

The impact of reciprocity on Instagram pet influencer posting response times

Rastko Milošević¹, Savka Adamović¹, Ana Komlenić², Davor Menzildžić³, Vladimir Dimovski⁴, Petar Vasilčić¹

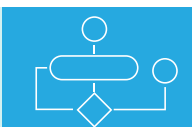
¹ Faculty of Technical Sciences, Graphic Engineering and Design, Novi Sad, Serbia; ² Institute for Pulmonary Diseases of Vojvodina, Sremska Kamenica, Serbia; ³ Faculty of Philosophy, Department of English Studies, Novi Sad, Serbia; ⁴ Faculty of Design and Multimedia, Podgorica, Montenegro

Introduction



Influencer marketing involves social media influencers promoting the products or services of brands in exchange for financial compensation or non-monetary incentives, such as complimentary products or services. This study investigates the effectiveness of two outreach strategies, reciprocation and conventional, on the response times of Instagram pet influencers when collaborating with a small business. Drawing from the principle of reciprocity, we aimed to determine whether offering upfront favors in the form of digital pet portraits leads to faster influencer posting times. A sample of 232 Instagram pet influencers was selected, with 203 approached using a conventional strategy and 29 using a reciprocation outreach strategy where the portrait was provided upfront. The key parameter analyzed was the time it took influencers to post the provided portrait on their Instagram feed after agreeing to collaborate. Results show that the reciprocation approach prompted faster and more consistent responses, with all influencers posting within five days, compared to 83.33% of conventional outreach participants posting in the first week. These findings suggest that upfront favors may encourage quicker influencer responses, offering insights into more effective influencer outreach strategies for small businesses.

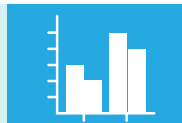
Methods



This study examined the impact of two outreach strategies—reciprocation and conventional—on Instagram pet influencer response times in posting a provided digital portrait for a collaboration with a small business, i.e., Petification (Instagram: @petification). This small e-commerce business focuses on creating custom digital art with a pet theme. The outreach strategy involved proposing unpaid collaborations, where influencers were offered free digital pet portraits in return for a post on their Instagram feed. A total of 232 Instagram pet influencers were selected for the study, chosen based on follower count, engagement rate, and their alignment with the brand. The sample represented a wide range of follower sizes, engagement levels, pet types (such as cats and dogs), and geographic locations. The study involved two groups of influencers: 203 influencers were approached with the conventional strategy, offering free portraits if they agreed to collaborate. The remaining 29 influencers were part of the reciprocation strategy, where Petification created and sent portraits upfront, along with a collaboration proposal. Data was collected over a 23-month period, from mid-2021 to mid-2023, including outreach, influencer responses, and posts on their Instagram feeds. The key parameter analyzed in this study was the time (in days and weeks) that Instagram pet influencers took to post, measured from the moment a finished digital pet portrait was provided to them (specifically when they confirmed receipt of the information) to the moment they posted it on their Instagram feeds. The smaller sample size for reciprocation outreach was due to time limitations regarding the

preparation of the portraits upfront. Outreach messages for both strategies clearly communicated collaboration terms and encourage influencers to share their personal impressions alongside the portrait.

Results



More than 50% of Instagram influencers in both outreach approaches posted within 1 day (0-1 days). Reciprocation outreach resulted in a higher proportion of posts within 2-3 days (28.57%) compared to conventional outreach (16.67%). Notably, 100% of the influencers in the reciprocation group posted within 5 days, while 3.33% of those in the conventional outreach posted between days 6 and 7. In total, 83.33% of influencers in the conventional outreach group posted within the first week, with the remaining 16.67% posting within the following 2-6 weeks. In terms of weeks, 100% of influencers in the reciprocation outreach group posted within the first week, while 83.33% did so in the conventional outreach, with a smaller percentage (16.67%) continuing to post over the next several weeks (2-6 weeks).

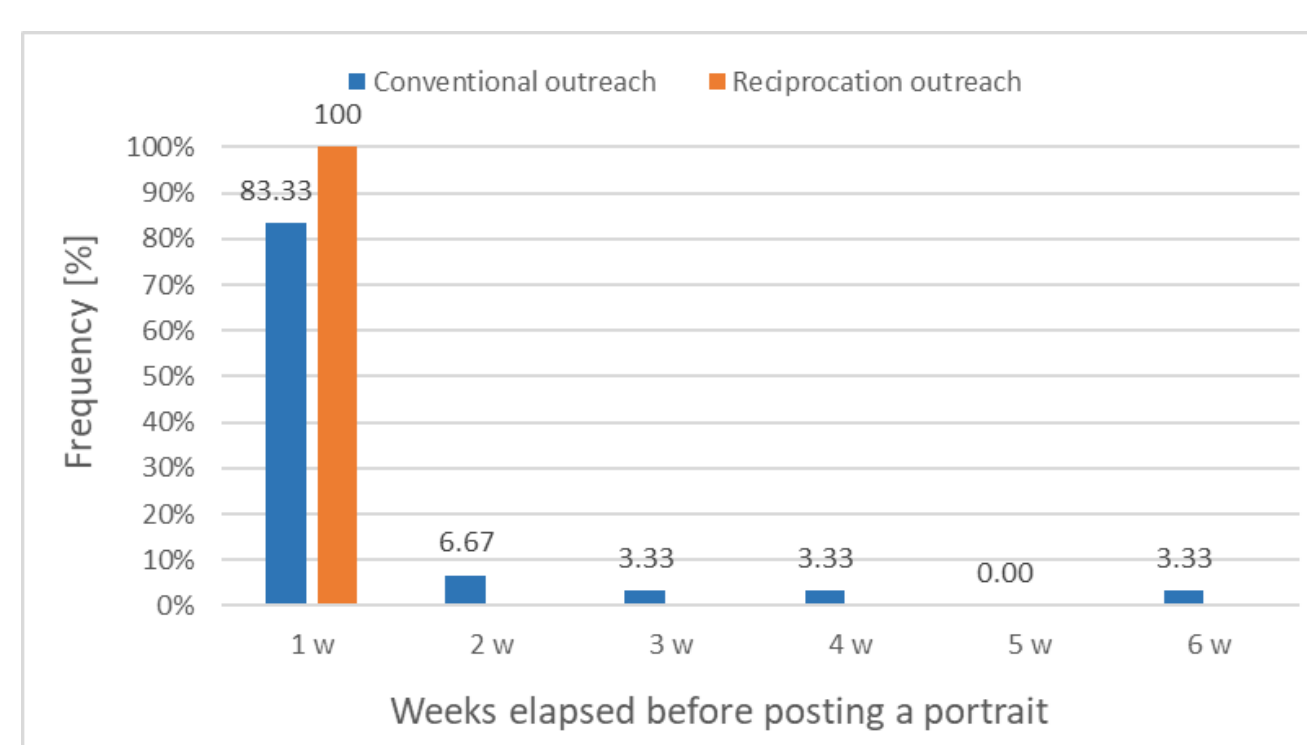
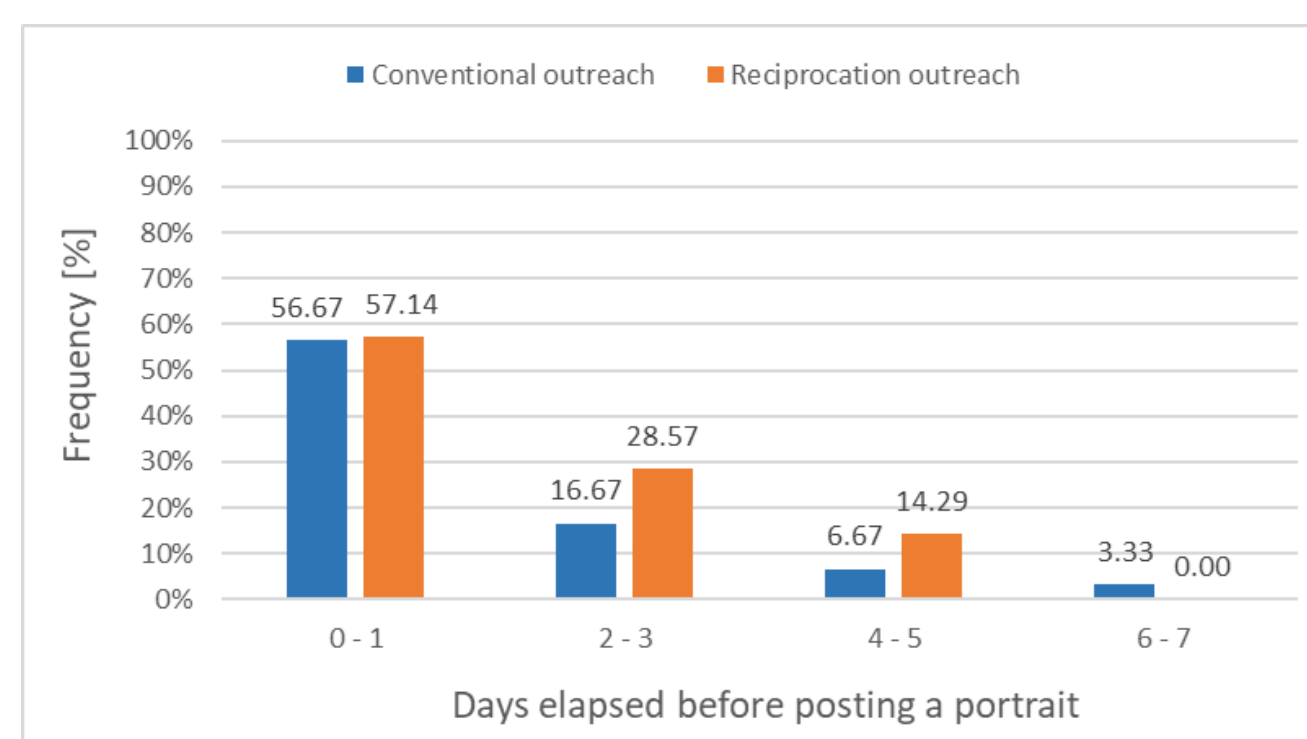


Figure 1

Distribution of days and weeks elapsed before posting

The average time to post was 1.43 days (stdev. ± 1.29 days) for reciprocation outreach, excluding the outlier who did not respond to the collaboration proposal, but eventually posted a portrait after 104 days. This exclusion was made to ensure more accurate data representation, as including such an extreme case would have significantly skewed the average posting time and misrepresented typical influencer behavior observed. By excluding the outlier, we highlighted that the majority of influencers in this group posted quickly, providing a clearer understanding of general Instagram pet influencer response behavior. A relatively low standard deviation of ± 1.29 days also indicates consistency in posting times, further suggesting that reciprocation outreach encourages a quicker, more predictable response compared to conventional outreach. For conventional outreach, the average posting time was 4.83 days (stdev. ± 8.45 days), where the larger standard deviation for the full period reflects greater variability in posting times, indicating a less predictable response pattern. However, when considering only the first week, the average posting time was 1.48 days (stdev. ± 1.47 days). Overall, while reciprocation outreach leads to faster and more uniform posting, early responders in the conventional outreach approach exhibited similar behavior to those in the reciprocation group.

Several factors contributed to Instagram pet influencers delaying or failing to post. Some missed the collaboration request due to an influx of messages, while others waited for peak engagement times. Some had recently posted and wanted to space out content, or lost the portrait file. Personal reasons also played a role, as many do not consider this their main job, reducing their sense of urgency to fulfill the task.

Obtained results from the study indicate that the reciprocation outreach approach prompted quicker and more consistent response patterns, whereas much more variability was observed in the conventional outreach approach. The average posting time for reciprocation outreach was 3.38 times faster (4.83 days / 1.43 days) compared to conventional outreach. This aligns with reciprocity principles, suggesting that upfront favors may encourage quicker action, supporting the idea from the study by Burger et al. (1997) that reciprocity motivates timely responses, though the time decay aspect from their original research may not fully apply to the present study. While reciprocation outreach generated faster influencer responses, early responders in conventional outreach posted at similar speeds, exhibiting a similar posting behavior when considering only the first week. These findings suggest that reciprocation outreach may be more effective for small businesses seeking timely collaborations, which is important for planning campaigns with strict timelines, though conventional outreach can still be effective for some influencers.

In addition to the quantitative results, several factors contributed to the failure of influencers to post or delays in posting. Influencers cited reasons such as missing the collaboration request due to message overload, timing posts for optimal audience engagement, or personal and technical challenges. Furthermore, for many influencers, this is not their primary profession, which may lead to lower motivation to complete the task promptly. These factors highlight the complexities of managing influencer collaborations.

Discussion / Conclusion



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research has been supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation (Contract No. 451-03-65/2024-03/200156) and the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad through project "Scientific and Artistic Research Work of Researchers in Teaching and Associate Positions at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad" (No. 01-3394/1).