Online Manipulation in Inspirational Messages: A Case Study

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Abstract. In September 2018 in Germany, you can find outdoor, therefore offline advertisements for an online service provider: Facebook. The main message of the campaign is that Facebook is fighting against “fakeness”: against fake accounts and fake news. This is only one example for the relevance of “fakelessness” and credibility nowadays. This paper copes with online manipulation, drawing on the example of a case study on Hungarian motivational messages. Inspirational messages (as well as fake news, pseudo-scientific texts) often show clear signs of deceptive nature, still they are shared by many users on Facebook. What could be the reason for this? The paper tries to answer the question by analysing the characteristics of inspirational messages.

Keywords: influencers, online manipulation, inspirational messages

1. Influencers and Manipulation

Online influencers have a genuine relationship with their audiences and know how to build human connections on a level that brands cannot achieve through traditional forms of advertising. Their reach magnitude can be small or large, influencing a tight-knit community of afficionados (micro-influencers) or talking to the world masses (those with celebrity status) (Pellicer, 2018). Macro- and micro-celebrities with many social media followers also act as opinion leaders (Marwick–Boyd, 2010; Senft, 2008), which can be quite profitable for them: marketers increasingly often contact online opinion leaders to make subtle or express reference to a product or service in consideration of financial support or

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1 In influencer marketing, two further categories are used in addition to influencers based on their relationship and financial arrangements with the company: brand ambassadors and brand advocates. In short: brand ambassadors are always paid and are hired for long-term collaborations. They often appear on branded materials and are the face of the company on their advertising. Brand advocates are the most passionate and loyal customers, but they can also be the employees, partners, or shareholders of a company (Pellicer, 2018).
certain products (or product samples). This is the simplified description of the technique called influencer marketing. Influence, persuasion, and manipulation are three strongly interrelated concepts.

Presenting the extensive literature of verbal and visual manipulation is beyond the scope and intent of this paper; so, only a few defining elements are outlined here. Manipulation is a type of influence aimed at influencing others’ ideas, opinion, emotions, and behaviour (cf. Van Dijk, 2006). Anett Árvay writes that “communicators try to create a standpoint or opinion in the audience that is favourable to them or to change (or strengthen) the opinion of the audience in a given topic” (Árvay, 2007: 2). István Zentai terms manipulation those instances of influencing “where the target person is unaware of being influenced but ultimately gives the intended reaction” (Zentai, 1998: 14). Eszter Bátházi (2008: 445), however, argues that “this definition ignores the [...] situation where the target person is aware of being influenced and still reacts as intended by the influencer”. This controversy is eliminated in István Síklaki’s definition: “successful manipulation [...] creates a paradox situation in which the manipulator achieves its goal whether you give credit to him or not” (Síklaki, 1994: 129). While persuasion is a two-way process, manipulation – as it is based on a manipulative intent – seems more unidirectional.

My perception is that the authors (or specialized sharers) of online motivational text-image messages manipulate their audience and forge the identity of a wise, reliable, and experienced media or person in the eye of their audience.

2. Narrative Images and Storytelling

The simplification of producing, editing, and distributing pictures has also changed their role. Traditionally, pictures were treated as illustrations to texts or as a kind of decoration (e.g. product shots, stills) which represents an ideal world. However, today’s fierce fight for consumers’ attention requires new types of visual content. The so-called storytelling pictures (including graphics, photos, and videos) build on the visual narrative. This shift of perspective is reflected in the collections of stock photo agencies (such as GettyImages or Shutterstock) which used to prefer standard, neutral, and therefore widely usable pictures. Today, those pictures become so-called swipe-stopping images, which look realistic and authentic. In addition, a “good” picture catches the eye, it is easily remembered, emotionally touching, more than the optical repetition of the text and reflects something more than what is evident, that is, it tells a story (Baldoni, 2011).

So, how could we define the concept of visual storytelling? It is the telling of stories in a visual format (image, video, infographic, presentation, meme, or other format based on visuality) through the mass media (typically in social media but
also in print media), primarily in a way that triggers emotional reactions. It often serves marketing purposes, in which case the visual story is built around a brand and the related offers (in terms of use for marketing purposes, cf. Walter–Gioglio, 2015). As opposed to advertisements based on generalities, the speciality and difficulty of storytelling marketing is that it focuses on a single specific example (so, it should be carefully selected) and appeals to emotions instead of reason.

A good (impressive) story, whether visual or verbal, uses the following five building blocks: 1. Hero: the story must have a character with imperfections who the audience can identify with. 2. Conflict: if the outcome corresponds to what is expected, the story is boring and banal (e.g. a diligent student from a decent and supportive background becomes a successful adult); however, if the outcome is achieved through struggles and difficulties, the story becomes exciting (e.g. a poor individual works hard and becomes rich; the hero fights for love). 3. Impulsivity: as mentioned before, the story will have a lasting effect if it can provoke (positive or negative) emotions from the audience. 4. Potential virality: simple enough to be remembered but interesting enough to be shared with others. 5. Meaningful essence: it is important that the core message, the purpose, the intended effect of the story is clear (e.g. a joke exerts its effect through the punch line, a moral story through the lesson; Bergström, 2009: 14–74; Gallo, 2016).

Criteria for narrative images: 1. authenticity; 2. uniqueness (i.e. focus on special moments instead of stereotypical situations); 3. involvement of various senses; 4. use of archetypes (common patterns, roles) such as the warrior, the healer, the seducer, the magician, the protector, etc. (Sammer–Heppel, 2015).

3. Motivational Messages

Today, motivational messages combining images and texts represent a significant portion of content shared on Facebook. Typically, these image-text combinations comprise a quotation and an appropriate picture, and their declared aim is to inspire contemplation in the reader or provide spiritual support for them (and thus propagate content in social media).

I assume that 1) due to their virality, the messages empower sharers to influence and manipulate the audience; 2) this aim is achieved through verbal and visual story-telling, as suggested by collections of tips for creating online content. These hypotheses are tested in this study.

My argument is that the authors of online motivational messages forge an influencer identity for themselves – based on the large number of reactions and shares –, and they benefit from this role not only in the online world but also beyond, translating this advantage to specific (financial and influence power) gains.
3.1. Questionnaire Survey

In order to prove the hypotheses, first, a questionnaire survey was conducted among people sharing motivational messages.

The survey was open from December 2017 to March 2018 and received 183 responses. Data cleaning (deleting irrelevant and trolling answers) left us with a total of 127 valid response forms. All of the respondents were quite active social media users (so-called heavy users, cf. Tófalvy 2017). Based on the answers to the question “What do you usually do with motivational messages?”, they typically only read, like, share, and comment on the messages (in this order, cf. Veszelszki, 2018). So, passive content consumption is the most common activity, followed by predefined communication activities, and the rarest one is making comments which require active contribution. Many respondents wrote that they save the images (as paradoxical as it may sound, the following content management method is a real one: “If I like it, I share it with myself, without others seeing it!”).

Regarding manipulation, the source and credibility of the message could be very important. A large majority of respondents said that they did not care about the source, only the nice/inspiring/etc. thought; nearly a quarter of them preferred posters sharing their own thoughts to quotes from well-known people. Some noted that they accepted quotes from people “who have achieved something in life and their experience can be inspiring for others”.

Figure 1. Examples of motivational messages
A respondent called attention to the “uselessness” of motivational posts (“It may be that many people are inspired by these thoughts, but it is much easier to push the ‘like’ button than to live by these words. Sometimes I have the impression that these shares are faked. We may agree with the thoughts, but we find it difficult to associate with them”). Nevertheless, the responses suggest that inspirational messages have played an important role in several respondents’ lives: they helped in a concrete workplace problem, raised new aspects for dealing with difficulties (grief, break-up), encouraged the respondent to change his or her lifestyle, or brought quick relief in a situation. The messages can offer encouragement or, due to their general nature, can help overcome the feeling of loneliness.

I was curious to know what the respondents thought about the (actual) purpose of the authors of image-text messages. Most of the answers stated that the aim is to bring a problem or the sharer into focus. Others thought that the actual purpose is to give food for thought, to inspire, to cheer up, and to help. But some respondents believed that the authors try to solve their problems by creating (self-)encouraging messages and expressing their emotions through them. According to less common but still existing opinions, the real purpose is marketing, influencing, and money making (like baiting).

This is related to the question of how respondents perceive the identity of the authors of motivational messages. The vast majority of the respondents perceive them as optimistic, cheerful, romantic, educated and intelligent, humorous, and understanding people (about a virtually unknown person). Some noted, however, that the authors of the messages do not necessarily have personality traits in common and that they were unable to form an opinion about the authors.

Now that we have an insight into the opinion of people sharing motivational messages, we can move on to give a closer look at the messages themselves. In order to clarify the questions left open, I conducted a content analysis.

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2 The story of a respondent: “The situation has changed in my workplace, and the managers began to compare workers. Soon enough, everyone had a sinking feeling that they were not good enough. After a while, everyone was afraid of getting fired. And then, one day a quote from Einstein popped up on my screen saying: If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid. This didn’t solve my problem but did change my attitude.”

3 “Helps me look at the problem from another angle, from a better perspective.”

4 “I started doing workout because of it”; “It gave me strength when I didn’t want to go to the gym”.

5 “I stopped crying”; “I was down in the dumps but it made me feel better”.

6 “I gave up my dreams to listen to the national anthem from the top step of the podium because I made no progress in training. But Katinka and many others managed to get back in the game. So, I should be able to do, too!!”

7 “Especially on All Saints’ Day I can feel that I’m not the only one who has lost her parents.”; “It makes me feel I’m not alone”.

3.2. Content Analysis

Guidelines suggest that the success of online images, shared by many users in social media, is based on storytelling. To check this assumption, I conducted an empirical examination using content analysis as a method. The image-text combinations for the analysis were collected from popular Facebook pages. The selected pages had at least 10,000 likes (some with over 250,000 followers). I collected altogether 100 picture quotes with a high number of shares and reactions (more than 1,000 in total). Images which contained text (quotation) in the description but not on the image itself were not included in the sample. “Facebook Kitsch” images with only phatic expressions on them (such as have a nice day, good night, sweet dreams, etc.) were also disregarded.

In most of the cases, the image (depicting persons, landscapes, or everyday objects) served only as background for the text. None of the typical characteristics of narrative images (authenticity, uniqueness, the involvement of various senses, use of archetypes) were dominant in these images: all of them were completely average that fit to almost any situation in life.

A quarter of the sample was about love, another quarter about knowing ourselves and others; the third biggest category was struggle with difficulties, while several messages were built on the metaphor “life is a journey”. This sample contained only a few religious messages. None of the special cases (like infidelity, divorce, grief, childbirth) appeared in the examined messages, which rather contained generalities. The use of archetypes is the only characteristic that appeared visibly in the analysed images: the adorable little child, the cute animal, the sentimental film character. Emotional collages often included hearts and smileys in support of the message. Highly emotional images can also be considered as an indicator of manipulative intent.

After looking at the general characteristics of narrative images, I examined whether the main components of storytelling (hero, conflict, impulsivity, potential virality, and meaningful essence) are present in the messages. The latter two were always present as the examined messages were widely spread over the Internet. In 28 instances, the image-text combination was clearly emotional. Only 3 out of the 100 messages had an actual hero character (e.g. a mother looking after her disabled grown-up child at the age of 101), and only 4 depicted a conflict between an expected and an unexpected situation. This suggests that the wisdom messages were successful among certain consumers not because of their uniqueness, which is a key element in storytelling, but because of their general applicability to every situation and person.

Reference handling was also considered an important aspect as making or not making reference to the source can be a means of manipulation: on the one hand, reference to a person lends their authority to the message, while, on the other hand,
if no reference is made to the author, the authenticity of the quote becomes even more difficult to verify; also, if the poster creates the impression that he/she is the author of the quotation, it is a form of manipulation (as the poster looks smarter than he/she is). In 60 of the 100 messages, the author remained unidentifiable, 20 messages referred to a famous person, and another 20 messages featured the text as the poster’s “own” thoughts. In the two latter cases, the author was named. The name of the posting website, as it has a marketing value, appeared on 54 images. The veracity and original source of such messages are difficult, if not impossible, to check (and many users do not even try to check the correctness of alleged quotations). This asymmetry in information, which could well be regarded as a manipulative strategy, puts the user sharing the text into a dominant or even opinion-leading position.

Finally, the analysis looked at the argument techniques of deception. 26 texts contained context-independent fallacies. Instances include mistranslation: the following text which was translated from English to Hungarian and is now translated back literally: \textit{There is always a little truth behind every “Just kidding”. A little “I don’t know” behind every knowledge. A little “I don’t care” behind every emotion. And a little “It’s ok” behind every pain.} The first sentence was translated well, but then the translator could not follow the logic of the sentences and mixed up the hidden feelings and the uttered words. Parts of the texts were characterized by pleonasm (e.g. \textit{The people you think of before you go to bed and after you get up are very close to your heart.}). Exclusivity and permissible opposites are contrasted in the following example: \textit{Men think they choose women but almost always women choose men.} And, although it is not a flaw in the argument but a stylistic fault, mixed metaphors also appeared many times in the texts (e.g. \textit{They say it is easy to forget your problems when the weather is good. But a cool breeze is enough to blow reality back to our faces.}).

### 4. Conclusions

The study is primarily concerned with two hypotheses and set out to test them by means of a survey and content analysis.

The experts of online content production always underline that verbal and visual storytelling are key to success. This examination, however, shows that posting verbal and visual banalities online can also be an effective strategy with a viral outcome under certain circumstances or in a specific target group. Data showed that banality and generality are key to the success of motivational messages, which clearly breaches a fundamental principle of creating online content. This is evidently a novelty in web content creation.

Motivational messages, that is, the inspirational image-text combinations shared in social media with an unexpectedly big impact, manipulate viewers
(primarily by making both the authors and sharers look highly compassionate and/or intelligent, granting them influence and benefits beyond the social media: e.g. they publish books and give expensive motivational speeches). This content production method is significant as the high number of shares gives information power to the poster person. The poster thus becomes an opinion leader (influencer) who may use this power to influence the thoughts, opinions, emotions, and behaviour of others in a way that the target person is not aware of the influence (cf. Falyuna, 2016). Influencing through motivational messages is probably not so dangerous as pseudoscientific messages and fake news (Aczél, 2017; Brodnig, 2017; Falyuna, 2017; Veszelszki, 2017) and has a smaller negative individual, physical, mental, financial, and social impact, but it is still suitable for identity forging by the poster. This hypothesis has been proven.

Hungarian sociologists and cultural anthropologists Ágnes Kapitány and Gábor Kapitány also reflected on this phenomenon saying: as the consequence of the overly individualistic mindset of our age, the individual is increasingly directed from the outside. They recognized that individualization will lead to a situation where the “‘inner-directed’ morals-driven individual is increasingly replaced by the masses of individuals who are dominantly characterised by adaptation (…) by the uncritical following of economic powers and the media which uses advertisements and other manipulative methods. This results the paradox that while individuals are becoming more and more ‘individualised’” (Kapitány–Kapitány, 2013: 118) they are also becoming more and more vulnerable and dependent.

Online knowledge is not always reliable: the author, the sources, and the recency are often unknown, and the information is often uncontrolled, which means that anyone can publish anything. There can be misleading, pseudo-scientific, and sometimes outright harmful views on the Internet, which inadvertent readers can easily take for granted. The sources of knowledge have changed, and so Internet users have to develop a critical mind, a skill for the critical evaluation of information as part of their new media competence.

References


