate marketing programs, generating revenue through advertising on platforms like YouTube, licensing content, selling merchandise or digital products, and providing services such as coaching or consulting. Additionally, SMIs collaborate with brands for sponsored content, participate in events, and receive donations or other forms of direct gratifications by their followers. By combining multiple models, SMIs aim to diversify their income and accommodate different platforms and audience preferences, choosing the models that align with their niche, target audience, platform focus, and personal branding.

Overall, the most served topics like lifestyle, private life, and fashion gain the most attention and reward the SMIs monetarily via several models. However, more professional SMIs (at least currently) serve overall less posted content categories (e.g., psychology, business, or esoteric topics). The cluster analysis grouped them among the content categories that require a higher level of content specific expertise. It revealed two distinct clusters of content

categories. Notably, topics that require a deeper understanding in domains such as psychology, business, and science are forming one cluster. These topics resonate with broader background knowledge being necessary to be authentic and reach the right audience to watch their content. For collaboration with such SMIs, it is important to relate to a higher level of professionalization. Therefore, companies should also bring a certain knowledge to the cooperation to create a holistic campaign because content creators choose this topic on purpose according to their background knowledge. The second cluster comprises topics that require less background knowledge or content-related expertise. Here, content creators experience a certain sense of sharing their fashion tastes, travel destinations, and affection for pets or animals, resonating from their own opinion and everyday life. For the audience, it is easier to understand the message of such SMIs as they do not need a certain prior knowledge of these topics and directly build a personal relationship with the content creator. The focus here is to connect and start an interaction with their audience.

Companies should also be aware of the diversity in the formats of communication. The results showed that personal stories considering fashion, beauty, music, and art are presented visually. Different media types drive different engagement or interaction with the SMI, hence, the company. The different prevalences of formats per topic suggest that they differ in their effects within a certain content category. Obviously, it is not only important what kind of stories are told but also how the audience is engaged by the latter.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF SMI AS CONTENT CREATORS IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

SMI leverage their influence and reach to provide authentic and relatable endorsements, thus bridging the gap between brands and consumers. They can build a loyal and dedicated following across social media platforms, whereby their influence stems from their expertise, creativity, and ability to connect with their audience, leading to higher engagement rates and the potential to shape consumer behavior (Tafesse, & Wood, 2021). Furthermore, SMIs or content creators often act like entrepreneurs (Han, 2020). Content creators can monetize their influence and creativity through brand collaborations, sponsored content, affiliate marketing, merchandise sales, and other revenue streams. This enables them to turn their passion into a viable career and contribute to the creative economy (Shapiro, & Aneja, 2018).

Content creators might increasingly challenge traditional gatekeepers and incumbent media in the future by providing alternative and diverse perspectives. They have the potential to disrupt established industries and democra-

tize access to creative platforms, giving rise to new voices and ideas (author 4). As the volume of digital content grows, content creators can play a crucial role in curating and recommending content to their audience. Their recommendations and endorsements can shape consumption patterns and contribute to discovering emerging artists and creators.

The future may see content creators further professionalize their work by establishing genre or content specific standards, forming collectives, and collaborating with other creators and professionals (author 6). This could lead to more structured collaborations, generating value based on their creativity in value-co-creation processes. All these trends will depend on factors like further technological advancements (e.g., AI and virtual influencers alongside of it), shifting consumer behaviors, and structural change in media industries and beyond.

LIMITATIONS AND OUTLOOK ON FURTHER RESEARCH

There are limitations of this study concerning the overall methodology as well as the specific data collected. The survey approach based on a questionnaire with closed questions does not allow for further exploration of new developments in this still highly dynamic field. Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that certain subsets of SMI have different understandings of the used terminology as SMIs have different sociodemographic backgrounds but also live and work in diverse contexts given the large variety of topics covered. Regarding the data, we see a substantial surplus of female participants that might lead to a certain bias. However, investigating gender differences in the areas discussed in this article did not show significant effects. Lastly, the countries we included in the survey are not encompassing. Hence, with regards to cultural contexts, there might be a bias in the data and not as much diversity as expected by the choice of the different countries selected for the survey.

A rewarding future research topic, is first of all, a qualitative explorative approach to shed light on the details of formats used in the postings and their orchestration into stories across platforms. The systematic approach with closed questions and standardized answers shows a wide variety that a survey approach cannot fully capture. Furthermore, formats and styles to combine them on a meta-level to complex narratives change over time, and certain patterns evolve per topic or content category. Although there is a plethora of different degrees of freedom to format the content, only some are dominant within a given category. Why do SMI seem to converge their style and what is the mechanism that leads to such trends?

A qualitative complement to this quantitative research would also be interesting regarding the different compensation models or even more encom-

passing the different business models established per topic. Obviously, the dynamics of the interactions among the different stakeholders (SMI, social media user, brand, ...) differ across content categories, as do the models that develop (and possibly also change over time).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS AND INCUMBENT MEDIA

The cultural and creative industries, including media organizations, play a significant role in producing and delivering symbolic value. Through creative storytelling and messaging, SMIs reach large audiences, impacting society and its members in various sociocultural ways. Taken together, these activities involve significant sociocultural ramifications for the general public.

For companies or agencies, structuring their portfolio according to the identified clusters can be helpful for future cooperation with SMIs. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that monetary compensation is still predominant for SMIs who share their own personal story and post about their own opinions. Companies can start campaigns with such SMIs to create customer engagement on a regular and authentic basis. In this line, companies should be cautious, as some SMIs may also produce opinionated and rant-like content when they share mainly their own experiences and feelings. This can backfire, especially when dealing with the younger generations.

Content creators who focus on subjects like news, politics, business, management, and science topics aim to offer informative and unbiased information. They present facts, statistics, or news content to educate and raise awareness mainly without taking sides or passing judgment. These creators are typically more professional. They have extensive knowledge and expertise in specific areas, making them trusted experts. When companies collaborate with such creators, they can be more confident that their campaign's message will be clear and aligned with their goals, leaving little room for confusion or conflicting interpretations. All in all, companies can use the insight from this article to direct their social media activities with content creators from three perspectives: content topic decision, format decision, and level of professionalization:

When deciding on the topic for social media collaborations with content creators, practitioners should consider the sociocultural ramifications and the symbolic value associated with the content. They need to understand the audience's interests, preferences, and the potential impact of different topics. By aligning the chosen topic categories with the organization's values and goals, practitioners can ensure that the content resonates with the target audience and creates a meaningful connection.

Choosing the appropriate formats for collaborations with content crea-

tors involves understanding the different platforms and audience preferences. Practitioners should consider the characteristics of each format, such as visual-focused content, informative content, or entertaining content, and match them with the intended message and target audience. This decision will influence the engagement and effectiveness of the collaboration.

To assess the collaboration with content creators, marketing managers need to understand how SMIs make money and get paid in their content area or genre. Managers should also consider whether the content creator mainly shares personal stories and opinions or provides informative and unbiased content. This evaluation will help marketing managers to figure out how valuable the collaboration would be for your organization.

Generally, marketing or brand practitioners should carefully consider the topic categories, formats, and level of professionalisation when collaborating with content creators. This strategic approach shall enhance the effectiveness of social media activities and enable creating meaningful and hence successful collaborations that resonate with the target audience and align with the organization's goals.

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