

# Adopting Social Media Influencers in Boutique Hotel Marketing: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** Opinions posted by popular social media influencers (SMI) impose significant influences on brand equity and subsequent purchases. From the in-depth interview with Hotel A, the current practises between the hotel and SMI were explored. It provides a useful background for developing effective instruments for the next stage of study.

**Keywords:** Social media influencer, Hotel marketing, Boutique hotel, Hong Kong

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## 1. Introduction

Travelers nowadays are increasingly seeking travel-related information from various social media channels such as YouTube (Kapoor et al., 2021). Following the trends, many tourism service providers are increasingly adopting social media channels for their product promotion and relationship building with their current and potential customers (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Tourism industry is heavily affected by influencer marketing due to the intangible nature of tourism products, which cannot be tested or felt before their purchase and consumption. Hence, using influential people in social media, so-called social media influencers (SMI), to recommend products and brands is evidently more effective in persuading followers or prospective customers to share information with others or make subsequent purchases than using traditional advertising formats (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011).

It is not necessarily true that information disseminated by sponsored SMI is less credible than that of those who are not sponsored. When the contents contain no negative views on the product or service concerned, it may often be perceived by viewers as sponsored posts. As SMI stamp their posts also with their personal aesthetic touches and personality twists, whether the “informative” value of the post will affect the credibility of the influencer remains controversial. It is also not yet clear how the design and contents of the post will be more persuasive to viewers in affecting their subsequent behavior. Depending on the local cultural environment of a destination and the agreement between the SMI and the hotel company, the charisma of the SMI may be good enough to override everything, and his or her endorsement alone on specific product aspects could be sufficient to influence purchasing behavior of followers. The main objectives of the research are to firstly explore the normal practice of the hotels with SMI, then identify what elements in the SMS content design post and evaluate how these elements might affect perceived information credibility and their subsequent behavior.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Characteristics of SMI

Social media influencers (SMIs), or sometimes called key opinion leaders (KOLs), refer to people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. SMIs are independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes by creating and sharing brand-related content on their personal social media channels (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Influencers can be divided into different types. The most common methods are by follower numbers, types of content, and level of influence. SMIs’ messages can be sponsored or non-sponsored, depending on whether SMIs receive monetary or other forms of compensation from a company. Social media influencer marketing is becoming more popular in the hospitality industry due to its high return on investment provided appropriate influencers are selected (Sun et al., 2021). Many of these posts are sponsored by a brand, while others are in the form of genuine advice. Influencers might choose to add a disclosure (“this is not sponsored content”) in non-sponsored product posts that highlight their impartiality. It is also often preferred by independent restaurant owners because of its low cost, wide reach, and high interactivity (Needles and Thompson, 2013). By providing free meals, these influencers endorse the restaurants by sharing their experiences with their followers via social media platforms, though it is expected the posted comments would normally be positive (Leung et al. 2022).

## **2.2 Impact of SMI marketing on Hotel and Restaurant Business**

The rise of SMI has significantly transformed the landscape of marketing, particularly within the hotel and restaurant businesses. Hotels and restaurants have increasingly leveraged the reach and persuasive power of influencers to enhance brand visibility through visually appealing content, engage with potential customers, and drive sales. Such practice is particularly valuable for smaller establishments seeking to compete with larger chains. Prior research by De Veirman et al. (2017) suggests that influencer endorsements can lead to higher conversion rates, as followers are more likely to trust and act upon recommendations from influencers they admire. As such, spending on influencer campaigns has surged significantly worldwide since 2016, and is expected to reach a global total of 22.2 billion U.S. dollars by 2025 (Statista, 2024). Nevertheless, Bentley (2024) discovered that partnering with SMIs in social media posting (as opposed to posts originated from the brand) could be perceived as a norm violation for consumers with a high brand attachment, which negatively impacts brand equity and consumption intentions.

## **2.3 Social Media Posting Contents and its Impacts**

Though SMIs have the potential to spread awareness and stimulate the purchase intention of viewers and followers, not all posts are equally effective. The visual design, such as high-quality images and videos with appealing aesthetics, is likely to enhance viewers' engagement more than just presented in pure textual information. A study by Cascio Rizzo (2024) revealed that high-arousal language triggers positive responses with micro-influencers, yet it backfires with macro-influencers. For macro-influencers, using overly high-arousal language such as "totally amazing" will be perceived as less trustworthy and less "genuine." The message is more associated with advertisement intention. Apart from the wording used, it is discovered the information disclosure types (sponsorship information) also affects the perceived credibility of the message content and resulting purchase intention (Stubb and Colliander, 2019).

## **3. Research Methods**

The whole study involves two main stages. In this first stage, one-hour in-depth interview was conducted with a hotel marketing manager of a boutique hotel (named Hotel A) in Hong Kong with 250+ rooms to explore the current practice on how the hotel works with SMI in product promotion. In the next stage, the study will conduct scenario-based between-subject experiments. After filtering questions, the participants will be asked to think of a specific influencer they follow during the online survey. They will be randomly assigned to one of the scenarios, which will be developed based on actual influencers' postings learned from the stage one interview. Once the participants read through the given scenario, a series of manipulation check items will be provided, followed by the measurement items for the constructs of interest. The survey will end with questions asking about the participants' socio-demographic information. Descriptive statistics will be assessed to ensure the assumptions. Once the results show a satisfactory manipulation of the constructs, the main hypotheses will be tested through a series of omnibus tests and post-hoc analyses using R.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Selection of SMI**

In Hotel A, SMI marketing is mainly adopted in the promotion of "rooms" and "food and beverage" selling. For the former, international influencers are normally employed to attract non-local customers. Whereas local influencers are used in the later in order to target local customers. On average, a total of 20 influencers are invited each month. Apart from scanning from the international influencer list provided by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, the source of international SMI often based on self-searching from various popular social media sites, such as Instagram. For local SMI, preferences will be given to those that the hotel has employed before or referrals from other hotels. In some cases, referral could come from other SMI met in other various hotel events. Usually, SMI with similar backgrounds such as age group, cultural characteristics, style etc. with the target customer group are considered for invitation. Other selection criteria include the number of likes/followers/engagements/views", style of the influencer, and history of posted contents. Tools such as Social Blade are used to check the authenticity of the contents. The aim of using SMI is mainly for soft promotion in creating product awareness rather than hard sales.

### **4.2 Arrangements with SMI**

SMIs are generally given creative freedom, with no rigid guidelines on the photos they should take, the language they should use, what contents they should cover in their posts, post length, or the timing and method of

promotion. This approach allows influencers to maintain their unique style, which is crucial for attracting their audience. SMIs are usually provided with general information about the hotel, either through press releases or a hotel tour. They might be encouraged to highlight specific features such as the sea view from rooms, sustainability practices, and taste and pricing of food. Food and beverage promotions often require more urgent attention to avoid missing promotional deadlines. There may be some negotiation regarding content format, especially for room promotions. This is due to the limited availability of rooms at Hotel A and the restricted opportunities for influencers to visit multiple times. Such negotiations might involve the number of posts to be uploaded. SMIs are provided with specific hashtags to use in their posts.

Interestingly, no formal contracts are signed, and no monetary compensation is offered, which means influencers do not need to declare their content as "sponsored." Despite the lack of financial incentives, influencers are expected to promote the hotel in exchange for the usual perks. Failure to do so might lead to being "blacklisted," although this is rare due to influencers' concerns about maintaining their reputation. The hotel manually checks the content posted by invited influencers to ensure compliance. The primary benefit for influencers in promoting hotel products is the enhancement of their profiles, which can aid in future promotions. While restaurants and other product influencers are typically paid for social media promotions, with fees ranging from several thousand to over ten thousand HK dollars, hotels often have greater bargaining power. This allows them to forgo providing financial incentives to influencers.

## **5. Conclusion**

Overall, using SMI as a marketing tool is very important to Hotel A due to the high popularity of Instagram in affecting potential customers. There is no strict KPI on SMI evaluation, as the purpose for hiring SMI is for "soft" promotion rather than ROI focus. Occasionally, the hotel will ask customers directly on the attractiveness of SMI posted contents.

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