

The Rise of Greta Thunberg: A Case Study in Micro-Celebrity and Global Climate Mobilisation

Yichen Liu

School of Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

Social media influencers can mobilise their networks widely, sharing information and adding their voices to numerous online discussion groups in the digital age. The social media identity of Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg is marked by authenticity, making her an important figure in current discussions about climate change and activism. This essay will discuss her identity on social media platforms and mention the challenges regarding communication strategies and goals. Also, the relationship between the content creators, audiences and platforms will be investigated. It will argue that while social media has provided influencers the opportunity to develop their identities and communicate with their audiences, it has also exposed them to a great deal of online criticism and challenges.

KEYWORDS

Micro-celebrity; Climate Activism; Social Media Strategy; Authenticity; Digital Identity.

1. MICRO-CELEBRITY AND IDENTITY BUILDING

Based on different social media platforms, Greta Thunberg can design a variety of strategies to build personal identity in many ways. She started the 'Fridays for Future' movement, leading millions of young people worldwide to participate in climate protests (5). Marwick claims that micro-celebrities are influencers who are famous to a specific group of people because of their online presence and activities (6). Their desire for recognition might arise from personal goals, a need for social capital, or the pursuit of professional opportunities. Also, Olesen discusses that Thunberg focused on raising awareness for everyone to see this global challenge and urged for immediate action (8). This means her motivations derive from a strong concern about the future generation and the global community. For instance, Thunberg uses platforms such as X and Instagram, where she connects with her audience and encourages them to join the climate movement. There are a lot of posts about climate protests and sustainability, which have become symbols of her activism and contributed to her status as a global icon. Meanwhile, as a micro-celebrity, she must actively create her online identity, which includes building a persona, producing content, and communicating with followers in a way that is regarded as 'authentic' (6). First of all, the communication strategies of Thunberg often include personal elements, such as her experiences with Asperger's syndrome, which is described as giving her a unique perspective on the world. This narrative not only draws empathy for her but also inspires many young activists to follow her call and become environmental activists. Moreover, Thunberg uses visual expression, such as severe photographs of protests and impactful slogans, to catch attention and transmit messages efficiently. Sorce asserts that Thunberg often emphasises immediate action and the need for political leaders to hold responsible, which effectively connects her audience by framing climate change as an imminent threat (10). In addition, Ryalls and Mazzarella state that the discourse of Thunberg focuses on the climate crisis as a moral challenge rather than just an

environmental issue (9). For example, her speeches often convey a sense of urgency, emphasising the ethical implications of the climate crisis. She presents the climate crisis in terms of justice for future generations, appealing to the ethical responsibilities of her audience. This framing not only mobilises youth but also attempts to involve wider society by stressing shared values.

2. STRATEGIES FOR AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

The dynamics of the social media ecology give Greta Thunberg more control over her performance and facilitate active audience engagement, attributable to her rise to worldwide environmental activism. Duffy and Wissinger point out that content creators are dependent on social media platforms for visibility and audience engagement (1). There is a complex relationship between social media content creators, their audiences, and the features of the platforms. To begin with, different platforms have their policies, functions, and user base. These factors can influence how content is created and shared. For example, Thunberg often uses Instagram to share visually striking images from protests, which could capture attention and spark conversation. In contrast, platforms like YouTube may allow her to share more in-depth content, such as speeches and interviews, which provide a better understanding of activism and personality expression to her audiences. In addition, Olesen believes that audiences are no longer passive recipients but active co-performers (8). Which means the features of social media platforms promote this co-production of identity. For instance, platforms like X and Instagram allow for immediate feedback and interaction. To create a sense of intimacy between Thunberg and her audience, and also build a connection and enhance her perceived authenticity. In this way, she could ensure that her voice is not distorted, and audiences could make comments and engage directly with her posts. So the audience could express their support or critique, helping further shape her social media identity. Moreover, Sorce explains that social media platforms are crucial in networked leadership (10). For example, the social media presence acts of Thunberg could serve as an essential link in the 'Fridays for Future' movement. With her posts and messages being posted, assisting in the organisation of activists and maintaining progress for the movement. Besides, Marwick outlines that micro-celebrities often view their online connections as a fan base, which helps to foster loyalty and engagement (6). To enhance the sense of community and solidarity among activists, Thunberg uses internet connections among followers, allowing them to share their own stories and experiences while recognising the purpose of the movement. At the same time, activists could develop a sense of belonging and common purpose, which is critical for long-term participation in social movements.

3. CHALLENGES OF FAME AND ONLINE SCRUTINY

Whereas social media has given Greta Thunberg her fame, she has also faced several challenges of negative comments and controversies. Unlike traditional celebrities, micro-celebrities do not have the same level of protection from public scrutiny, which may amount to pressure on their mental health and personal life (6). According to Molder et al., these protests have often placed Thunberg at the centre of political debates, leading to polarised opinions (4). For example, Thunberg was labelled as a 'double-standard environmentalist' and 'puppet of Western politicians' for targeting China on annual emissions (2). Chinese media says that climate change is a matter of morality and ethics. The most complex political dynamics and regulatory challenges are reduced to simplicity. Ryalls and Mazzarella added further that through framing Thunberg as a 'saviour' or 'hero', some media operated on whiteness and individualism, thereby hiding the contributions of other activists, particularly those from more marginalised backgrounds (9). This could lead to a narrative that change can be achieved through the efforts of a single individual rather than collaboration among various activists and communities. Furthermore, Jung et al. discuss that the identity of Thunberg as a young climate activist has been both a source of inspiration and a target for criticism (3). Some social media opinions with negative overtones indeed originate from scepticism concerning climate change and

broader social issues, such as gender and age biases. For instance, critics often label her as a ‘child’, which would make her less authoritative and serious about her message (7). This framing undermines her worth as an activist and questions her motive by making her appear too young to have anything to do with complicated global issues. Meanwhile, Molder et al. indicate that even as Instagram provides wide broadcasting of messages and engages the young audience, it also presents Thunberg’s work to the algorithmic preferences of the platform, hence engaging in forms of content that algorithms will prefer (4). This could cause problems such as dilution of the message if it is aimed at fitting algorithmic preferences rather than true communication. Also, the visual nature of Instagram might make the discussion of the complex climate issues at hand come down to available photos and slogans easily accessible.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Greta Thunberg uses all types of media platforms to speak out and spread her messages worldwide. She is direct in her expression, calling the established norms into question and therefore serves as a call to action and an inspiration for others. Through media strategies, she was able to achieve authenticity because her conversations around mental health and sustainability provided depth to the message that created a sense of relatability, which makes her calls for action more powerful and credible. All these elements, combined with media coverage, including appearances on outlets such as BBC and performances of the subject being discussed in talk shows and documentaries. This helps to weave a web that not only raises awareness around the climate emergency but has also turned her into somewhat of a micro-celebrity. However, she frequently requires emotional labour due to severe criticism and judgement. Her ability to respond strategically has become an important factor in developing influence. Thunberg actively engages with her audience by responding to comments and addressing criticisms, which shows her determination and further strengthens her connection with followers. In any case, the instance of Thunberg shows how authenticity for communication and engagement with media is fundamental in promotion and suggests that grassroots content creators could likewise fill important roles in the worldwide environmental movement today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Natural Science Foundation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Duffy, B. E. and Wissinger, E. Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and “Just Being Me”, *International journal of communication*. Vol. 11 (2017), p. 4652–4671.
- [2] Global Times Thunberg mocked as ‘double-standard environmentalist,’ ‘puppet of Western politicians’ for targeting China on annual emissions, *Global Times*, accessed 09 May 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1222988.shtml>.
- [3] Jung, J. et al. When a Girl Awakened the World: A User and Social Message Analysis of Greta Thunberg.” *Sustainability*, Vol. 12 (2020) No. 7, p. 2707.
- [4] Molder, A. L. et al. Framing the Global Youth Climate Movement: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Greta Thunberg’s Moral, Hopeful, and Motivational Framing on Instagram. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 27 (2022) No. 30, p. 668–695.
- [5] Murphy and Patrick D. Speaking for the Youth, Speaking for the Planet: Greta Thunberg and the Representational Politics of Eco-Celebrity. *Popular Communication*, Vol. 19(2021) No. 3, p. 193–206.
- [6] Marwick, A.E. *The Fabulous Lives of Micro-Celebrities*. Status Update. (Yale University Press, 2017, p.112-162).
- [7] Marquinez, M. Environmental lobbies or how to manipulate the population’s thinking, *CE Noticias Financieras*, accessed 17 December 2023.
- [8] https://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx?page_driver=searchBuilder_Search#/?&_suid=172783515366009452952425218877.

- [9] Olesen, T. Greta Thunberg's Iconicity: Performance and Co-Performance in the Social Media Ecology, *New Media & Society*, Vol. 24 (2022) No. 6, p. 1325–1342.
- [10] Ryalls, E. D. and Mazzeella, S. R. "Famous, Beloved, Reviled, Respected, Feared, Celebrated": Media Construction of Greta Thunberg. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Vol. 14 (2021) No. 3, p. 438–453.
- [11] Sorce, G. The 'Greta Effect': Networked Mobilization and Leader Identification Among Fridays for Future Protesters. *Media and Communication (Lisboa)*, Vol. 10 (2022) No. 2, p. 18–28.