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Lydia Dunkley

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Lydia Dunkley

Reaching Generation Z: Harnessing the Power of Digital Influencers in Film Publicity

This paper examines the benefits of targeting Generation Z in film publicity campaigns. To effectively target Generation Z research signals online platforms have the greatest impact, in particular Generation Z turn to other consumers to gain information about products and brands. This makes digital influencers highly effective at reaching Generation Z as they regard them as other consumers, so have a high level of trust in their recommendations. The research also signals the term celebrity is diversifying for this Generation, with some digital influencers thought of in a higher regard than traditional celebrities; making traditional film publicity efforts focused on harnessing the star power of the talent in an upcoming release, not as effective. Digital influencers can be included in film publicity activities, through their incorporation in experiential activities, and their inclusion at screenings and premieres.

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema admissions and sales both domestically and internationally saw exceptional growth in 2015 due to the release of a variety of blockbuster smash hits, such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Jurassic World* (Macke 2016). Yet, the slates for both 2016 and 2017 although “promising... may struggle to match the stellar performance of 2015” (Oliver 2015), highlighting an all too familiar threat to box office sales film studios face. One of the ways film studios can try and keep the success of 2015 alive is through targeted film publicity efforts to reach Generation Z as studies have found the most frequent cinema goers in the UK are younger visitors (Oliver 2015). This paper aims to outline what consumers make up Generation Z, who are digital influencers, and where their place is within film publicity.

WHO ARE GENERATION Z?

There is much debate between researchers over when Generation Z were born, yet a majority seem to agree it is anyone born after 1995 who has grown up with the internet

integrated into their daily life (Anderson 2015; Benhamou 2015; Stein 2015; Fujioka 2016). This integration has meant Generation Z prefer online publicity campaigns, particularly through social media (Alberti 2016; Anderson 2015; Benhamou 2015; Stein 2015; Fujioka 2016). Generation Z is a hot topic for marketers currently due to the fact they are set to become the largest consumer group worldwide.

“In just a few years, nearly 4 in 10 consumers will be from Generation Z, and their purchasing power will rise exponentially over the next five to seven years as they grow to be the single largest group of consumers worldwide.” (Anderson 2015). The immense spending power of Generation Z is also highlighted by Williams (2015) who believes they are “flush with billions in spending power, they promise untold riches to marketers who can find the master key to their psyche.” Most importantly, Generation Z “are forming their spending habits now which can influence their habits into adulthood” (Idol 2016), highlighting the benefit on the long-term spending habits of this consumer group if they are effectively reached now.

This has led some to argue Generation Z should be positioned at the forefront of marketing communications rather than the Millennials who used to be in their place. In 2015 Ketchum even began a speciality offering focused solely on Generation Z, called “Engaging Gen Z” (Bradley 2015; Geller 2015). Although this paper is focused primarily on engaging Generation Z, the power of Millennials as a consumer group cannot be ignored completely due to the fact there are an estimated 13.8M Millennials in the UK and a further 75.3M in the US (Lyons 2016; Stein 2015). Yet, as Generation Z continues to grow it seems undeniable “smart brands should examine and follow Gen Z trends for future marketing” (Stein 2015). Carter (cited by Stein 2015) notes brands should already be trying to target Generation Z because “brands don’t want to have to rebrand themselves 10 years from now and try to become relevant.” This further implies the trends we are seeing with Generation Z currently look set to continue into the future.

WHO ARE DIGITAL INFLUENCERS?

Swant (2015) defines digital influencers as “sophisticated media consumers whose reach is coveted by not only media companies but also brands” due to their ability to engage Generation Z, making them a vital communications tool.

“In an age where consumers’ content consumption has almost touched the brink of saturation, finding individuals who are considered influential when it comes to consumer decisions can make a world of difference for brands” (Newman 2014). Mastroinanni (2016) states this is due to the fact Generation Z are a “web savvy, app friendly generation” meaning members of this consumer group are able to use the internet as a platform for creating content. This means ordinary individuals are able to elevate themselves to the role of digital influencers. Digital influencers span across a number of social networking platforms, including blogs, vlogs, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Vine and Twitter (Solis 2012). In the UK there is a large variety of key digital influencers, with YouTube stars such as KSI, Zoella and PewDiePie topping the list (Dredge 2016).

GENERATION Z'S RELATIONSHIP WITH DIGITAL UNFLUENCERS

One of the key trends for PR practitioners to take away from Generation Z's spheres of influence is, "consumers no longer have to listen to brands. Consumers only listen to other consumers" (Pollack 2013). This is where digital influencers come in, because these otherwise "ordinary people" have huge influence on Generation Z's purchasing decision making processes (Newman 2014; Morrison 2015; Smart Insights 2015; Hymans cited by Dredge 2016). In fact, consumer trust in digital influencers is so high, it only just falls behind the trust Generation Z have in recommendations from friends and family (Affilinet 2015).

Most significantly for the world of film publicity, Affilinet (2015) found consumers were more likely to trust the opinions of influencers over mainstream media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, broadcast), highlighting how traditional avenues pursued for publicity activities might prove ineffective with Generation Z. Although there has been an increase in the number of digital influencers who are monetising their social media efforts to assist brands with the promotion of their products (Newman 2014), this does not seem to be an issue for Generation Z. Whether this is due to the fact they are unaware of this, or they just don't care is not widely documented, the most important take away is "consumers trust real people" (Newman 2014), making digital influencers vital in the promotion of products and services.

DIGITAL INFLUENCERS VS. CELEBRITIES

Research suggests Generation Z lack the ability to connect with celebrities the way they do real people and are more likely to be influenced by promotion via a digital influencer (Smart Insights 2015). This means celebrities do not hold as much selling power as they have done with previous consumer Generations.

"Big-name movie stars are not necessarily bringing audiences to theatres – only 19% of moviegoers cite seeing a movie with their favourite actor/actress as a motivation for their most recent trip to the theatre."

Macke (2016).

The research above conducted by Macke (2016) highlights that now consumers are after more than just big name talent. Solis (2012) also notes digital influencers themselves are now classed as celebrities for Generation Z. This is further expanded upon by Saul (2016) who states "*celebrity* is diversifying... where once only film stars... would fit under this classification, social media influencers are now working their way to the fore." This highlights the relevance of the use of digital influencers in film publicity, as they are now considered by Generation Z to be of the same status as film talent. This could be one of the reasons behind the findings by Treme (2010, p.5) who found "promotional appearances do not significantly affect box-office revenues", highlighting further harnessing the "star power" of talent in the upcoming releases might not be the big push box office sales need.

DIGITAL INFLUENCERS INTEGRATION INTO FILM PUBLICITY ACTIVITIES

Of course, there is no denying that film studios across the world have already begun to realise the power digital influencers have “to cause effect, change behaviour, and drive measurable outcomes online” (Solis 2012, p.8). This has made the use of digital influencers a vital element of film marketing, with many film studios allocating proportions of their digital budgets to influencer marketing (Dahan cited by Coffee 2014). Yet, McCratic (cited by Bradley 2016) argues digital influencers should not only be viewed as marketing tools, as he notes “in 2016, influencer marketing will be to PR what digital was to traditional advertising”. This reiterates digital influencers are set to become a key tool in a PR practitioner’s arsenal.

As previously highlighted, evidence suggests Generation Z responds best to online publicity, in particular through social media, whilst traditional publicity activities focused on gaining print and broadcast coverage are less effective (Affilinet 2015; Alberti 2016; Anderson 2015; Benhamou 2015; Stein 2015; Fujioka 2016). It is undeniable film studios have embraced the use of social media tools over the past few years (Warren 2010; Robehmed 2015), yet a study has found Generation Z can often find a brands’ social media content not engaging (Reggars 2016). Digital influencers already have a direct connection to an engaged Generation Z audience, and know exactly what content they want to see, making them invaluable in helping film studios create online content Generation Z can engage with.

Most importantly, Generation Z respond best to content that puts the “brand in the background for the sake of just being playful” (Alberti 2016), meaning the inclusion of digital influencers in junket activities should focus on offering a disconnect from the upcoming release. This is not a new concept in film publicity by any means, with journalist experiential activities included in a variety of junkets for many years now. Journalist experiential activities are events run alongside the junket day, which allow journalists/ presenting personalities to take part in an activity immersing them in an aspect of an upcoming release. These events focus on the journalist featured rather than the talent, allowing for the creation of unique stand-up content, so as to give the audience an immersive perspective into an aspect of a release. One example of a journalist experiential activity is for *Edge of Tomorrow* (Warner Bros.), which allowed journalists to try on the exo-suits featured in the film and create content as if there were at the taking part in a battle scene.

Figure 1: Journalist Scott Carty Taking Part in Simulated Battle Scene from *Edge of Tomorrow* (Carty 2014) (copyright Scott Carty; accessed via YouTube)



The events would allow for digital influencers to experiment with aspects of the activities, to create unique content they know their audience would be interested in seeing.

“If you engage with them in the right way, and you create content for them but you accept that they’re going to want to customize, curate and remix that content and make it their own and pass it on, then that’s a really interesting opportunity.”
(Bluden cited by Swant 2015).

This highlights the benefit of these events for film studios’ social media efforts. Furthermore, due to film studios having set the parameters for the event, they are able to foresee the possible content a digital influencer might gain from the activity. This allows for digital influencers to put their own stamp on events in a controlled environment.

The experiential events lend themselves to digital influencers who create primarily moving image content, so for digital influencers who traditionally have online print based influence (i.e. bloggers), it would be advisable to invite influencers to screenings and premieres. That is not to say it would not be beneficial to invite digital influencers who specialise in moving image as well, as this will also present them with an opportunity to create unique content. Digital influencers inclusion at screenings and premieres could prove influential in encouraging Generation Z to go to the cinema to see upcoming releases, as Peterson (2014) notes they “suffer from FOMO (fear of missing out) more than millennials”. This means they could feel inclined to undertake the same activity as the digital influencer to feel as though they are included. Furthermore, the suggestion digital influencers have gone to see an upcoming title could act as a recommendation for their next trip to the cinema (Pollack 2013; Affilinet 2015).

CONCLUSION

Arguably, Generation Z could hold the key to the continuation of the box office success of 2015, making the implementation of publicity tools that effectively engage them vital. It seems evident the trends explored in this paper, in conjunction with Generation Z's spheres of influence, are set to continue into the future. This makes the immediate implementation of publicity efforts to suit Generation Z essential, as it will be harder for film studios to "rebrand themselves 10 years from now [to] try to become relevant" (Carter cited by Stein 2015). The trend with the biggest impact on film publicity is the diversification of the notion of celebrity (Saul 2016) suggesting in the future, digital influencers will hold a higher power of influence for Generation Z than traditional celebrities. Perhaps over time, digital influencers might even gain talent status within junket activities, to be incorporated alongside traditional talent focused activities. But, at this point in time what is most apparent is a digital influencers ability to "build an authentic bond with Gen Z - often in just eight seconds or less" (Bradley 2016), making them invaluable to future film publicity efforts.

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