

Leadership Chaos: When Power is in the Hands of Followers

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Research Background

It has been argued that leaders only exist when they have followers (Grint, 2010). However followership has gained a somewhat negative connotation (Carsten et al., 2014) with the word 'follower' carrying with it notions of inferiority to the leader and thus reinforcing a power imbalance in the leader-follower relationship (Jackson and Parry, 2011). Nevertheless, there is an increasingly blurred line between leaders and followers in some contexts (Bennis, 2008), with the latter being arguably afforded more power by non-traditional means such as anonymous blogging. According to Kellerman (2012) an increased power of followers can be partly attributed to technological imperatives and cultural constraints. We build on this extant work by focussing on the role of social media, where the term follower has become part of the accepted language of sites such as Twitter and Instagram.

The Instagram influencer market alone has grown exponentially in recent years. It's now a billion dollar industry with a value projected to double by 2019 (Statista, 2018). Social media is increasingly being utilised by users to build their brand, digital celebrity identity and followership (Fischer and Reuber, 2011). These individuals are using their skills, knowledge, and expertise to become social media influencers (hereafter social media leaders – SMLs) and can be defined as content creators who have established a solid base of following through their social media activities (De Veirman et al., 2017).

SMLs are able to drive the attitudes and behaviour of social media followers (SMFs) by pushing content at them. In fact this aspect of social media leadership has received an ample attention (i.e. Nair et al., 2010; Khamis et al., 2017; Daniel et al., 2018). However, the nature of SMLs-SMFs relationships remains largely underexplored. Traditional views on leadershipship indicate that follower behaviour is a direct result of what leaders do and that leaders are the active ones within the relationships. But no studies explore if this is the case with social media influencing where followers have interactive means of impacting SMLs' activities. In our exploratory research we discovered a different side to the SMLs-SMFs relationship, the one where traditional perspective on a follower is transformed.

Methodology

We adopted a hybrid qualitative methodology, a mix of netnographic observations (Kozinets, 2015) and grounded theory (Glaser and Straus, 2017), to explore SMLs-SMFs relationships. Using unstructured interviews, we first interviewed twelve social media micro-influencers who are part of the Bournemouth Bloggers community. In line with Glaser and Strauss (1967) we used three-step coding process to analyse data. Second step of the data collection and analysis involved an observational netnography of social media influencers accounts. This enabled us to explore how social media influencers are interacting with their followers. A total of 135 posts, accessible and available in the public domain, were collected and analysed using Bolat and O'Sullivan's (2017) three analytical steps.

Key Findings

Our integrated findings show that SMLs are largely influenced by network behaviour of SMFs, meaning sentiment of engagement as well as behavioural social media activities (i.e. likes and comments) are guiding what content SMLs post and how they brand themselves. All SMLs desire to establish a greater followership. SMFs are almost perceived as SMLs' currency. Consequently, SMLs appear to go through a cognitive thought process of how to curate followership, in line with Grint (2010)'s notion of leaders existing only if they have followers. A fundamental element towards this is a continuous two-way dialogue with SMFs and reciprocity. Moreover, our integrated results support existing literature (Solis 2016) in suggesting that SMLs are able to establish a sense of intimacy by posting elements of their personal everyday lives.

We found that SMFs drive content and have a large contribution to SMLs' activities. This particular finding demonstrates the active role SMFs play within the context of social media – aspect that is largely ignored by existing literature. The SMLs-SMFs relationship can be said to be co-produced and co-constructed (Shamir, 2007), with SMLs interacting with their SMFs to ask for views and recommendations, as well as crucially thanking them and publishing content they ask to be posted.

Interestingly, our study found that there could be a dark side to followership, which can have negative repercussions for SMLs. SMLs are driven by an increased sense of confidence, generated by the number of likes and follows they gain. However, we found that despite being empowered through increased confidence, SMLs suffer from anxiety, social media fear and insecurity. Our interviews highlight the manner in which mental health issues can be triggered by SMFs themselves, who play an important role in shaping the direction SMLs take. However this in turn can have an impact on how authentic SMLs see themselves as being - which can create internal conflict. Gabriel (2011) concluded that *"followers may love the leader, craving protection and support but they also resent and envy the leader"*. In SMLs-SMFs context it is not about resistance but about a continuous power shifts within the relationship. Moreover, when power is shifted to SMFs, followership can take both a light (positive) and dark (negative) turn.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

Despite integrating both followers and leaders perspectives within our research, we have used different samples within both phases of research. Further studies into power shifts are required to understand dynamics, antecedents and outcomes within various scenarios.

Relevance / Importance to Conference Theme

The study of followers as key components of the leadership process through their enactment of followership has been largely missed in the leadership literature. Our research demonstrates the social media context presents opportunities to investigate this further.

Followers often considered the individuals who lack the capacity to lead – Adidas slogan 'never follow' is exemplar. We discovered that in the context of social media this is not true. SMLs-SMFs relationships are complex and represent various scenarios of power shifts with SMFs taking active role in increasing SMLs' power but also in destroying it. With this in mind, there is much more to be done in further understanding the role technology plays in leader-follower relationships and power shifts.

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