Title: Investigating the commercial construct of TikTok influencers

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Introduction and background

The engaging visual content of photos, videos, and memes have made visual social media platforms (VSM), such as Instagram and TikTok, famous for commercial purposes. Commerce on VSM is often referred to as social commerce (Wang and Zang, 2012), characterized amongst others, by influencers promotion of products and services (Abidin, 2016).

The global influencer market size has more than doubled since 2019. In 2021, the market was valued at a record high of 13.8 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2021). Given this development, researchers from the information systems (IS) field and related fields/disciplines, have directed their attention toward the social influencer industry (e.g., Argyris et al., 2021; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Farivar et al., 2019). However, it has been argued in a review study by Hudders et al. (2021) that research investigating the influencer industry has mainly been conducted from an audience perspective and concerned the appeal, efficacy, and transparency of influencer commerce (e.g., Chae, 2018; De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). Comparatively, the commercial content practices of influencers have been much less studied (Hudders et al., 2021).

In addition, most existing studies have focused on the VSM platform Instagram, which is still a dominant platform for influencer commerce (Mention, 2022). However, the video sharing app TikTok is rapidly growing and was the most downloaded social media app in 2020 (Omar & Dequan, 2020). With an estimated 1.1 billion active users a month, TikTok has quickly established itself as a powerful commercial tool (Cantawee et al., 2021; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2021), accompanied by an increase in TikTok influencers (Relatable, 2021).

Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate how commercial products and services are integrated into Scandinavian TikTok influencers content practices. We apply our study from a sociotechnical perspective within IS. This perspective does not only consider transactional outcomes, such as efficiency and productivity, but also, the societal outcomes such as the individuals and collectives that develop and use such artifacts in social contexts (Bergquist et al., 2018; Sarker et al., 2019).

In our preliminary results, presented in this extended abstract, we offer a descriptive overview of the extent to which Scandinavian TikTok influencers' videos are commercially constructed and comment on the narratives used in their commercial videos. Our research question is as follows: How are commercial products and services integrated into Scandinavian TikTok influencers content practices?

We investigated female social influencers between 18 and 35, as this is the dominant group in the influencer industry. We applied our study to the fashion and beauty domain as these are influencer dominated (Trybedynamics, 2021). Our study was applied in a Scandinavian context due to a lack of studies investigating the influencer industry in the Scandinavian region (Abidin et al., 2020).

Method

For our preliminary results, 30 Scandinavian TikTok influencers from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were selected using the analytical tool Klear (Klear, 2022). Based on a normative approach, we selected 10 influencers per Scandinavian country whose follower base was between 1,000 and a million-plus. We conducted a netnographic content analysis (Kozinets, 2006), using observations and note-taking practices drawn from the visual analysis tradition (Rose, 2016). For this, we used the influencers' 50 latest videos. Since some of the TikTok influencers had fewer videos on their feeds, we ended up with 1,390 videos to be coded.

Our coding approach contained both a denotative and a connotative level, as inspired by the content analysis of Instagram stories by Bainotti et al. (2020). We investigated the videos' representations at first glance for the denotative level. At this initial level, we were interested in identifying the number of commercial videos. A video was recognized as commercial if it contained any business tags, visible brand labels, or a caption that had commerce-related information. Second, we were interested in identifying the content category of each video (e.g. portrait, or materiality), its related audio template, and the related caption code (e.g., hashtags, descriptive, brand tags). At the connotative level, the videos were interpreted to understand what types of commercial contexts were applied. Once all the data were gathered, we translated the frequency of occurrence of certain symbols into summary judgments and comparisons (Kozinets, 2006).

Results

This section presents our preliminary results from the denotative and connotative levels.

Denotative level

Of 1,390 TikTok videos analyzed in the dataset, 375 contained commercial content. The total percentage of commercial videos among the TikTok influencers' videos was thus 27%.

We were then interested in investigating the distribution of commercial videos per Scandinavian country, and we found that Swedish TikTok influencers had the highest percentage of commercial videos. The table below provides an overview of the number and percentage of commercial videos per country.

Table 1.

An overview of commercial posts per Scandinavian country

Country	Videos analyzed	Commercial videos	%
Norway	426	84	20%
Sweden	532	168	32%
Denmark	432	123	28%

In the next step, we identified the narrative types applied in the TikTok influencers' commercial videos. Of the 375 commercial videos identified, we identified three types of narrative: portrait, materiality, and setting. Table 2 provides an overview of the narratives identified with their percentage distribution. The narrative types were not mutually exclusive, and the posts might have included more than one narrative type.

Table 2.

Narrative types and their percentage distribution

| Narrative type	All commercial videos analyzed	Videos with a particular narrative type	%
Portrait	375	259	69%
Materiality	375	107	29%
Setting	375	80	21%

The narratives most frequently applied by TikTok influencers were "Portraits." Portraits are narratives in which the social influencer is at the center of the video. Figure 1 provides an overview of the denotative levels related to portraits, such as

the audio template, whether the caption was constructed as commercial or social, and the caption codes (e.g., hashtags, brand tags).
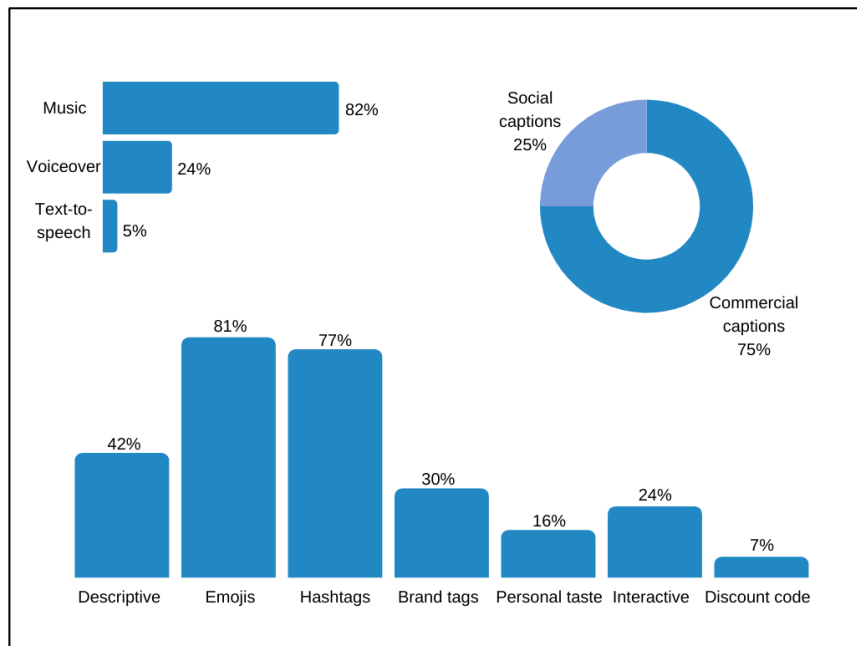
Figure 1. "Portraits" and related percentage distribution

The second narrative type was "Materiality." Materiality refers to videos with material objects at their center, such as shoes, bags, beauty products, or visible food packaging. Figure 2 provides an overview of denotative measures related to materiality, such as audio templates, whether the caption was constructed as commercial or social, and the caption codes (e.g., hashtags, brand tags).
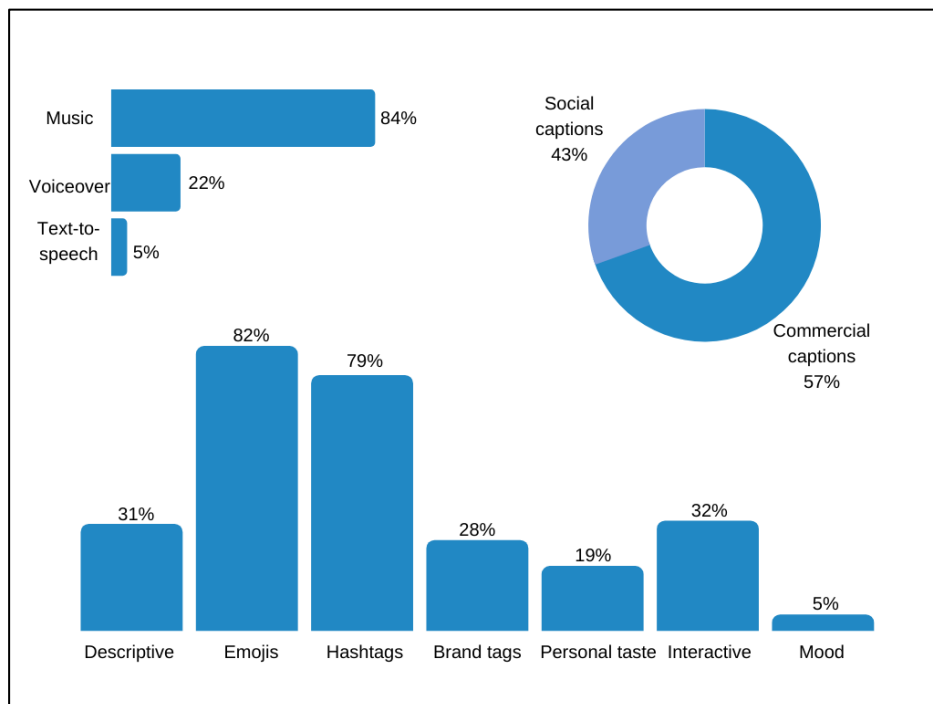
Figure 2. "Materiality" and related percentage distribution

The third visual narrative type was "Setting." Videos categorized as settings were, for example, videos of the influencer's daily life or their specific surroundings. Figure 3 provides an overview of the denotative levels of settings, such as audio templates, whether the caption was constructed as commercial or social, and the caption codes (e.g., hashtags, brand tags).
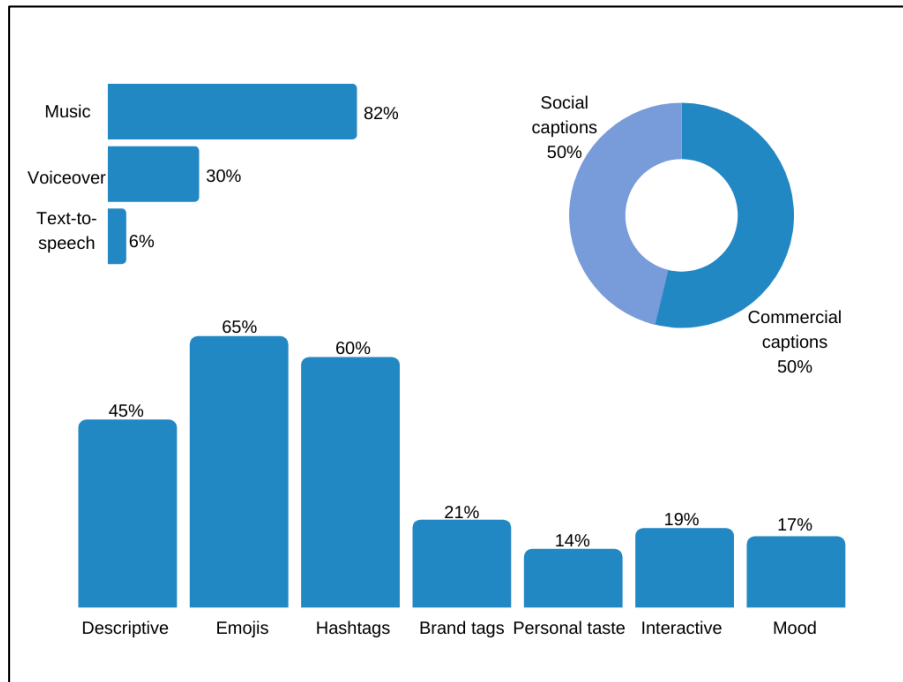

Figure 3. "Setting" and related percentage distribution

Connotative level

We identified four dominant commercial narratives on the connotative level. First, commerce often appeared as dance videos in which the TikTok influencers showcased wearables (n = 111). This narrative mainly was constructed as portrait (Figure 1), materiality (Figure 2), or as a combination of both. Music was the most used audio template, and brands would be presented as overlayed text in the video or the attached caption. Second, commerce often appeared integrated into skincare routines, hair styling, make-up routines, or cooking (n = 90). For example, multiple TikTok influencers would showcase their skincare routines in a step-by-step guide on applying the products. These videos were also often constructed as a combination of portraits (Figure 1) and materiality (Figure 2).

In most cases, commerce appeared as visible brand labels and textual descriptions. Third, TikTok influencers often applied a narrative involving product testing or showcasing their new "purchases" (n = 77). In these videos, the products and services would be talked about, and the influencers' opinions would be expressed after or before testing the product (Figures 1 and 2). Fourth, commerce could also

appear as elements in otherwise broader social contexts (n = 53). For example, some TikTok influencers would create videos of a day in their life and include a visit to a specific brand store as one element of the video (Figure 3).

Future Work

In this extended abstract, we have presented our preliminary results concerning how commercial products and services are integrated into Scandinavian TikTok influencers content practices. We showed the extent to which Scandinavian TikTok influencers' videos are commercially constructed, and the narratives used in their commercial videos. In our future work, we plan to investigate industrial perspectives. Because the commercial influence of TikTok influencers goes far beyond the activities taking place on the platform, we argue that it is essential to understand the processes behind the on-screen actions (Sarker et al., 2019). Investigating this topic is important because TikTok is becoming increasingly commercialized. TikTok's infrastructure is different from that of other platforms, and there is a lack of insight by academia and industry regarding its commercial constructs. We hope that this study will contribute to the social media and social commerce literature and provide valuable insights that will help improve the fast-growing influencer industry.

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