

Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication

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Part I

Public Relations is a fast growing a dynamic field. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations (PR) as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, n.d.). This definition demonstrates how PR prioritizes long-term connections and trust over image or exposure alone. Social media has emerged as the most dynamic means of this happening in the current digital era.

The public now perceives social media influencers as "normal" people who have developed a relationship of trust with online firms by producing consistent and genuine content. Because their followers view them as peers, the influencers' recommendations are seen as more reliable than those of traditional advertisements. These days, influencers help to shape public perceptions of businesses, goods, and other things. Although marketing and promotion are implied by their activity, trust is at the heart of influencer communication. They are the equivalent of "word of mouth," lending campaigns that meaningfully link audiences and organizations with a credible and relatable voice.

From a PR perspective, influencers are part of the strategic communication process because they help organizations build the “mutually beneficial relationships” that PRSA (n.d.) describes. Audiences, now, trust influencers more than they trust corporate messages, making them valuable intermediaries. This raises important questions for PR professionals: How can the impact of these partnerships be measured? And how can organizations use influencers not just to promote products but to strengthen relationships and close communication gaps? These questions are what make the social media function, especially influencers, so interesting to me.

The Ring “Great Ghost Search” campaign is a clear example of this function in practice (Berger, 2024). Ring partnered with celebrity and influencers to connect with consumers in a Halloween-themed campaign. Influencers like Finn Wolfhard and TikTok creators used humor and storytelling to engage audiences, turning viewers into participants. The campaign’s goal was not just to sell products but to create a shared experience between Ring and its users.

This case study demonstrates how social media functions within PR by creating dialogue and community around the brand. Instead of depending on conventional advertising, Ring engaged people in the narrative through influencers, fostering a dynamic relationship through engagement. In addition to garnering over 91,000 likes, Wolfhard's video attracted 5,000 video submissions and hundreds of thousands of views from other influencer postings (Berger, 2024). Beyond metrics, the campaign garnered significant media attention and strengthened audience ties. Consequently, it embodies PR's primary objective of fostering connections that benefit both parties.

This kind of PR work highlights the growing need to study influencers’ role in strategic communication. In order to comprehend how influencers promote trust, credibility, and organizational legitimacy, public relations professionals require frameworks to quantify actual impact as influencer collaborations become a more prevalent and crucial component of PR initiatives. As dependable mediators who uphold open communication and rebuild confidence, influencers may also repair the gap between organizations and the public, particularly during times of crisis or transition.

I selected this function/type of PR because it reflects how communication happens today, and how it will continue to grow within this function. Social media allows PR professionals to

combine creativity and strategy to build authentic connections, and increase trust and credibility to brand. Working with influencers has taught me that public relations is about creating communities and enduring connections, not just managing messaging. We need to make sure that communication in our digital age prioritizes openness and connection. This is mediated through social media, giving it a crucial role in modern PR.

Part II

Nadine Enke and Nils S. Borchers' essay "Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication: A Conceptual Framework for Strategic Social Media Influencer Communication" (2019) lays a solid theoretical foundation for comprehending influencers in public relations. The authors define how influencers strategically function within communication in an effort to close a research gap. They contend that influencers serve as powerful actors in organizational communication as well as marketing tools, assisting in the accomplishment of PR objectives including mutual understanding, credibility, and trust.

Influencers, according to Enke and Borchers (2019), are autonomous third-party actors that have built a sizable number of pertinent connections with organizational stakeholders by the creation, sharing, engagement, and public visibility of information on social media (p. 263). This definition highlights the importance of relationships, which are fundamental to public relations. According to the authors, social media influencers assist organizations in establishing and maintaining ties with the public, therefore carrying out strategic communication tasks. They also point out that as influencer communication has an impact on reputation, public perception, and long-term trust, it should be considered a component of public relations rather than just marketing.

The article presents a conceptual framework that describes how influencer communication can be examined through inputs, actions, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. It is based on Macnamara's integrated assessment approach. Influencers provide innovative content (inputs), engage in participation and content sharing (activities), create visibility and dialogue (outputs), establish credibility and trust (outcomes), and eventually mold the reputation of the organization (impacts). For public relations practitioners, this framework is helpful as it provides a methodical approach to assess how well influencer partnerships can accomplish communication goals (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The article's key aim is to distinguish between controlled and unmanaged influencer communication. Managed communication involves compensated partnerships, gifted collaborations, and brand-sponsored content, whereas unmanaged communication refers to organic postings generated by influencers without direct sponsorship. Given that they influence audiences' perceptions of organizations, both forms of communication are strategically important. For example, a spontaneous influencer post on a positive brand experience might be just as beneficial as a paid collaboration. This emphasizes how important it is for public relations specialists to keep an eye on and react to influencer behavior outside of campaigns (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The peer effect is another concept covered by Enke and Borchers (2019). It describes how influencers establish authenticity by relating to audiences as peers rather than as authorities or untrustworthy people. This sense of sameness and accessibility strengthens the perceived honesty in their communication. In PR, this authenticity is essential because it builds credibility and fosters trust; two of the most important components of relationship management. The

authors explain that influencer communication's success depends largely on these peer-to-peer dynamics, which mirror the two-way communication model in PR.

The article also examines how influencer communication supports marketing and PR goals, but PR places more emphasis on legitimacy and reputation. According to Enke and Borchers (2019), influencer collaborations can help firms achieve their PR objectives when they are used for more than just promotion; they can also be used to engage the public in meaningful discourse. This is consistent with the idea that strategic communication is a process that benefits both parties.

Connecting this theory to practice, we can see how the Ring "Great Ghost Search" campaign fits the framework proposed by Enke and Borchers (2019). Through influencer alliances and public participation, the campaign employed both managed and unmanaged communication strategies. Over 5,000 videos were submitted by the public in response to the influencers' funny and relatable content that generated conversation (Berger, 2024). This exchange exemplifies the PR benefits of influencer communication since it boosted engagement, built trust, and raised brand exposure. It became a shared experience, which is exactly what Enke and Borchers (2019) describe as strategic social-media-influencer communication. The case study on Ring demonstrates how even when not selling and persuading the audience to sell a product, it allowed for the audience to participate alongside influencers, build brand relationships, and increase brand awareness.

From a professional point of view, the article is highly relevant and practical. It provides clear definitions, explains the roles influencers can play, and offers a model for measuring outcomes. It allowed to mind the gap to better understand the function of social media

influencers on strategic communication, a crucial part of PR. I found it helpful because it validates what many PR practitioners see every day: influencers are not just promoters—they are partners in communication. They help organizations reach publics authentically and can even act as relationship builders who close the gap between institutions and individuals. I agree with Enke and Borchers (2019) that more research is needed to understand the long-term effects of influencer communication on organizational trust and reputation.

In conclusion, this article adds valuable insight to the research being created on the use and impact of social media influencers in the field of PR by positioning influencers as part of strategic communication. It provides a framework for understanding their roles, responsibilities, and impacts. Yet, there is still a need for more research and theoretical/conceptual frameworks and theories to better evaluate their effects on PR. Influencer communication, when managed strategically and ethically, supports PR's main goal, to create mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

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