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Author(s): Vanninen, Heini; Mero, Joel; Kantamaa, Eveliina

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Social Media Influencers as Mediators of Commercial Messages

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Abstract

Social media influencers are integral to contemporary organisations' marketing strategies. Despite growing interest in the topic, there is scant knowledge of how organisations manage and collaborate with influencers in their content production during commercial collaborations. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and a semiotic analysis of social media content, this study elucidates the dynamics of organisations' commercial collaborations with influencers and discusses how influencers decode and transmit organisations' commercial messages to their followers in the destination marketing context. Social reality and commercial messages are enmeshed in the content narrative and interpreted by the influencer and their knowledge of their audience into what they could mean and become in the semiotic and symbolic landscapes of social media environments. Thus, an influencer's interpretation of organization's commercial messages is embedded in the social media environment.

Keywords: influencer marketing, social media, opinion leadership, two-step communication flow theory

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Introduction

Social media influencers have become integral in brands' social media marketing (Appel et al., 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020) but nevertheless how brands can manage influencers as part of the marketing mix remains understudied (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). Influencers can be defined as 'microcelebrities' who accumulate a following on social media through narrations of their personal everyday lives (Abidin, 2016). Consumers see social media influencers as trustworthy experts and thus they influence consumers' decision-making (Koay et al., in press). This in turn makes influencer marketing appealing to marketers (Audrezet et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the organic reach of brands' social media content is continuously decreasing (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Tuten & Solomon, 2018) as consumers avoid social media advertising in various ways (Chinchanachokchai & De Gregorio, 2020). Thus, influencer marketing has significant potential (Appel et al., 2020), with its industry worth expected to reach \$15 billion by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). Consequently, it has become crucial for academics and practitioners to understand how to strategically employ influencers as part of the marketing mix (Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Haenlein et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2019).

Despite growing academic interest in influencer marketing, there is scant knowledge of how organizations manage the production of influencers' content that is associated with their commercial collaborations with brands. Few studies to date have addressed managing influencer marketing from a firm's perspective (Borchers, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021, Ye et al., 2021). Managing the content

production may not be straightforward given that the key characteristic separating influencer marketing from other marketing communications is that the influencer is considered (largely) in control of the marketing material produced (Audrezet et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020). While extant research has investigated brands' social media content (e.g. Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021; Dolan et al., 2019), we know little about the design of influencers' posts and how organizations can influence their production (DeVeirman & Hudders, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). Influencers are seen to be in control because their content supposedly represents their real life (Audrezet et al., 2020). Thus, influencer marketing involves both organizations' and influencers' output when commercial messages are transmitted to audiences via influencers. Thus, we ask: *How do influencers mediate organisations' commercial messages to their audiences?* To address this question, we conducted a multi-method study, including semi-structured interviews with organisations and influencers and a semiotic analysis of social media content.

We contribute to understanding managing influencer marketing from a firm's perspective—a neglected topic in wider influencer marketing literature (Borchers, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021, Ye et al., 2021). Further, we contribute to the two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) by elucidating actions in the various steps of the two-step flow of communication through influencers. Our findings elucidate how organisations plan and guide the transmission of their marketing messages and the main brand themes via influencer marketing. Finally, we contribute to the literature on the use of influencers in the destination marketing context, which has previously focused on communicating brand values via ordinary social media users (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015; Xu & Pratt, 2018) and visitors' perspectives (Xu & Pratt 2018). From the managerial perspective, this study provides the destination marketers' and influencers' perspectives on

how destination brand themes can be communicated through collaborations with social media influencers.

Theoretical Background

Influencers as Opinion Leaders

Extant research has named individuals that have a disproportional effect on others as *influencers*, *influentials* or *opinion leaders* (Libai et al., 2013; Iyengar et al., 2011). Such individuals are integrated into firms' social media marketing strategies as a part of a social content strategy and, further, a seeding strategy (Li et al., 2020) to ensure rapid diffusion of firms' marketing messages (Iyengar et al., 2011). Similarly, in the field of advertising, influencer marketing is seen as a form of *native advertising*, with advertisers increasingly utilising influencers to endorse various offerings (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Voorveld, 2019). In general, influential people are seen to have three key traits: they are convincing, they know a lot, and they have a multitude of social ties (Goldenberg et al., 2009). Further, they personify certain values and have strategic social locations (Weimann, 1991). Thus, such people can have a major impact on opinion formation regarding any matter (Goldenberg et al., 2009), such as companies' offerings. While the concept of opinion leadership originates from pre-social media era, it is equally relevant in digital contexts (Cole et al., 2011). In the age of social media, influential individuals are often social media influencers, and their communications are seen as a unique form of marketing due to their (a) blending of elements of paid and earned media, (b) loyalty to their followers in addition to commercial messages and (c) control over the message design and implementation (Hughes et al., 2019).

Opinion leadership refers to the extent to which an individual is perceived as a model for others, and the information provided by an individual, such as an influencer, is considered interesting (Casaló et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). Opinion leaders are influential and empowered by other members of their reference groups (Katz, 1957)—in this case, by influencers' social media followers. The opinion leadership of influencers increases consumers' intention to interact with influencers and recommend them to others, which benefits the influencers by increasing their value as opinion leaders (Casaló et al., 2020). Online opinion leaders have social influence because they tend to have their messages spread and shared by others in online networks, which also gives them the power to form and inform public opinions (Choi, 2015). The perceived originality and uniqueness of an influencers' social media posts make the poster influential in the opinion of consumers (Casaló et al., 2020).

The construction of basic communication processes has changed because the social media audience is willing to respond instead of being passive receivers of messages (Andéhn et al., 2014; Oliveira et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Further, social media enables influencers to create content in different forms, utilise visual elements and storytelling and thus promote unique characteristics of even complex offerings, such as destinations, at a relatively low cost (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017; Sevin, 2016; Tsaor et al., 2014). Destination marketing research highlights this particularly well because previous research finds that consumers tend to appreciate content in which a personal story of a destination is involved (Lund et al., 2018; Lund et al., 2019).

Influencer marketing is typically seen as a combination of old and novel marketing methods because of its similarities with celebrity endorsements (Seeler et al., 2019). Unlike celebrities, who are popular in traditional media, social media influencers have become famous through

the content they have created and published on their own social media accounts (Jin et al., 2019; Lou & Yan, 2019). Influencers can have general expertise in some specific areas, such as travel, architecture or food, and they produce content on their channels to cater to audiences who are interested in these topics (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Stoldt et al., 2019). Influencers regularly communicate persuasive messages to their audiences, offering informational and entertainment value as well as cues to their personality, which contribute to how the followers react to their posts, whether sponsored or not (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The feeling of connectedness and relationships that influencers can create and develop between their personal brands and their followers define the characteristics of influencers' success (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Hou, 2019).

Influencers are considered brand resources who enhance brands' credibility because they talk about brands authentically in an authentic-seeming media environment (Childers et al., 2019; Hou, 2019). The social media content that influencers create is delivered via first-person narration, which is seen as warmer and more personal, leading to more engagement (Chang et al., 2019). Influencers are seen to provide authentic evaluations and recommendations of products and services, and they ensure this authenticity by promoting brands that fit their style, respect their individual identity and give them the creative freedom to execute marketing campaigns (Audrezet et al., 2020). The reputation and online personas of influencers are also shaped by their appearance with known brands, and the trustworthiness of the associated brands also plays a key role in the perceived credibility of the endorser (Jin et al., 2019). Followers tend to have positive associations with the influencers they follow; therefore, by utilising influencers to communicate the message of a brand, favourable impressions can be formed about the brand among the target audience (Childers et al., 2019).

Influencers as Mediators of Commercial Messages

According to the two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), messages disseminated by mass media are filtered by opinion leaders who mediate the transmission of information. Any marketing message is first encoded by the sender (organisation) and then decoded by the recipient (in this case, the influencer). Encoding requires the organisation to write into their messages (i.e. include core elements of the brand or other matters they wish to convey to potential customers) (Castleberry et al., 1999). Decoding the message entails ‘a) understanding the meaning of the message, b) evaluating the message and c) retaining the message in memory’ (Castleberry et al., 1999, p. 31). Opinion leaders interpret the information they receive and then pass it to others, which further increases its influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders are central because ‘so many things in the world are inaccessible to direct empirical observation that individuals must continually rely on each other for making sense out of things’ (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 55). The theory emphasises interpersonal relations, which function as communication channels and influence decision-making by modulating the thinking and acting of the people in a network as well as functioning as a source of social support (Katz, 1957).

Extant research has found the two-step flow communication theory to be suitable for studying the dissemination of brand messages via influencers (Casaló et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Marketers are increasingly utilising influencers as intermediaries (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) to deliver the message of the original sender to their own social networks. According to the model (Katz, 1957), in this second step, messages are interpreted, contextualised, filtered and disseminated by opinion leaders to the participants of their communities (social media followers, in the case of influencers), which leads to differentiated

comprehensions of the message across various social boundaries (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) drew on the two-step flow theory to build a model of how brand communication flows in the social media network through influencers who communicate brand messages to their followers and how these shared experiences of offerings represent reference points for their followers. While Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) identified influencers as intermediaries in the two-step communication flow, they did not elucidate the workings of this step (e.g. how influencers interpret the messages). Casaló et al. (2020) studied opinion leadership from the perspective of its influence on consumers' behavioural intentions and found that the influence is greater when the consumer perceives that the content posted on the account matches their personality and interests. Therefore, these studies do not focus on influencers' mediation of commercial messages (i.e. the decoding and encoding needed to transmit the message to audiences).

We argue that, as a part of this decoding/encoding process, influencers carefully consider how to present social reality in a manner that is interesting to the audience. In the field of media studies, Weimann (2000) argued that there is a large gap between reality and what he calls the *reconstruction of realities* as they are communicated by the mass media representing various world events. His arguments build on Lippmann (1922/1998) who also thought there is little relation between the factual world and people's perceptions and beliefs of this world. Thus, Weimann (2000) suggests that reality mediation proceeds from (a) reality through (b) constructed mediated reality (CMR) to (c) the perceived mediated reality of the audience and states that 'CMR is more dramatic, more colorful, more intense, more active, and faster than real life... We want CMR to offer us the unusual, the dramatic, the things that are out of [the] ordinary' (Weimann, 2000, p. 12). Similarly, social media influencers use their creative skills and social media affordances (Leonardi & Vaast, 2007) to produce remarkable content that

catches their audiences' attention. An underlying tension in influencer marketing is that CMR can be viewed as opposite to authentic that is considered the key appeal in influencer content (see Audrezet et al., 2020). But, according to Heidegger (1962), authenticity is based on experience and can change from moment to moment. This denotes that the influencer is a witness, an observer and consumer of various possibilities that constitute the world of experience (Heidegger, 1962).

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical background of the study. To elucidate how influencers operate as the social media era's second step in two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) by conveying organisations' commercial messages, we need to understand how the encoding/decoding process (Castleberry et al., 1999) between the organizations and influencers takes place. Both the affordances of technology (material aspects) (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) and the need to respond to audience expectations (social aspects) of, for example, authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020), facilitates the delivery of content that is considered interesting by the audience and thus can be considered 'constructed mediated reality'—a term borrowed from mass media communications (Weimann, 2000).

Figure 1

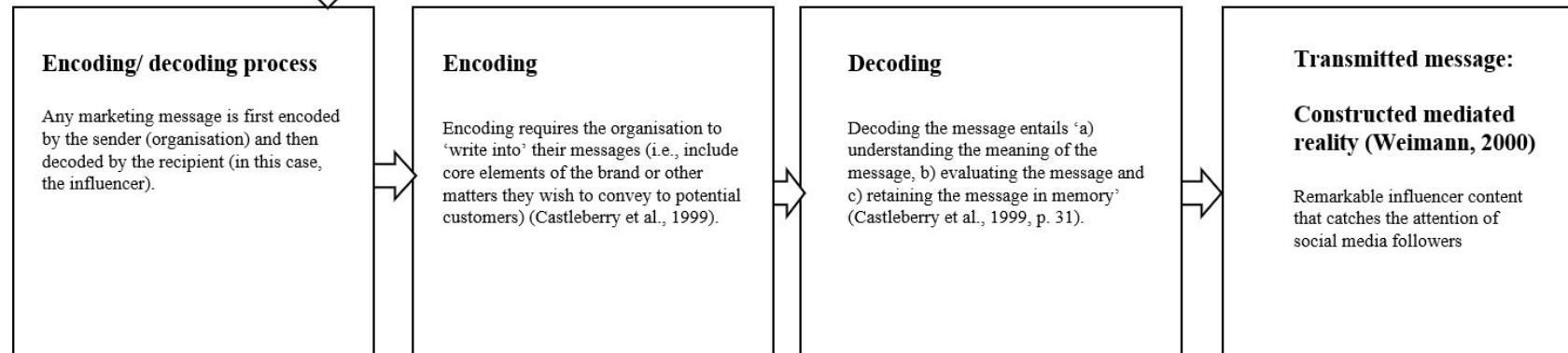
Theoretical Background

Opinion leadership in social media

- Some individuals have disproportional effect on others (Libai et al., 2013; Iyengar et al., 2011)
- These 'influencers' are utilized in social media marketing strategies (Li et al., 2020) to ensure rapid diffusion of firms' marketing messages (Iyengar et al., 2011)
- Emerges from the nexus of technology and individual social influence (Appel et al., 2020; Childers et al., 2019)
- Influencers utilize social media affordances (see Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) to create content in different forms (visual elements and storytelling) (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017; Sevin, 2016; Tsaor et al., 2014).
- Key idea: authentic communication about brands (Childers et al., 2019; Hou, 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020).

Opinion leaders' mediation of messages

- Opinion leaders mediate the transmission of information which further increases its influence (Castleberry et al., 1999; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)
- Messages are interpreted, contextualised, filtered and disseminated by opinion leaders which leads to differentiated comprehensions of the message across various social boundaries (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014)



Methodology

Understanding influencer marketing from the content production process perspective is in the early stages of development. Therefore, qualitative methodology has been adopted for this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such an approach is useful for understanding and developing rich descriptions from interviews and other qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2009), and it acts as a basis for further theory building. Further, we have employed a post-positivist stance, and our data collection and analysis has been informed by two-step communication flow theory. Destination marketing was chosen as the context for studying influencer marketing content production due to its complexity. In addition to tangible elements, there are various intangibles and immaterial characteristics (Ageeva & Foroudi, 2019) of tourism offerings. These offerings are sold before consumption; thus, social media has a key role in travel planning, and shared experiences are considered valuable information sources (Amaro et al., 2016; Bilgihan et al., 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The present study utilises several forms of qualitative data: semi-structured interviews with DMOs and social media influencers, DMOs' and influencers' social media content and various secondary data. These data were deemed most suitable to examine the process of content production because we need to understand (a) which messages organizations task influencers to convey, (b) how influencers interpret these messages and (c) how this interpretation shows in the output of their work, which is social media content. All data used for this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1***Data Sources of the Study***

| Data type | Interviews | Influencers' social media data | Other data |
|--------------------|--|--|--|
| Amount | 26 interviews | 603 Instagram pictures/videos + associated text and 204 pages of blog posts | |
| Description | <p>Representatives of Nordic and Baltic destination marketing organisations (22 interviews)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PR Manager • International Marketing Manager • Social Media Manager • Campaign Manager • PR Account Executive • Digital Marketing Manager • PR Manager • Travel Trade & PR Manager • Managing Director • Project Manager • Sales and Marketing Director • Business Specialist • Tourism and Marketing Planner • Account Manager • Digital Marketing Specialist • Project Manager • Cultural Producer • Marketing Manager 1 • Social Media Manager • Account Manager • Communications Coordinator • Marketing Manager 2 • Marketing Designer <p>Social media influencers (4 interviews)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencers 1–4 | <p>Instagram posts</p> <p>Photographs and related texts that may include emojis and other visuals in different Instagram features, including 'feed', 'stories' and 'highlights' sections.</p> <p>Blog posts</p> <p>Longer posts that include photos and text describing the destinations and influencers' experiences (e.g. activities, visited locations, such as hotels and restaurants, and various events), and feelings generated from these.</p> | <p>Destination marketing organisation websites and social media profiles, press releases, news articles and briefs for the influencers</p> |

Data Collection and Analysis

Typical DMOs are publicly funded regional development organisations that aim to increase travel to specific countries, cities or regions. The DMOs were selected for this study with

purposive sampling (Silverman, 2010). The selected DMOs have similar organisational structures and functions in that they all represent a capital, large city or region in the Nordic and Baltic countries, maintain a presence on various social media platforms and utilise influencer marketing as a destination marketing tool. We focused on local-level (city/region) DMOs instead of country-level DMOs because the latter focus more on general development of the country image, etc., and they have other audiences, such as international investors, for their communications. While local-level DMOs engage in branding at the local level, they also conduct more tactical consumer-oriented marketing campaigns, such as those with influencers.

We used a key informant protocol (Kumar et al., 1993) and identified the DMO employee responsible for marketing by using external sources (such as DMO websites or LinkedIn). In our initial contact email, which included an invitation to participate in the study, we described the key themes of the study and asked the addressee to forward the email to the right person if someone else in the DMO was more knowledgeable regarding our themes. In a few instances, the email was forwarded to someone else, but most of the initial contacts considered themselves most knowledgeable. In total, we interviewed 23 DMO representatives from 22 different DMOs (one DMO stated that 2 people were equally responsible for influencer marketing; thus, both participated in the interview).

Despite one DMO interview consisting of only email communications due to the respondent's requirements, the other interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes; each was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on understanding DMOs' experiences with influencer marketing in general and understanding how their specific destination brand themes are conveyed via influencers' communications in particular. We asked the DMO interviewees to describe (a) what themes and aspects of their destinations they

wanted influencers to convey to their audiences, (b) how influencers were guided during the collaborations and (c) how they thought influencers had managed to convey these themes in their content. Secondary data, such as websites, press releases and news articles, were also utilised to better understand the commercial messages of the destinations.

Additionally, we interviewed four social media influencers who had collaborated with one or several of the interviewed DMOs. These interviews were conducted to understand how influencers had understood the commercial messages of the DMOs and how they had interpreted and embedded the messages into their social media posts. Interviewing both organisations and influencers was integral to grasping the process of communication flow via the two steps it contains. In search for further insight, we reviewed the interviewed influencers' social media profiles on all the social media channels they use and conducted *behaviour checking* through a review of their publicly available social media posts to understand how they produce content. This was consistent with studies that have examined social media use (Fischer & Reuber, 2011) and is the best practice for augmenting and validating other basic data (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). These additional steps increased our understanding of the content that influencers typically produce. All social media content that was produced for the DMO collaborations was saved via screenshots for the purposes of further analysis.

Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013) was used to analyse the interview data from both the DMO and influencer interviews. Our theoretical background of two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) directed our focus on the instances where encoding / decoding activities (Castleberry et al., 1999) took place. Specifically, we scrutinized how a specific theme (mentioned by a DMO as a brand theme) was understood (or if it was) by the influencer and how it manifested in the social media content that was further analysed using semiotic

analysis (Berger, 2019; Peirce, 1932) to provide additional insight. We placed the greatest focus on how more intangible themes (such as culture) were interpreted and presented because there was more room for interpretation in these (versus in the presentation of tangible themes, such as food). Following the approach of Drenten et al. (2020), the visuals and text of each post were analysed together to determine whether they either reinforced or contradicted each other. The analysis of social media content included identifying broad themes that emerged from the content (photos/videos/textual content), analysing specific content first on the *surface level* and finally drawing out underlying sets of meanings that either recurred or were absent in the content. For example, when a DMO representative mentioned that their destination's theme was 'sustainable travel', we read the texts and looked through photos for *signifiers* (Peirce, 1932) that could either denote (signify a literal meaning, e.g. 'bio-diesel') or connotate (signify meanings that are secondary, cultural meanings of signs, such as certain brands sold in boutiques) this theme. Overall, the analysis focused on how tangible and intangible elements were embedded in the influencers' content.

Findings

Encoding and Initial Decoding: Commercial Messages of Destinations

To elucidate how influencers mediate the transmission of organizations' commercial messages to their audiences, we first need to address what kind of messages / brand themes organizations task influencers to convey. DMOs hire influencers to execute strategically planned destination marketing. Each destination has specific brand themes that are highlighted in its marketing communications. Some DMOs' marketing strategies are aligned with the marketing strategy of the national tourism organisation of their country, meaning that some elements of the country-

level DMO, such as the country's brand themes, are also used in local destination marketing. In addition to national themes, DMOs have various themes of their own, and they want to emphasise certain characteristics of their destination brands. In general, themes of the destinations that DMOs want influencers to convey in the social media content that they produce can be divided into tangible (such as food), and intangible (such as positive emotion).

The choice of the influencer is the first key issue when starting to communicate about a certain selected brand's theme to consumers. DMOs collaborate with influencers who have a specific area of expertise as well as with lifestyle influencers whose content is not clearly focused on a specified topic. However, DMOs increasingly prefer collaborating with influencers who focus on a specific area, such as gastronomy or design, if that aspect is a match for the core element of their destination brand:

I think the themes are often quite given by their profiles because I choose someone who has a clear profile and [I know] what they want. Not [choosing] just travellers because it gets a bit like you have seen it before. Influencer marketing is evolving because people get tired of just seeing people traveling around. They [influencers] need to have something they are good at. They need to have some kind of area that they are highlighting. Not just traveling. Everyone does that.
(Digital marketing manager, DMO interview)

Furthermore, some DMOs consider it extremely important for the influencer to share similar values to their destination brands. The aim of influencer collaborations is to support the strategy of the DMO and create content that emphasises the characteristics, themes and values of the destination brand. To achieve this, DMOs brief the influencers and introduce them to the main

themes of their destination brands. Some DMOs provide influencers with either a ready-made programme for the duration of the visit (in which these elements are embedded) or suggestions for attractions and elements of their destinations that influencers could be interested in to mention on their social media channels:

In general, these influencer trips have had a particular theme, for example, local cuisine, which is one of our main focus areas. Then the influencer gets to see and experience the local food culture and the destination through these food experiences. Then we build the program around this specific theme. (PR manager, DMO interview)

If an influencer focuses on a specific theme, the collaboration does not require extensive preparation because DMOs believe that the influencer will naturally be emphasising that specific theme when creating content for the destination.

Influencers are introduced to the main themes that we are interested in showcasing through the collaboration. Generally, one can say that the suggestions that we give to influencers on what to see and do in the city are divided into four categories: Food and Drink—taste X, Art, Architecture, Design and Science—understand X, Sauna and Archipelago—experience X and Urban Nature—feel X. (PR manager, DMO interview)

DMOs see influencers as professional content creators who know their audiences and their interests. Influencers can interpret the given themes as they wish:

We have five main [themes]; it's gastronomy, design, architecture, green sustainability and culture and royal history. Then it can be a lot of activities under those brand themes. They [the brand themes] can be analysed very openly. You don't have to have something that is specifically onto this one or that one, so we are not so categorical with it. They know their audience better than I do. So, they need some freedom to express themselves. (Digital marketing manager, DMO interview)

Each year, there is a cluster of themes that we're trying to push, but when you're working with influencers, you can't always keep only pushing those ideas because influencers, they often want a wider look on things, so they won't only look at design, only look at green areas or nature. It's often a combination of things. (Social media manager, DMO interview)

Depending on the type and objectives of the collaboration, some DMOs are stricter with the instructions than others and want to have more control over how influencers interpret the themes and publish on their channels as a result of the collaboration. While influencers are typically guided by *briefings* on what they are expected to do while working on the commercial campaigns, the DMOs expressed uncertainty regarding the briefs due to the novelty of the approach and differences in the influencers regarding professionalism:

We are still learning. It has been a jungle before how to treat influencers because it is very non-traditional. There has been a challenge in how to do contracts, how to handle them, how can we get them to actually be worth it.

Sometimes it was unsure how can we even get them to post on their pages about the destination. (Travel trade & PR manager, DMO interview)

DMOs do not want influencers' content to only focus on the most known tourism attractions but rather to communicate the distinctive aspects and intangible elements of the destination, such as the general atmosphere and local culture, which are crucial to illustrating the distinctiveness of the destination's brands. Influencers are guided to experience the authentic local lifestyle at their destination, including meeting local people, introducing aspects of sustainability and trying local cuisine. Collaborating with influencers supports reaching these objectives because the influencers often strive to see and portray unique aspects of destinations on their social media channels.

When communicating various elements of the destination brand through social media influencers, DMOs want messages to be delivered in a way that is perceived as appealing and credible. Organisations do not expect influencers to have a formal communication style but rather one that is authentic and in alignment with the content that the influencer is typically producing. When the aim is to communicate intangible characteristics or the emotional value of a destination, the created content ideally conveys the influencer's attachment to the destination, contains cues to the influencer's personality and reflects the influencer's personal experience. If the destination's core values and identity are similar to the influencer's personal brand, their relatedness to the destination can be communicated to audiences more easily in a credible manner. Influencers may also have their own limitations due to strong personal brands, which may cause tension during collaborations:

We had a group [of travel bloggers] from Germany, and one girl and her sister were vegans, and they would just ask me seven times like is the restaurant serving vegan food. I said, yes, but [it turns out] that if it's not specifically focused on vegan food, she wouldn't find it a fit for her content. I could not bring the three other people all the time to a vegan restaurant, so you have to... it's a small detail, but it [gets on] your nerves. (PR account executive, DMO interview)

Thus, if the influencer has a strong personal brand (e.g. being a vegan influencer), their audiences expect all content (even the commercial) to resonate with this personal brand value.

Influencers' Decoding of Destinations' Commercial Messages and Further Encoding them into Content

When influencers transmit organizations' commercial messages, they first need to 'decode' the organizations' message that is open to interpretation, i.e. understand its meaning, and then further 'encode' it into their own content. While DMOs can communicate various guidelines for collaborations that include monetary compensation (in addition to merely paying for trip expenses) in a rather detailed manner, the briefs may also include destination themes that are often more intangible and open to interpretation (e.g. culture or sustainability). One intangible theme present in several DMOs' marketing themes was 'promoting sustainability and sustainable travel'. Despite this being a key theme, the influencers were not asked to highlight any sustainability aspects in a specific manner. For example, one influencer interpreted this guideline by focusing on giving subtle hints on this objective:

I don't prefer preaching about sustainability, but I rather let the actions and content speak [for themselves]. Not like saying we sleep here in a sustainable manner, but just feature content that communicates this aspect. (Influencer 1, interview)

Thus, this influencer's content showed how their rental car was fuelled with biodiesel; sightseeing was done by bike; meals consisted of ingredients produced locally; the clothes shown in photos were typically from small and sustainable local clothing companies; the shops visited comprised more local boutiques than chain stores; and the restaurants were vegetarian-friendly. However, there was no textual explanation in the content regarding sustainability; rather, the meaning received was dependent on the receiver's understanding and knowledge of sustainability. For instance, one of the Instagram photos showed a local boutique that sells organic and sustainably produced cosmetics from a small domestic brand. Unless the receiver knows the brand, this message will not be received as 'promoting sustainability'. Similarly, the other more intangible elements of the destinations and campaign goals are also open for interpretation in the content.

The interviewed DMOs often merely embedded the chosen theme into the programme designed for the influencer, and while the theme may have been mentioned briefly to the influencer before the visit, such as by email, the influencer was not specifically instructed to highlight this in the content. For instance, while one DMO wanted to promote the 'culture theme' with one influencer, it was still not highlighted to the influencer:

I got the program [from the DMO] beforehand, and then I just followed it. Otherwise, I didn't get any briefings that [specified] "here, you have to focus on

this". It was just "go here"; otherwise, I had free hands to do whatever and post whatever I wanted. (Influencer 4, interview)

This influencer's content showed, for example, cultural and historical locations that may not always be interesting to younger social media audiences. To make up for this, the influencer had included Instagram stories, such as a photo showing a large windowsill in an old castle with the caption "#Readingcornergoals", which refers to the popular social media convention of showing something desirable and describing it with the word 'goals'. In the interview, this influencer stated that with every location, she strives to find something that would be interesting from her point of view because she believes that is also what would interest her audience. Overall, the expectation from the DMOs was that the influencers would create social media content in their own style and convey the essence of the destinations via material that is desirable from the viewpoint of their followers:

We agreed about the content entity, that I would do Instagram stories freely from that time [of the visit] and while something is happening [during the day] and posting in real time. It was like the style of 'my day' content. (Influencer 3, interview)

'My day' refers to another popular social media convention of posting content that describes an influencer's day as it happens. However, the influencers seemed to rely on their gut feeling when assessing what the followers wanted to see:

I don't really know [who follows me]. I would say that it's, based on just my hunch, pretty regular people who like the same things that I do. I don't know if

they really like [it], but that's my guess. Or... I don't really know. (Influencer 4, interview)

Influencer 3 was chosen due to her 'family influencer' status; her content is focused on describing how different locations and activities are suitable for young children. This is mostly shown in various photos of kids doing different activities with smiles on their faces, including associated texts, such as the following:

On Tuesday, we tried the activity park X. It was so much fun. Also, our 3-year-old likes to climb, and they had several routes that were fitting for her too. Beforehand, I was worried if they would have enough to do for the youngest one and whether she's still too small, but not at all. At times, we rested at the bench, but she managed to climb on many different routes really well. (Influencer 3, blog post text)

The visuals and the narratives complement one another in the commercial content. For instance, as part of the visits, the DMOs typically organise guided tours around the cities. Influencers use these instances to pick a few 'fun facts' that can be placed in the text captions or in the blog texts; otherwise, they are less essential in the actual campaign content creation, which focuses on showing what the audience is mostly interested in (e.g. hotels, restaurants, bars and cafes). While photos serve as visual cues for conveying the messages, influencers also include textual narratives to their social media content, such as blog texts and text captions of shared photos or videos:

The sunrise looked magical, so in the [island location], I shared photos of it just because of the feeling [I was able to convey]. But the text is also important. I remember how I felt impressed about traveling in [location] and described this in the text. The photo is just one moment and what you frame in it. (Influencer 2, interview)

Above all, the interpretation of any theme presented by DMO was based on influencers' own opinions:

If we think about themes such as sustainability that people may divide over and are interesting, I think my followers are most interested in hearing my own personal thoughts about these. (Influencer 2, interview)

Influencers' ultimate need to provide interesting content to their followers may even override commercial messages and guidelines:

When producing content, I don't think about 'now I just focus on this specific theme'. I focus on everything that is in my opinion fantastic or intriguing. (Influencer 4, interview)

When there are multiple themes that the DMO wants influencer to highlight, the influencer may also use the different technological affordances of social media:

I don't have much about the sustainability in the stories [Instagram function] because stories are made in a more of a real time style. In this one [Instagram

feed] picture I have written about [sustainability related offering]. But mostly I focused [in content] on how to make travel easy and nice for families with kids.”

(Influencer 3, interview)

Both [pictures and text] have a role and the combination brings forward the feeling [of the location] best. In the text you can deepen any [thematic] approach and with videos you can show what is going on and in pictures you show the beautiful moments. (Influencer 2, interview)

Overall, the visual surroundings shown in photos or videos and the influencers’ own customer experiences in textual descriptions (text and emojis/gifs) in pictures, stories and blog content are equally important. The amount, quality and tone of the resultant social media content depends on both the visuality of the surrounding destinations and the feelings and experiences of the influencers. The influencers (including their skills and looks) and all stakeholders (local business representatives, etc.) are the ingredients needed to make the moments ‘instaworthy’. However, aspects such as customer service only complement the visual surroundings, which is still the most important aspect for content creation on visual social media platforms. The details that make destinations unique are described in various photos and their associated texts.

Evaluation: The Delivery of Commercial Messages

Despite significant preparation, influencer marketing is still characterised by some uncertainties due to the commonly agreed upon freedom to produce content in an influencer’s own style. Consequently, decoding is an intuitive process that cannot be fully managed:

The content didn't really show the unique feeling of the area, which is of course also understandable if [influencer 1] didn't comprehend that. But you have forests and lakes all around X, so [content] didn't show how [our location] would have been special, but in [influencer 2's] content there were things that are unique to us. But, of course, that's also on us. If we build the program as nature themed, and X [is the only thing] that nobody else has, it's very difficult to create a spectacle out of it. (Project manager, DMO interview)

The influencers' social media channels' existing visual style may also be determinative of the 'visual interpretation' of the destination:

Sometimes, when you get to see the results, for example, the quality of the pictures or what they have posted... if it is an influencer that uses a lot of filters on their pictures to make it look similar to their feed and we think like: "Omg, it didn't look like that at all with the colours" and you get disappointed because the sky was blue and trees were much greener than that, so why do they use a filter, but if you then look at that person's feed, you see that they do that on all destinations, and that's what their followers like. So, those are challenges that sometimes you need to look away from. (Travel trade & PR manager, DMO interview)

On visual platforms, such as Instagram, the profile 'feed' typically has a uniform look, and all produced content is altered to fit this look. Overall, influencers need to first decode the commercial messages of DMOs and, typically, they are given freedom to interpret these as they wish. Next, influencers encode the (selected) themes into their content according to their own interpretation of the objective and visual style. Table 2 presents the summary of findings.

Table 2. Summary of Findings

| | |
|--|---|
| Encoding (organization) ‘Encoded’ approach for influencer communications | Strategic background brand building to establish key destination themes. Commercial messages (incl. themes) of destinations: tangible (local food, art etc.) or intangible (emotions, sustainability, atmosphere etc.). DMO chooses an influencer who has a broader focus in the content creation (lifestyle etc.). DMOs merely introduce influencers to the main themes of their destination brands. |
| Decoding (organization) ‘Decoded’ approach for influencer communications | DMO chooses an influencer that is focused on a specific theme (such as food) to ensure influencers’ content automatically reflects the selected destination key theme. DMOs provide influencers with either a ready-made programme for the duration of the visit (in which selected themes are embedded) or instructions and suggestions for attractions that highlight these themes. |
| Decoding & Encoding (influencer) Social reality Interpretation Following conventions Social media affordances | Influencer follows the programme designed. Influencers’ customer experiences become determinative. Influencer’s creative process becomes determinative (person brand influence, interpretations of themes, various skills in content creation, understanding of audience, selection of certain produced content.) Influencers’ own interpretation of intangible themes – what could these mean and be in the content? Presenting theme following social media conventions for content Presenting themes with the help of social media’s visual and textual elements. The visual surroundings shown in photos or videos and the influencers’ own customer experiences in textual descriptions (text and emojis/gifs) in pictures, stories and blog content are equally important. |
| Evaluation | Organization evaluates influencers’ content from the viewpoint of how it delivers DMO’s commercial messages |

Discussion and Conclusions

Transmission of Marketing Messages in Influencer Marketing

Little extant research has examined the dissemination of brand messages via influencers (Casaló et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), even though they are increasingly used in marketing communications. Our research contributes to the two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) by elucidating actions in the various steps of the two-step flow of communication through influencers. We also contribute to understanding managing influencer marketing from a firm's perspective— a neglected topic in wider influencer marketing literature (Borchers, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021). While previous studies identify influencers as intermediaries in the two-step communication flow (Casaló et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), they do not elucidate how these actors produce the content related to commercial collaborations (e.g. how influencers interpret the messages). Therefore, these studies do not elaborate on influencers' mediation of commercial messages (i.e. the decoding and encoding needed to transmit the message to audiences). The present study is the first investigation into the whole two-step flow communication in influencer marketing from the commercial messages to the actual outcomes. Our findings elucidate how utilizing the second step, an influencer, changes the 'traditional' transmission of marketing messages.

According to the two-step flow communication theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), messages are filtered by opinion leaders who decode and transmit a commercial message (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) and thus increase its influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The results of the current study show that the use of influencers alters the two-step flow communication theory because any marketing message is first encoded by the sender (organisation) and then decoded by the recipient (the potential customer). While previously these roles referred to the organization and end customer, we argue that the utilization of influencers who have a double role as 'marketer-customers', makes the message transmission a more complex process. In the

first step, organization chooses either a ‘decoded approach’ or an ‘encoded approach’ for influencer communications. Decoded approach entails that organization chooses an influencer who focuses on a specific theme (such as food) to ensure that influencers’ content automatically reflects the selected destination key themes. Further, they provide influencers specific guidelines for the duration of the visit. Encoded approach entails that DMO’s guidance is rather loose; they merely mention their brand themes to influencers and leave much room for interpretation. The influencers can then interpret the themes and embed them in social media posts as they wish.

In the second step, the social reality (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) of travel destinations and campaign messages are interpreted into what they could mean for social media followers—the main audience of the content. Social reality (i.e. the destinations, milieus, places and businesses to be visited) and the campaign themes, such as sustainability, are all enmeshed in the content narrative and interpreted by the influencer and their knowledge of their audience into what they could mean and become in the social media environment’s semiotic and symbolic landscapes. In this step, influencers need to do both encoding and decoding but in *reverse order* than the extant theory posits (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). They must ‘decode’ the marketing message (brand themes, etc.) given to them by the organisation before the collaboration begins. Even in the ‘decoded approach’ in which organizations have assisted in decoding their themes for the influencer (by carefully choosing a specific type of influencer and by designing a detailed programme for visiting), the influencer still needs to create content in their ‘signature style’, and that is authentic for them, as audiences expect this from influencers’ content.

In the encoded approach, influencers’ encoding, the creative process, becomes more determinative. Further, while tangible elements can be communicated easily to the target

audience via visuals, intangible elements require the influencer's interpretation and embedment in social media. An influencer's own interpretation and understanding of the intangible objective and their perception of the social media audience's understanding of certain intangible elements are determinative in the interpretation and contextualisation of marketing messages of the campaign's commercial stakeholders. Only after interpretation can influencers 'encode' commercial messages into the posts they produce for their audiences. An influencer's experience is embedded in with the aid of social media affordances (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) in a process that involves using semiotic and symbolic elements (words, gifs, emojis) and visual elements (photos, videos) to showcase the social reality of the destinations. The outcome of this process is the constructed mediated reality (Weimann, 2000)—the content that is interesting to social media audiences who are keen on following the influencer and who do not want to be mere recipients of uninteresting commercial messages.

We also contribute to the literature on the use of influencers in destination marketing (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015; Xu & Pratt, 2018). Prior research in the context of destination marketing has examined the communication of destination brand values on social media by locals and users without an influencer status and the reactions of users on destination brand-related content (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2015). Previous studies have also examined influencer marketing in the destination context from the visitors' perspective (Xu & Pratt, 2018). This study contributes by providing the destination marketers' and influencers' perspectives on how destination brand themes can be communicated through collaborations with social media influencers so that favourable destination images could be created in the minds of the target groups. Furthermore, this study illustrates how the characteristics and values of the destination brand can be transmitted through influencers. DMOs strive to create a strong, unique, and attractive destination brand identity (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). This study

demonstrates how DMOs integrate social media influencers in their destination marketing activities with the aim of efficiently communicating the various elements identified with and strengthening the positioning of their destination around the specific topics identified with their destination brand. Collaborating with social media influencers is an effective way to communicate the various aspects of the destination brand because influencers reflect their personal experiences and develop an attachment to the destination in their generated content.

Managerial Implications

Our findings have implications for providers of services, such as tourism-related activities. Due to the intangible and immaterial characteristics of tourism products that are sold for consumption, social media plays an increasing role in travel planning. Furthermore, while the use of influencer marketing is continuously increasing, businesses do not yet fully understand how to utilise this rather novel form of marketing (Haenlein et al., 2020). Understanding how the transmission of marketing messages via influencers is conducted, businesses can better plan their co-operation with influencers.

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