

Book Review

Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Brand Communication

Reviewed by

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Perspectives-on-Social-Media-Influencers-and-Brand-
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Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Brand Communication is a practical handbook of Social Media Influencer (SMI) research and case studies for brands. This mode of communication's effectiveness over traditional media forms is powerful and often mysterious. The chapters help the novice SMI stakeholders understand key definitions, applications, and implications for brands and consumers.

Content and Scope

The book's goal is "to provide readers with an overview of the current research into SMI as brand communicators and their integration into brand communication strategies" (p. xv). Indeed, the popularity of influencers is a trending topic in social media education, but the research and theoretical models are somewhat limited. The book consists of nine chapters ranging from the history of SMIs to regulations and laws about brand-influencer relationships. The research inspires future inquiry into the ever-evolving dimensions of SMIs and brand relations. Fundamental theories are at the end of each relevant chapter summary for readers to refer to in future projects.

Chapter 1—The History of Social Media Influencers

The first chapter sets the stage for unique areas of research perspectives on SMIs and brand communication later in the book. In chapter 1, Burns reviews the "early days" of the practices of social media influence in the 1990s with blogs and moves through crucial social media platforms. Be prepared for quick facts that make up many engaging history lessons for platform researchers. Explanations of the evolutions of platforms to adapt to meet the needs of influencer marketing and the necessary SMI regulations serve as historical timestamps.

Chapter 2—Rising to the Top: Social Media (Macro) Influencers and the Democratized Brand Capital of Entertainment, Interaction, and Disclosure

Chapter 2 highlights the research of Landsberger and Martinez about macro-influencers in social media and opportunities for them to break into traditional entertainment media due to their social media presence. Using content analysis on the Instagram and YouTube channels of top macro influencers' profiles., the authors find that content created by the macro-influencers reveals five major themes, including professional, promotion, personal, interactive and frequency themes. Drawing on Goffman's theoretical framework, the research shows the significance of credible brand relationships in establishing celebrities.

Chapter 3—Micro-SMI: The Beginning of a Theoretical Model

Micro social media influencers or Micro-SMIs on social media platforms are megaphones for personal influence. Chapter 3 outlines a study including interviews with Australian micro-SMIs and Harrison's industry experience to develop a proposed model for Micro-SMIs. Thematically, digital literacy and inclusion are evident. The researcher posits that five essential dimensions define the role of Micro-SMIs: "personal attributes, content attributes, outcomes generated, behavior and strategies, and network characteristics" (p. 53). Topics from the chapter for future review related to Micro-SMIs emerged, like well-being, mental health, authenticity, and follower objectives.

Chapter 4—Evaluation of Brand-Sponsored Influencers and Tactics Across Industries

Chapter 4 reinforces that the customer journey is a non-linear process. Brands rely on SMIs to share product benefits and features in a trustworthy manner—Mariani's Figure 4.3 New Customer Journey. The New Customer Journey Moving from a Funnel to a Circular Process is on page 71. The goal of the circular model is to keep consumers moving

throughout the customer journey as a brand advocate, helping to elevate WOM. The author reviews industry influencer partnerships by focusing on case studies in the beauty, optical, and financial industries.

Chapter 5—LushUK Goes “All In” on Influencers

In 2019, LushUK went all in on the influencer-only strategy eliminating centralized social media from the plan. But did you know the company has never had an external advertising budget? Wallace, Luttrell, and Torres discuss a decentralized social media approach’s benefits, risks, and costs. The authors apply a mix of mass communication, psychology, sociology, and strategic communication theories to examine the decision to close centralized social media accounts and focus on influencers. Also relevant to the chapter discussion is the Gen Z research and “Superhero” generation dubbed by Luttrell and McGrath: “Gen Z, in particular, is turning more to phone conversations and face-to-face small talk over online interactions” (2020, p. 102; see also Stinson, 2017; Luttrell & McGrath, 2016). Theories covered in this chapter include: Social Impact Theory; Social Networking Theory; Uses and Gratifications Theory; Media Ecology Theory; Social Exchange Theory; Social Identity Theory.

Chapter 6—#OhSnap Using Current Students as Influencers in Higher Education

Keeping with Gen Z, Agozzino provides a chapter with considerations for the complexity of higher ed marketing related to digital and social media tactics. On page 115, the author defines key Snapchat terms. A Snapchat campaign case study from Ohio Northern University showed promising results associated with the engagement of the incoming class. The campaign included a careful blend of brand strategy (unexpected) and resonance with users. Spectacles, glasses made for the Snapchat app were part of the campaign’s success. The spectacles allowed a 3D storytelling opportunity for campus visitors and current students. Nearly 30% of incoming first-year students followed the new university

Snapchat account (p. 120). #OhSnap-A well-thought-out plan for Snapchat is beneficial for communicating campus messaging!

Chapter 7—Influencer Marketing: Is it Right for Your Brand?

SMIs might not be the right tool for some brands. Hernandez provides research-based guidelines to help brands determine whether or not an SMI relationship is appropriate. Guided by Social Identity Theory, the researcher outlines factors to consider when deciding to use influencer marketing, including brand relevance, influencer engagement, frequency of interactions, and capabilities to create authentic or organic results (p. 125). Additionally, the author outlines the factors to consider when deciding not to use influencers, including damage to society and other ethical considerations such as encouraging risky behavior, opacity challenges for the brand, and the potential for scandals and fraud. Other challenges Hernandez presents include the lack of trust and authenticity and the veracity of influencers' large following.

Chapter 8—Framing the Impact of Pseudo-Influencers via Communication Ethics

Pseudo-SMIs engage in conversations with brands by using hashtags and tagging them in posts to entice the brands' followers to follow them. Lo Castro describes how pseudo-SMIs inhibit brands' ability to cultivate genuine relationships with consumers, thus harming the brand image. Ultimately, the author highlights that by using influencers, brands inadvertently are seeing growth in engagement with fake followers. The author points to normative ethics to get to the root problem of industry concerns and the ethical implications of deception by pseudo-SMIs.

Chapter 9—Playing by the Rules: Legal Restrictions Surrounding Brand-Influencer Relationship

Barclay and Weaver interpret FTC standards in layperson's terms, enticing readers to understand the legal implications of endorsement-based messages. On page 164, the authors outline definitions and approaches that

are helpful in developing endorsement guidelines. Barclay and Weaver share recommendations for brands and influencers from policy compliance with Guidelines Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising and state laws related to deceptive advertising. The authors spotlight relevant FTC decisions and publications in the chapter for legal planning.

Contribution to PR Education

Through research evidence and theoretical approaches, Editor Watkins and the contributing authors create a playbook of SMIs and brand communication relevant to academics and practitioners alike. The book contributes to PR education by demonstrating the impact of SMIs on brands and the need for academia and the industry to understand how to use influencers as an effective strategic communication tool. They examine the emergence of SMIs in real applications and forge a path forward for understanding future opportunities and challenges in brands connecting with consumers. Unveiled are new theoretical models to be used in future practice.

Conclusion

Watkins curated a diverse group of contributors with research highlighting complex considerations for the marketing communications industry and academia regarding social media influencers and brand communication. The authors bridged the gap between industry and academic research in a compelling manner. Each chapter topic could be a book in itself. What makes the book exciting is that it provides a foundation of the history, theories, and practicality of brands in using SMIs for the reader. This book is a helpful guide for undergraduate and graduate faculty members embarking on the journey of teaching specialty topics in the area of SMIs. The case studies include concrete examples of success and areas of improvement in the influencer realm.

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