INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS' RESPONSIVENESS TO
A SMALL BUSINESS COLLABORATION OUTREACH

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Abstract: *Collaborations between social media influencers (SMIs) and brands have become increasingly popular in recent years, so many marketers and brands either start implementing influencers or intensify SMI use in their marketing strategies. Influencer marketing is the practice of compensating influencers for posting about a product or a service on their social media profiles. Influencers usually specialize in a particular niche area and possess highly devoted follower bases of different sizes. Their incentivized brand-related messages are very effective and achieve increased engagement because of their personal manner, subtlety, and authentic advertising approach. One of the first steps in the influencer marketing process is to reach out to the right influencer with the aim of partnering up and collaborating in order to engage new potential customers and consequently grow a business. Therefore, influencer marketing basically starts with an influencer's positive response to a brand's outreach and collaboration consent.*
This research study aims to determine the responsiveness of Instagram influencers to a small business outreach offering an unpaid collaboration (a free product in exchange for a feed post). It was also analysed how different Instagram influencer categories, in terms of follower count, responded to the selected small business' outreach (and consequently collaborated) and which Instagram influencer category is more likely to accept this kind of collaboration proposal. In addition, several practical recommendations are made regarding how small businesses should focus their efforts to make their Instagram influencer outreach marketing strategy more successful.

Keywords: social media influencer (SMI), Instagram influencer marketing, influencer outreach and collaboration responsiveness, influencer outreach strategy, small business

1. INTRODUCTION

Using influencers as a part of marketing strategy is not a novelty. However, the emergence of various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok, has increased the use of influencers in marketing, and also democratized their use immensely (McMullan, Laurell & Pitt, 2022). Advertising in online environments is exceptionally competitive, so social media influencer marketing was formulated as a more refined advertising method than traditional ones, offering less overt, more subtle and authentic advertising (Campbell & Rapp Farrell, 2020).

Social media influencers (SMIs) are notable social media users who specialized in particular niche areas and successfully gathered a highly devoted follower base by making an authentic online persona (Casalo et al., 2020; Lou et al., 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020, as cited in Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Campbell & Rapp Farrell, 2020). Influencers differ in branding and focus, follower count, engagement rates, collaboration requirements, and skill sets they possess (Campbell & Rapp Farrell, 2020). By generating and sharing highly personal content focused on their interests and lifestyle, this new type of opinion leader builds closer and deeper psychological relationships with their followers, which are based on shared values, ideas, and preferences (Audrezet et al., 2018; Ki et al., 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020, as cited in Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Casal´o et al., 2020 as cited in Belanche, et al., 2021). Based on influencer follower counts, but also considering their perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital, we can distinguish five different influencer categories: 1) nano-influencers (up to 10K followers), 2) micro-influencers (10K – 100K followers), 3) macro-influencers (100K – 1M+ followers), 4) mega-influencers (1M+ followers), and 5) celebrity influencers (1M+ followers) (Campbell & Rapp Farrell, 2020). Influencers are generally positively perceived by consumers and are considered to share similar traits, to be personal, authentic, credible, attractive and down-to-earth information sources which makes their incentivized messages very effective (Jin et al., 2019; Ki et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020;

Djarafova and Rushworth et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019, as cited in Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021). Their influence depends on their credibility and trustworthiness (Schouten et al., 2019, as cited in Belanche et al., 2021). At the fundamental level, influencers aim to provide value to their community through content creation and engagement, and consequently grow the followers they have influence over (Backaler, 2018). Followers are individuals who subscribe to the content of influencers on Instagram, which enables them to receive updates from accounts they subscribe to (Argyris et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing is the practice of compensating influencers (either monetarily or with free products, services, trips, or experiences) for posting about services or products on their social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). It is a persuasion process aimed at changing follower attitudes and behavior toward products or brands (Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2021), where influencers leverage the pre-established relationship and trust they have nurtured with their followers (Kim & Kim, 2021). Influencer marketing has become an essential part of almost every digital marketing strategy because it represents an effective approach to connecting brands with potential customers on social media (Kim & Kim, 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). At the moment, Instagram is the most influential platform and the primary choice of influencers for brand collaboration (White, 2022; Seifert, 2020; Ifluenz, 2017; Ki et al., 2020). The importance of this visual and engaging social network is expanding every day in terms of number of users and economic volume (#Hashoff, 2017; Socialbakers, 2018 as cited in Belanche et al., 2021).

Particular brand goals dictate the choice of a social media influencer for brand collaboration. Currently, thousands of different influencers are available, with various characteristics (e.g., different niche area specializations, number of followers, engagement rates); therefore, brands are facing a challenging task when trying to select the best-suited and most effective influencer. Some authors suggest that marketers should always prioritize an influencer's fit with a brand over their follower count, i.e. reach. A mismatch between a brand and an influencer can cause negative consequences for both the influencer and the brand in terms of the influencer's credibility (social media users might perceive the influencer as less credible) and the effectiveness of the brand's marketing efforts (Chahal, 2016; DeVeirman et al., 2017; Koernig and Boyd, 2009 as cited in Breves et al., 2019; McMullan, Laurell & Pitt, 2022).

Before initial contact, a brand needs to identify the right influencers and develop an effective influencer outreach strategy (Backaler, 2018). Influencers can be contacted through their social media accounts via direct messages (DMs), emails, using different outreach tools, through a larger business or a marketing agency (Shaffer, 2022; White, 2022). However, there is no right answer to which of these outreach methods is the best for each SMI, and it usually depends on the influencer's preferences (Backaler, 2018; Shaffer, 2022; Wiley, 2022). A drawback of DMs as an outreach method is that they can be overlooked because of the hundreds or even thousands of DMs influencers get via their social media channels (Seifert, 2020). Interacting and engaging with chosen influencers a few weeks prior to sending a collaboration proposal can show that a brand is genuinely interested in a potential long-term relationship with an influencer and the content they create. This practice can increase the chances that the influencer will become familiar with the brand and consequently respond to the brand's inquiry, leading to a successful outreach effort (Farmiloe, 2022; Ellis, 2017). If an outreach does not generate a response, sending a follow-up email or a direct message to an influencer is a common practice that shows a brand's genuine interest and dedication to collaboration (Shaffer, 2022; Backaler, 2018). For some B2C industries (business-to-customer), paid influencer collaboration is the norm; however, non-monetary incentives or a combination of the two can also be a way a brand or marketers build their initial relationship with influencers (Backaler, 2018).

As the influencer's positive response to a brand's outreach is one of the first and most important steps in influencer marketing and a subsequent successful influencer-brand collaboration, this study aimed to explore Instagram influencer responsiveness to small business outreach. The analysis shows how different Instagram influencer size categories responded to the outreach of the selected brand, as well as which Instagram influencer size category is more inclined to accept an unpaid collaboration proposal (a free product in exchange for an Instagram wall post). As a result, we were able to make several practical recommendations that aim to improve an Instagram influencer outreach marketing strategy in the case of a small business of a similar size.

2. METHODS

To determine the responsiveness of Instagram influencers to a brand's outreach, we chose a small business and the unknown brand Petification (IG:@petification) which operates in the pet industry niche, i.e. they make custom pet-themed digital and printed art. A single feed post campaign was carried out

where the goals were to raise awareness of new products and the brand itself, as well as to increase considerations and conversions. However, the effects of the fulfilled collaborations were not within this study's scope. A single feed post campaign is the most cost-efficient way to test out influencers for a brand's marketing campaign (Levin, 2020). Since Petification is a small business with limited advertising resources, the idea was to make an offer to influencers for an unpaid collaboration and propose a free product (a digital pet portrait of their pet) in exchange for an Instagram feed post. One of the first and essential steps for succeeding in an influencer marketing campaign is to write a compelling brief when reaching out to influencers (Levin, 2020). To formulate an outreach message and make influencers clearly understand the terms of the brand's collaboration proposal, a list of questions and guidelines from Levin (2020) was used.

After the brief was completed, the influencer identification and selection process began. A total sample of 116 influencers was manually selected using the brand's existing influencer database and the "Similar Account Suggestions" Instagram feature that gave suggestions to follow other similar accounts based on the followed Instagram profile. The selection process was based on both influencer follower count and their post engagement rates. Selected influencers for outreach had a follower count between 14K and 1.9M, and engagement rates from 0.55% to 69.54%. Usually, smaller accounts get more engagement (Oberlo, 2022). We also followed a common practice to interact and engage (follow and like) with chosen influencers before reaching out to them in order to increase the chances that they would positively respond to the brand's inquiry (Farmiloe, 2022; Ellis, 2017).

The data of Instagram influencer profiles was obtained using Phlanx (phlanx.com) and HypeAuditor (hypeauditor.com) online platforms for social media analytics. This data included follower count, post number, average number of likes, average number of comments, and engagement rate. Follower count is the number of Instagram users subscribed to an influencer's Instagram account. Follower engagement is a key metric to determine the quality of an influencer's content based on the number of interactions the content generates. Finally, the engagement rate defines the quality of influencer deliverables based on total follower responses (likes and comments) divided by total gross reach or follower count (Levin, 2020).

Smaller influencers are generally focused on growing the number of their followers and collaborations, so compared to the big ones, they are less selective when choosing a brand for collaboration (Trend, 2022). Even though a small audience of engaged followers is worth more than a large audience of less active followers, big influencers with a high number of followers are perceived as more popular and likable, with higher chances of converting prospects to customers. Therefore, big influencers can leverage these follower and brand perceptions to negotiate better collaboration deals and to decide which brand they will collaborate with (Anger and Kittl, 2013; Cheong, 2017; as cited in Agam, 2017). Our assumptions that smaller influencers with lower follower counts will be more eager to collaborate and, therefore, more responsive to Petification's outreach match the information provided in the literature. In this respect, we formulated a hypothesis H1 that states:

H1: A significantly higher number of influencers with a lower follower count will positively respond to a small business' outreach and consequently collaborate with it, compared to the influencers with a higher follower count.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For assessing influencer response rate to a small business outreach, as explained in the Methods section of the paper, we chose the Petification brand. 116 Instagram influencers of different follower counts and engagement rates were selected and eventually offered a collaboration proposal. The influencers were contacted in the span of approximately eight months, between July 2021 and March 2022.

Influencer response rate to the selected brand's outreach and collaboration proposal was 20.69% (24 influencers), whereas 14.66% (17 influencers) accepted and fulfilled the agreed upon collaboration terms (a free product/pet portrait in exchange for an Instagram feed post). A certain number of contacted influencers, 6.03% (7 profiles), responded to the brand's direct message but either refused the offer, wanted to change the offer significantly, or had accepted it but eventually failed to respond to the brand's follow-up inquiries that were necessary for proceeding with the collaboration process.

Table 1 presents the basic metrics of the Petification brand's Instagram account at this point (September 2022), such as follower count, number of posts, average likes, average comments, and engagement rate. Additionally, Table 1 shows calculated mean values of the same metrics for both contacted influencers

and those who afterward collaborated with this brand. Table 2 contains typical engagement rates of Instagram influencers that belong to different follower count categories from Oberlo (2022). As it can be noticed from the results presented in Table 1 and Table 2, the engagement rates of the Petification brand and the selected influencers are both severalfold higher than reported general Instagram influencer engagement rates. This indicates that one of the main parameters when selecting appropriate influencers was focused on their high engagement rates instead of relying solely on follower count. However, the relatively high mean values of the follower count parameter for both contacted influencers and those that collaborated with the brand show that reach, which depends on follower count, was also considered for influencer selection.

Table 1: Basic Instagram account metrics of 1. Petification brand, 2. contacted influencers, and 3. influencers that collaborated with this brand

Instagram account metrics	Follower count	Posts number	The average number of likes	The average number of comments	Engagement rate [%]
1. Petification Instagram account	10,600	279	907	37	8.91
2. Mean contacted	199,655	1,044	10,812	201.6	8.30
3. Mean collaborated	99,100	908	6,727	112.4	11.90

Table 2: Mean engagement rates of different Instagram influencer sizes categories (Oberlo, 2022)

Number of Followers	1K – 5K	5K – 20K	20K – 100K	100K – 1M	>1M
Mean engagement rate [%]	4.84	1.70	1.22	1.06	1.23

Table 3 presents three data sets: 1) the distribution of contacted influencers (relative to their follower count category), 2) the distribution of the influencers who positively responded and collaborated with the brand (relative to their follower count category), and 3) outreach success rates (relative to the contacted influencers for a particular follower count category). Instagram influencer follower count categories were adopted from Campbell & Farrell (2020). The results show that nano-influencers were not considered for the influencer marketing strategy of this brand because there were none selected and therefore contacted. In addition, only three mega-influencers were contacted (2.59% of the total contacted influencers), which did not produce any positive response.

Table 3: Distributions of 1. contacted influencers and 2. those who collaborated regarding their follower count category, and 3. outreach success rate within follower count category

Influencer category (follower count)	Nano	Micro		Macro			Mega
	<10K	10K-50K	50K-100K	100K-250K	250K-500K	500K-1M	>1M
1. Influencers contacted [%]	0	24.14	23.28	31.90	10.34	7.76	2.59
2. Influencers collaborated [%]	0	9.48	0	4.31	0.86	0	0
3. Outreach success rate [%]	0	39.29	0	13.51	8.33	0	0

The distribution of contacted influencers within two subcategories of the micro-influencer category (10K-50K and 50K-100K follower count), and the subcategory of the macro-influencer category (100K - 250K follower count) were relatively uniform (24.14%, 23.28%, and 31.90% respectively). Still, they produced completely different outreach outcomes (of 9.48%, 0%, and 4.31% respectively). It can be noticed that the most effective outreach, with an almost 40% success rate, was achieved in the micro-influencer subcategory that has between 10K and 50K followers (9.48% of the total number of contacted influencers). There is a clear declining trend in outreach success rate and, therefore, the number of collaborations, with the rise of influencer follower count. Additionally, a disruption of this trend occurred and was recorded for the micro-influencer subcategory with 50K-100K followers, which produced a 0% outreach success rate. The number of positive influencer responses to the Petification brand collaboration proposal significantly drops with the increase of influencer size, which supports the H1 hypothesis. However, this data also confirms that a small business' outreach for collaboration with macro-influencers offering unpaid collaboration in the form of free product compensation can have limited and modest success. The reason for this outreach outcome can be explained by the main focus of micro-influencers, which is growing their follower base, so they are incentivized to work with more brands, whereas macro-influencers are usually more selective in this regard. Therefore, compared to collaboration with macro-influencers, a collaboration with micro-influencers is generally easier, more cost-effective, and should enable more intimate and authentic engagement (Trend, 2022). Considering the results of this study, the outreach strategy of a small business and a new and unknown brand does not necessarily need to be exclusively directed towards smaller influencers with a relatively limited reach. This also shows that influencers choose brand collaborations not only based on the physical value that the brand offers for compensation, but also on many other factors and how they perceive the brand itself.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As the selected firm for this study was a small business and still unknown brand with limited advertising resources, nano-influencers and mega-influencers were out of the focus of its influencer marketing strategy. The reason was that, most likely, it would not have been able to meet the common mega-influencer collaboration demands. On the other hand, too many nano-influencers would have had to be collaborated with (and therefore given many more free products) for the intended reach. Therefore, the optimal influencer size and the main focus of this brand's influencer marketing strategy were micro and macro-influencers.

The positive response rate of influencers to Petification's collaboration proposal was 14.66% (17 out of 116 influencers). However, similar outreach efforts toward different influencer size categories produced different outreach response outcomes. The most effective outreach response was achieved in the micro-influencer category, which have between 10K and 50K followers (almost a 40% success rate). With the increase of influencer follower count, the positive response rate of contacted influencers significantly dropped, which supports the set hypothesis H1. Therefore, the main focus of a brand of this size in terms of influencer marketing should be pointed toward micro-influencers with between 10K and 50K followers. However, the results showed that a brand's outreach to macro-influencers offering an unpaid collaboration could have some success regarding the number of agreed collaborations. This shows that influencers choose brand collaborations not only based on the physical value that the brand offers, but instead on other factors and the influencer's perception of a particular brand. Due to the much bigger follower count of macro-influencers compared to micro-influencers, they have a more significant reach which, from the perspective of a brand, can compensate for the small number of positive outreach responses it receives. Thus, the influencer outreach strategy of a small business should not be exclusively pointed toward micro-influencers with relatively limited reach, but also toward the macro-influencer category (100K-500K followers).

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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