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## Social Media Management Strategies in Influencer Marketing: Lessons for Building Stakeholder Relations and Brand Crisis Management

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### ABSTRACT

Based on the two-step flow model, this study examines how social media influencers manage brands through three aspects, including content strategies, engagement, and interactivity. A content analysis was conducted to compare content marketing strategies and levels of engagement and interactivity between popular and unpopular creators. The results show popular creators post more often, post more promotional content, interact less, but receive positive praise from their followers. Their followers are more engaged. The Instagram posts tend to imitate celebrity sites and often use professional photographers rather than photos from mobile devices. Less popular creators used Instagram in a more personal fashion, posting less often and taking pictures from their mobile devices of themselves. The content was less likely to have brand mentions, and/or hashtag use. Instead, the less popular creators engaged more with their followers to create a more powerful and personal relationship. The study provides insight into the effective online relationship building strategies with stakeholders and brand crisis management strategies using influencers on social media.

*Key words: social media management, creators, brand crisis management, social media influencer, Instagram*

### Introduction

Influencer marketing is a popular social media marketing practice which focuses on individuals who can influence potential buyers toward specific brands (Liu, *et al.*, 2015; Gu & Duan, 2024). To reach consumers, influencers develop social media networks by engaging followers through platforms such as

Instagram (Jin, *et al.*, 2019). This type of influence was first studied in the 1940's and 1950's and described as two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Based on this theory, people make decisions not from direct media information but information that is shared by a person considered to be important to them known as an opinion leader (Cha, *et al.*, 2010; Park, *et al.*, 2016). The concept of an opinion leader is today applied to social media influencers that have an online presence and

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guide consumers in their choice of brand (Vaidya & Karnawat, 2023). Influencer marketing agencies evolved to help brands determine which influencer and social media most effectively reaches their consumers. Influencers may be paid by a brand or by a digital marketing agency. Some influencers are unpaid. The active voice of the influencers creates the relationship between the influencer and his or her followers, as well as establishing credibility (Hayes, 2008; Liu, *et al.*, 2015). The influencer employs many strategies to gain and maintain followers. Much of the posted content provides a description of lifestyle choices.

The purpose of this research is to compare popular and less popular influencers from two prominent influencer marketing agencies, Socialyte and Influencer Marketing Agency (IMA), to determine the effective ways of managing brands using influencers through three aspects of marketing: content, engagement, and interactivity (Ashley & Tuten, 2014; Bergstrom & Backman, 2013). Social media, such as Instagram, has offered a multidimensional method for audiences to live vicariously through these platforms. Instagram features encourage followers to feel connected with influencers, as well as to follow their preferences and purchasing habits.

Influencer outreach has become a useful strategy today for brands to be successful. Research indicates there is a direct relationship between influencer marketing and impacts on consumer's positive attitude for brands and social presence of brands (Jin, *et al.*, 2019). However, there is little research regarding the effective and ineffective ways of managing brands using influencers on social media. As the industry of influencer marketing continues to grow, agencies manage and provide services to brands that want to gain a more intimate relationship with their consumers. By comparatively examining influencer marketing strategies, content strategies, engagement and interaction with users in the context of popular and unpopular influencers, this study provides insights into the effective techniques of creating and maintaining relationships with brand consumers.

## Instagram Marketing

Instagram's features include sharing, following, liking, and commenting on content. It also includes the ability to direct messages, edit photos with filters, and connect with other social networking sites. Bjorkgren (2012) explains the communication of Instagram revolves around instantaneous, real time pictures

where brands can convey personal and authentic identities while creating a massive following through use of hashtags. Instagram evokes different levels of user interaction. Bergstrom & Backman (2013) explains the utilization of Instagram's inherent qualities allows brands to publish material suitable to the expectations of their consumers, and thus influences their opinion of the brand in a desired way. They found Instagram can increase a brand's level of interaction with consumers by five times when encouraging users to co-create brand materials. According to Laroche, *et al.* (2012), Instagram users feel as if they can connect with a brand, which serves as a sense of inclusiveness in being a part of a brand community. By posting content connected to a target group, and by utilizing Instagram's features, influencers can effectively impact and inspire users, user interactions, and brand trust (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013).

To be successful in marketing brands online, relationships must be established between influencers and followers (Gu & Duan, 2024). Researchers have noted that membership in social groups achieves social identity through interactions with group members (Cha, *et al.*, 2010; Cheung & Lee, 2010). Interactions are based on trust and is related to members sharing information about themselves (Reid, 1987). Others have noted the importance of identifying influencers on social networks, as well as how users prefer to interact with their group members to achieve influence. They acknowledge marketing practices must identify influencers to successfully target brand's audiences (Liu, *et al.*, 2015; Wu, *et al.*, 2011).

Social media provides an inexpensive way to interact and engage with a large number of potential buyers, and develop branding, market research customer service and customer relationships (Chen, *et al.*, 2011; Tuten & Solomon, 2015). Castronovo & Huang (2012) suggests web traffic measures social media marketing by the number of clicks, repeat visits, number of new followers, mentions, and recommendations. Paine (2011) suggests using engagement as a key metric, categorizing it into phases. It begins with actions such as clicking and liking, progresses to commenting, following, sharing, and hash-tagging, and ultimately culminates in brand promotion.

The use of influencer marketing on social media has fundamentally changed the balance of power between consumers and brands because it enables peer recommendations to play a greater role in purchasing decisions (Wong, 2015). It is essentially a form of word-of-mouth marketing. According to a study of Bughin, *et al.* (2010), word-of-mouth marketing generates more than twice the sales compared to paid advertising, with these consumers exhibiting a 37% higher retention rate.

Word-of-mouth marketing influences twenty to fifty percent of all purchasing decisions, especially when consumers are buying products for the first time, or when products are relatively expensive (Bughin, *et. al.*, 2010). Marketing agencies attempt to capitalize on this by communicating messages through influencers. These influencers are often perceived as trusted friends by followers. According to a joint study conducted by Twitter and an analytics firm Annalect, 56% of users surveyed said they rely on recommendations from friends, while 49% said they rely on influencers (Swant, 2016). The combination of online influencer's relationships with consumers and the ability to post favorable contents towards a brands product, is an essential strategy for digital marketing. This approach also encourages greater selectivity to target audience segments (Hayes, 2008).

### Content Marketing Strategies on Social Media

Scholars have developed concepts and theories to understand how brands use various strategies to create an identity that relates their consumers. Aaker's (1996) brand identity model distinguishes four types of brand perspectives: brand-as-product, brand-as-organization, brand-as-person, and brand-as-symbol. A brand-as-a-product is the core element of a brand's identity and relates directly to the use or service of the product. Brand-as-organization, focuses on the attributes of the organization rather than the product or services it offers (Aaker, 1996). These attributes revolve around the organizations values, culture, and mission (Essamri, *et. al.*, 2019). The brand-as-person is the personality of the brand that associates with human characteristics such as gender, age, and socio-economic class (Aaker, 1996). For example, the cigarette brand Marlboro is considered masculine, while Virginia Slims is feminine; Apple is younger, while IBM is older. Lastly, brand-as-symbol uses structure and cohesion to gain recognition and recall to consumers. For example, consumers gain recognition through logos like Nike's swoosh symbol and the McDonald's golden arches.

This brand typology is not ambiguous; brands can be a product while at the same time adding symbolic meaning (Aaker, 1996). This information is helpful for influencers to know when marketing brands on social media since it relates to the potential consumer.

### Interactivity on Social Media

Peppers & Rogers (2004) identify today as the "era of interactivity," because technology has changed the way brands and consumers interact. Interactivity heightens consumer's attention levels, which in return facilitates the strengthening of brand relationships and consumer satisfaction. The higher level of interactivity is indicated by an increase in followers, likes, and user-comments (Simmons, 2007). A brand can create and develop recognition by posting content that appeals to consumers and is different from traditional media (Lovejoy & Saxon, 2012). Also, social media provides brands the ability to communicate publicly, which is powerful since all users can access it. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) aims to differentiate a brand from its competitors by personalizing communication with consumers. For example, this can be done by targeting a consumer with relevant information, or establishing a personal connection with a specific consumer that then leads to generating word-of-mouth advertising (Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Li & Bernoff, 2008).

The utilization of social media as a marketing tool has decreased the focus on selling the product; the attention has shifted towards the needs and desires of the consumer. Opportunities for interpersonal engagement, interactivity and dialogue are possible and differ from traditional media. For example, Instagram provides influencers the ability to give brands differing perceptions of the product or services by everyone reposting relevant content about the brand (Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Lovejoy & Saxon, 2012).

### Engagement on Social Media

According to Laroche, *et. al.* (2012), the creation of brand communities fosters brand engagement and gives followers a feeling of being included. Laroche, *et. al.* (2012) argue building brand communities on social media further evolves brand trust since users share experiences and information about the products or services, while also aiding one another. Graeme & Fosdick (2011) suggests participation may be passive (consuming the media content) or active (submitting or engaging ideas). Consumer engagement is typically measured by comments, clicks, followers, referring others, submitting inquiries, friends, or buying the brand (Falls, 2010).

Evans (2011) identifies four factors that create user engagement on social media: consumption, curation, creation,

and collaboration. Consumption, unlike interaction, solely pertains to the activities a consumer engages in online, such as, reading, downloading, watching, or listening to content. Curation is the transition from passive to active usage on social media, where the consumer engages with content by commenting, liking, and rating or with use of a hashtag. Content creation is when users upload their own material, such as pictures, statuses, and posts onto a platform. Instagram revolves around content creation, where its primary use relies on uploading pictures and interaction with other users. Lastly, collaboration refers to the process of co-creating content, such as when users comment on news articles in online magazines or post hashtagged pictures on Instagram. This level of engagement is most common among the influencers, since often they co-create contents with brands to portray the product or service in a favorable way.

## Method

Content analysis was conducted based on the coding scheme (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013) to examine the influencer's content strategies, level of interactivity, and level of engagement on Instagram during the month of December 2016. The number of posts, brand mentions, tags, and hashtags for each date selected was archived. A content strategy was operationalized as the type of content. Influencers post both sponsored and personal content. Sponsored content was measured when influencers mentioned brands, tagged brands, or used hashtags related to a brand. An example of sponsored content is a picture of shoes, tagged as a brand, as well as mentioned in their caption. Personal content was measured when the influencer did not mention a brand. For example, if an influencer posted a picture of themselves with a simple caption and no brand was mentioned or tagged. Promotional content was measured when the influencer used captions to promote the brand's product or service.

Engagement was operationalized using the influencer as the base to determine the number of followers, number of likes on each post, and number of comments and hashtags for each post. It is important to note that it was not possible to ascertain whether Instagram users who engage by likes, comments, or hashtags are followers of the influencers, since influencers' profiles are often public, so no connection is established.

The influencers' response activity measured the level of

interactivity once content was posted. Content included posing questions or establishing a contest. Original coding consisted of adding personal or sponsored content, geotags (geographical data added to hashtags), hashtag penetration (total amount of hashtag photos), the brand name, comment responses, and number of posts per day. Interactivity was indicated if influencers asked questions as part of their captions, used a contest tagline, responded to follower's comments, and/or asked followers to direct message them for further inquiries.

A total of 40 Instagram posts were analyzed. Five influencers with the most number of Instagram followers and five influencers with the least number of Instagram followers were chosen from two major influencer marketing agencies in the US, Socialyte and IMA. To distinguish them, the top influencers with more followers were labeled as "popular creators" and the influencers with less followers were referred as "less popular creators".

Each creator's Instagram contents were analyzed on Wednesdays on November 30th and the month of December leading up to December 25th, 2016. If creators posted more than one photo or video on one of these dates, the first post was chosen to eliminate duplication. creators' Instagram posts were individually analyzed by type of content (sponsored, personal, or promotional), level of engagement (total number of followers, likes, and comments), and level of interactivity (contest, questions, responses). The analysis of creators' content, engagement and interactivity determined if there was a relationship between how creators are managing brands, as well as how creators engaged followers.

## Results

### Influencer Brand Management Strategies

Results show popular creators with more followers, posted more promotional content in comparison to creators who have fewer followers (see <Table 1>). Popular creators with more followers represented brands by brand mentions, tags, and hashtags. They also posted sponsored content. Less popular creators with fewer followers posted more personal content and less content regarding brand representation. Also, those with fewer followers posted less promotional content and do not mention or tag brands as much as those with more followers.

In (<Table 2>), the total number of followers, likes, and comments portray the level of engagement. The results represent collective data where creators from two agencies were calculated together.

<Table 1> Measurement of creators’ content strategies

Content	Popular creators (N = 40)	Less popular creators (N = 40)
Total number of brand mentions	21	13
Total number of tagged brands	28	15
Personal content	16	18
Sponsored content	13	8
Promotional content	20	12

<Table 2> Measurement of creators’ engagement

Engagement	Popular creators (N = 40)	Less popular creators (N = 40)
Total number of followers	7.1M	59.4K
Total number of likes	5,618,342	15,576
Total number of comments	18,470	1,436

Popular creators have a higher level of engagement based on the total number of followers, likes, and comments. It appears that those with more followers have a more engaged audience because they comment, and like creators, post more than for those with fewer followers. Based on fewer likes and comments, less popular creators with fewer followers have less engagement.

Results indicate there is a difference between popular and versus less popular creators in their level of interactivity (see <Tables 3>). The level of interactivity as defined by contests, questions, and comments, indicate that popular creators interact less, but tend to receive positive praise from their followers. Less popular creators interact more, but that did not result in more positive or negative reactions. Those with fewer followers also post more content with contests and questions than those with more followers and interact more with followers through responses compared to the popular creators, who did not respond to any follower’s comments. This is an important result since previous research (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013) indicated that an increase in interactivity increases the level of support. Popular creators had a high level of engagement but a low level of interactivity.

<Table 3> Measurement of creators’ Interactivity

Interactivity	Popular creators (N=40)	Less popular creators (N = 40)
Total number of contest	1	2
Total number of questions	7	4
Comments to content	Positive	Neutral
Total number of comment responses	0	13

In <Table 4>, both creators’ brand management strategies were comparatively summarized in terms of their content strategy, levels of engagement and interactivity, and user responses they received.

<Table 4> Comparison of brand management strategies between popular and less popular creators

Interactivity	Popular creators	Less popular creators
Content strategy	Promotional	Personal
Engagement	high	low
Interactivity	low	high
User responses	Positive	Neutral

### Lessons for Building Stakeholder Relations and Brand Crisis Management Using Influencers

This study provides new insights into building effective stakeholder relations and brand crisis management strategies using influencers on social media. The unexpected finding that less popular creators’ more interactive content strategy does not obtain more engagement from audiences and positive feedback on Instagram offers lessons for refining brand management approaches especially for crisis situations.

The results indicate that engaging creators are not necessarily interactive with their users. Given that offering an appropriate crisis response in a timely manner is crucial for crisis communication (Park & Choi, 2023), using popular creators may not ensure the expected outcome. Conversely, less popular creators may be more suitable for brand campaigns as a crisis response tool. They can be useful in restoring an organizational brand image or communicating with stakeholders in a post-crisis situation, as they are more driven to interact with users on social media. However, special caution is necessary, as an interactive strategy does not necessarily gain positive support

from users. This means a more sophisticated message tactic is required to make influencer marketing effective beyond mere interaction attempts on social media.

Thus, crisis managers need to further address how to effectively leverage intended interactive content strategies. These findings of this study also suggest that the capability and tactics of engagement and interactivity are distinct, often considered the same concept in the literature. It is necessary to measure these two concepts separately by distinguishing between interactivity, often termed brand engagement, and consumer engagement (Barger, *et. al.*, 2016).

## Discussions

An important content strategy used by those with more followers was revealed. They represent more brands and at the same time portray personal content which depicts a lifestyle (Pepper & Rogger, 2004). This strategy incorporates a brand into their lifestyle to keep their followers interested in their content. For example, Caroline Receveur, who had 2.1 million followers, posted on November 30th with a brand image. The post analyzed was a picture of her wrist with a Cluse watch. She mentioned the brand in the post's caption, tagged the brand, and wrote a promotional caption stating: "Black mood with the new velvet edition from @Cluse". Receveur also included a hashtag in the picture to create more penetration and brand recognition. Another post on December 15th consisted of a picture of herself wearing Chanel shoes, with a caption stating, "I follow you." This post tagged the brand and portrayed her personal choice in shoes.

Popular creators have similar Instagram profiles and posts to celebrities. These profiles and posts include professional photos done by a third party, and many pictures of lifestyle choices including makeup, clothes, food, travel, and work. In the posts analyzed for this study, popular creators post content related to a desirable lifestyle. The posted photos represented creators eating habits, clothing, what they buy, and where they travel; brand representation is then integrated into these posts. Popular creators are selling the lifestyle they live and the brand's product or service is just an extension of the desirable lifestyle. Celebrity culture influences online marketing strategies.

The use of professional photography creates Instagram pages that could be considered more aesthetically pleasing to the eye. The popular creators from both agencies had visual content

that was professionally taken. Finally, less popular creators posted less content regarding brand representation and used fewer brand hashtags.

Analysis of engagement revealed differences between popular and less popular creators. It is evident from this content analysis, popular creators experience more engagement from their followers. Engagement is related to posting more content; popular creators posted more content and had more engagement with followers. For example, a reoccurring pattern from less popular creators was their lack of Instagram content on the selected dates. Popular creators created on average two-to-three posts per day. Also, photographs were both personal and/or brand oriented. The portrayal of a lifestyle (personal content) in conjunction with brand representation is related to the level of engagement a creator had, where popular creators and more personal content had a high level of engagement.

An important finding to answer the question regarding interactivity showed the level of interactivity from popular creators is low, even though engagement is high. This indicates creators' level of interactivity does not affect how they manage their brands. Less popular creators interact more with users compared to popular creators. This could be because of the amount of content and engagement popular creators receive compared to less popular creators, where may not be realistic for them to interact. Since popular creators interacted less with their followers, their profiles again seemed to resemble celebrity like profiles on Instagram where interaction was low, but interest and engagement was high.

A strategy used for interactivity has been the use of contests. None of the popular creators posted content with contest taglines in their captions. Previous research indicated contests would have a larger role in both the user motivations and creator's efforts when interacting with followers (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013). The rarity of contests among all creators' posts suggests this is no longer a prevalent strategy on Instagram for influencers to create interactivity for managed brands. However, less popular creators were more likely to use questions in their captions.

Less popular creators are interacting through contests, questions, and responding to follower's comments. Both creators had interactive followers who asked questions about their Instagram posts, however, only less popular creators responded to develop a personal relationship.

Several factors contribute to limitations of this study. The use of Instagram for influencer marketing creates an unpredictable environment since change is a constant aspect of this strategy. As of June, 2017, changes in the Instagram accounts make it difficult to check all data for reliability. For

example, Danny Chung's Instagram account is currently under construction. The rosters of Socialyte and IMA creators have changed since January of 2017. Some content was difficult to categorize as personal or promotional. One reason was because they were not written in English, even though Instagram provides translations. The other reason because influencer agencies did not mention what brands each influencer was directly working with during the time of analysis.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to compare how popular and less popular creators represent brands and managing their content, level of engagement, and level of interaction with followers. The results suggest that the number of followers reflects how creators post content, engage, and interact on Instagram. Popular creators have celebrity-like profiles, use professionally taken pictures and post two-to-three times per day. Popular creators did not mention brands as often in captions compared to less popular creators. Rather, the former tagged brands and did not have the brand name visible unless the follower took the extra step to click on the picture to reveal brand tags. These findings suggest social media creators with a large followers use Instagram as a platform to portray their lifestyle rather than consistently promoting different brands, products, and/or services (Leban, *et. al.*, 2020). It seems that this strategy is used to capture social media users based on a lifestyle projection and subtly influence brand purchases.

Less popular creators used Instagram in a more personal fashion, posting less often and taking pictures from their mobile devices of themselves. The content was less likely to have brand mentions, and/or hashtag use. Instead, the less popular creators engaged more with their followers to create a more powerful and personal relationship. These creators responded to follower's comments, while also used contest and questions to engage their users.

The creators' follower level of engagement and interactivity consisted more of praise or questioning versus negative feedback. Since pictures on Instagram have a limited exposure time, expressing criticism might not have created the same impact as other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. The positive feedback for all creators suggest it is beneficial in promoting the popularity of Instagram as a platform for brand promotion (Laroche, *et. al.*, 2012).

Overall, the number of followers a creator has affects how brands are represented on Instagram (Jin, *et. al.*, 2019). It would be more beneficial for name brands, such as Nike or Starbucks, to contract with influencers that have a larger following where engagement and interactivity are not necessarily needed to help the brand. Smaller brands would benefit from strategically choosing less popular creators with fewer followers, where engagement and interactivity is high to create more personal relationships. These creators have enough content that they can respond to follower's comments, and engage with their followers more. However, as influencer marketing continues to change and different strategies are used, future research could potentially determine what new approaches will benefit brand management through social media influencers.

Although not the specific focus of this study, crisis managers can learn from these results. Utilizing popular creators may not guarantee the expected outcomes in a crisis communication situation. Less popular creators may be more suitable for brand campaigns as a crisis response tool, such as restoring an organizational brand image or communicating with stakeholders in a post-crisis situation, as they are more driven to interact with audiences. Future research needs to explore relationships among users and various levels of content creators interaction. This may help develop an interactive strategy to gain positive support from users during and after a crisis. Crisis managers would benefit in understanding how to leverage intended interactive content strategies effectively.

Since, the results from this study indicate influencers with a large following on Instagram are less likely to interact with followers, it would be useful to examine the middle range of influencers to compare with top influencers to determine where the level of interactivity diminishes. Further, a comparison of celebrity profiles to successful influencers could reveal how a site could be more successfully managed. Finally, since previous research indicates influencer marketing is a popular strategy, future research also need to examine the procedures of the influencer marketing agencies in measuring influencer effects to offer insight on how influencers and brands are working together. Although the media has changed and the development of the Internet has initiated much of the change, the use of opinion leaders by people to make choices has not changed (Park, *et. al.*, 2016). What has changed is that influence marketing is using opinion leaders to promote brands and influence consumer choices rather than political choices.



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