

**SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AS PUBLIC RELATIONS
AGENTS FOR ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT AND
EMPOWERMENT AMONG YOUTHS IN UNIVERSITY OF
NIGERIA, NSUKKA**

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Abstract:

In the last decade, there has been a rise in the number of social media influencers in Nigeria, significantly reshaping the public relations (PR) landscape in the country. This development has presented new opportunities for youth engagement and empowerment. By utilizing the digital platforms most frequented by Nigerian youth such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, these influencers have become important voices and influences in shaping the perceptions of youths on issues. This paper examines the role of social media influencers as key PR agents in youth engagement and empowerment. The research was guided by the Uses and Gratification theory and social influence theory. It employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of youth response and qualitative interviews of influencers. Frequency tables and percentages were used to analyse the questionnaire responses, while the personal interview data was analysed on a question-by-question basis. Findings from the study highlight key strategies that influencers deploy to build trust and engage young audiences. The study also highlights challenges with influencer-driven PR including lack of authenticity, misinformation, and over-commercialization. Based on these findings, it was recommended that there should be a collaboration between PR professionals and influencers to mitigate the challenges faced by influencers. In addition, influencer relations and marketing should be introduced as a new PR curriculum by higher institutions to equip young

PR professionals. By leveraging the power of digital platforms and the credibility of social media influencers, PR efforts can pave the way for meaningful youth engagement and sustainable community development in Nigeria.

Keywords: social media, influencers, youth empowerment, strategies, public relations.

Introduction

The emergence of technological tools and inventions has revolutionized the media landscape and birthed ideologies and systems thought impossible. One such technological invention is social media. Social media, popularly called "new media", "digital media", or "internet media", refers to applications and websites that enhance the creation and sharing of content and user engagement in social networking (Diesing, 2013). Social media platforms have played important communication roles over the years, linking people together for information sharing, discussions on salient matters and analysing the viewpoint of others.

In recent years, however, the pervasive influence of social media platforms has triggered a profound transformation across various facets of society, fundamentally altering the landscape in which individuals navigate their professional trajectories. This digital revolution has notably impacted the youth demographic, characterized by the emergence of digital natives, adolescents and young adults who have grown up immersed in the digital age. (Gopal, 2012). Social media has passed beyond the limits of being a medium of communication and entertainment to being an indispensable tool for youth development and empowerment.

With the rise of social media comes the birth of social media influencers. According to Duffy (2020), social media influencers are a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors. To earn income, they hype branded goods and services to their communities of followers; such promotional communication takes the form of information, advice, and inspiration. Because influencers brand endorsements are integrated into their existing arsenals of visual, textual, and/or narrative content, their persuasive communication is widely understood as more "authentic" or "organic" than traditional paid advertising. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not

surprising that influencer marketing has witnessed an astonishing uptick in recent years. This is in line with Freberg et al. (2011) characterization of social media influencers as a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media. More recently, Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) described social media influencers as people who, through personal branding, build and maintain relationships with their followers on social media and have the ability to inform, entertain, and influence their followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours.

Public Relations is an evolving industry that has undergone a remarkable transformation as a result of the integration of new technologies and the broader reach of globalization (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019). Social media has revolutionised crisis management approaches in public relations (Akdeniz, 2020). The traditional method of crisis communication employed channels like press releases and interviews; the contemporary era allows for a swift and direct response through social media. Again, the corporate social responsibilities aspect of public relations has also not remained stagnant to the changes as in today's society, consumers are increasingly cognizant of businesses' impact on the world and are more inclined to support companies that align with their values and contribute positively (Tkalac Verčič, 2021).

In Nigeria, opinion leaders in online communities, now known as influencers, have been able to penetrate the visible areas such as political advocacy (Bring Back Our Girls campaign) and voting patterns or behaviour (#votenotfight, #electionnotwar, #sorosoke #endsars). The existence of social media influencers has become so prevalent in Nigeria's online community that there are now more than thousands of self-acclaimed and established online influencers with millions of followers on the Nigerian online community (Bello, 2018). This phenomenon has become very significant given the number of internet users in Nigeria today, which, according to the Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) report, the number of internet users was released as marginally 98.3 million (Nigeria Communications Commission, 2018).

Influencer relations is where public relations and social media interconnect. The communications and PR industries have evolved tremendously as a result of the power of social media. Influencers play a major role in that evolution. The aim of this paper, however, is to examine the role of social media influencers as key public relations agents in youth engagement and empowerment.

Statement of Problem

Existing studies on the subject of social media focus on the impact of social media on the youths, how social media affects the academic performance of youths, the role of social media on youth awareness and engagement, etc, but there a lack of sufficient research on the role of social media influencers on youth empowerment and enlightenment. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how social media influencers and influencer-driven campaigns promote youth empowerment and achieve social change. This study seeks to ascertain the role influencers play in bringing about youth empowerment and enlightenment in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What are the strategies social media influencers use to build trust and create authentic engagement with Nigerian youth?
2. What is the impact of influencer-driven public relations campaigns on youth empowerment and participation in social change?
3. What are the challenges faced by influencers when engaging young audiences, and what is the effect on influencer-driven PR campaigns?

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers

As social media continues to grow in use, it has developed into a platform for influencing the actions and decisions of users. This is usually referred as social media influencing and is carried out by users who have substantial following. According to Borchers (2019), social media influencers (SMIs) comprise different roles, some of which have traditionally been occupied by separate actors. SMIs can serve the roles of moderator, content distributor, creative content producer, community manager, strategic advisor, and event host. Combining these roles into just one actor opens new opportunities for strategic communication. These roles, as well as other functions that SMI performs for organizations, can also help define the concept of SMI more precisely. Thus, from a strategic communication perspective, social media influencers (SMIs) can be considered external actors who have established many relationships of specific quality with organizational stakeholders and influence them through content generation, content dissemination, interaction, and individual appearance on the social web.

Types of Influencers

Social media Influencers fall into different categories based on their number of followers. Olagboye (2023) highlighted four types: nano-

influencers with 1,000 to 10,000 followers, micro-influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, macro-influencers with 100,000 to 1,000,000 followers, and mega-influencers with at least 1,000,000 followers.

Furthermore, Fuller (2020) stated that nano-influencers are great for highly targeted, community-oriented campaigns, and they are reasonably priced; micro-influencers are suitable for generating high engagement rate conversions; macro-influencers are great for expanding visibility and trust in particular industries; mega-influencers or celebrities for large-scale, well-publicised brand awareness initiatives.

Social Media Influencers and Youth Empowerment

Influencers can spark social impact more than many people think. The influence is getting wider at the local or global levels, with millions of impressionable followers who tend to imitate others. The influence of the influencers in this quantity is as great as the relationship between a huge forest fire and the size of the spark that ignited it. Influencers have a high ability to persuade others, and some of them have close relations with the decision-making authorities. Therefore, everyone who enters the world of influencers is required to employ even a small part of his influence to work in the field of public reform, and for this to be an essential part of his program. Influencers in society also have a role in leading these societies by using the language of dialogue and calm in solving all problems, repelling damage and restoring an atmosphere of trust (Al-Rasheed, 2023).

Influencers' communication is persuasive, especially since they use different techniques and strategies to make effective and persuasive arguments. In other words, they are employed in a persuasive speech to obtain benefits, and everyone must use them to achieve success in his persuasive speech. Persuasion techniques are designed to sell a product, idea, concept, or suggestion (Gifu et al. 2014). In line with this, Perloff (2017: 8), defines persuasion as: "...a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviours regarding an issue". In other words, persuasion is based on just trying to convince others to change their attitudes on something, but it would be necessary to consider that addressees are always going to be able to decide if they want to have their attitude changed.

Social Media Influencers as Key Public Relations Agents

Influencers as important social media figures have become key agents and tools for Public Relations campaigns. According to Borchers

and Enke (2021), their participation increases brand awareness, creates product reviews, generates publicity, quickly spreads information and creates believable and authentic content.

From a public relations perspective, it is also interesting that influencers are currently acting as gatekeepers, given their central role in deciding information flows, and are becoming both senders of and channels for messages (Navarro et al., 2020). In fact, Herzig, Mass and Roitman (2014) argue that they can “disseminate interesting content, ideas or opinions to others, hoping to stimulate some intended reactions by potential readers, e.g., be endorsed, followed, cited, or even trigger an active discussion” (p. 46), which applies to commercial environments but also to other fields such as political communication. Probably for this reason, many PR professionals believe that using influencers can, in some cases, be more effective nowadays than standard advertising and traditional press releases, as many consumers now trust and/or listen to the latter less than to influencer-created content (Tworzydło et al. 2019).

Nevertheless, of course, it should also be noted that the implementation of the influencer figure in public relations campaigns is a relatively new trend. Therefore, managing their correct incorporation into communication strategies can be challenging for PR companies. As Wolf and Archer (2018) state, “the dynamics of influencer engagement present major challenges to even the most experienced PR professionals, due to the rapid rise of individual influencers, changing business models, and only slowly evolving best practice approaches to the evaluation of influencer engagement” (p. 502).

These new challenges involve supervising (and working in a beneficial way with) people who can share, send, copy, extract or comment on content relating to recommendations to large communities (Navarro et al., 2020). Furthermore, PR companies are continuously trying to find effective metrics to determine who are the most influential players, how far conventional metrics apply to new media, and what tools are lacking for measuring influencers' abilities (Gillin, 2008). Despite all these factors, public relations professionals seem to be up for that challenge, as they see “a potential in using influencers in activities associated with communication” (Tworzydło et al., 2019), and consider it a growing trend to which the discipline should adapt, and which it should even try to embrace.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted a combination of the Uses and Gratification theory and Social influence theory to further explain how social media influencers utilise digital platforms for public relations strategies aimed at youth empowerment. Dennis McQuail (2010) defined a theory as a set of an idea of varying status and origin, which seeks to explain or interpret some phenomenon.

Uses and Gratification Theory

McQuail (2010) states that the uses and gratifications approach is quite suitable for new media studies, especially in terms of comparison and definition, and that studies in this direction are following an increasing trend. Therefore, these studies result in the addition of new gratifications to explain how individuals use social media.

Propounded by Katz et al. (1974), the Uses and Gratification theory is a sociological theory that describes the reason behind an individual's selection and use of media to satisfy specific needs. The theory of uses and gratification sees the use of communication tools as a process of need satisfaction and tension and accepts the audience as individuals who are active, rational, resistant to influence, and making choices according to their wishes (Erzurum, 2022, p. 112).

In the context of the research, youths are drawn to influencers to fulfil their needs for information, entertainment, social interaction and personal identity, and as these influencers create content to meet these needs, an enabling environment is created for youth engagement and participation in social change.

Social Influence Theory

The central theme of social influence theory, as proposed by Kelman (1958), is that an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent actions or behaviours are influenced by referent others through three processes: compliance, identification, and internalization. Kelman (1958) posited that social influence brings about changes in attitude and actions and that changes may occur at different "levels."

From the aforementioned explanation of the theory, influencers act as opinion leaders who shape people's opinions, perspectives and views through their content. In other words, influencers bring about youth empowerment by creating content which seeks to impact the attitudes, behaviour and cognition of their followers towards taking action.

Methodology

This study made use of a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of youth response and qualitative interviews of influencers. The population of this study constitute of University of Nigeria Nsukka students making up a population of about 36, 000 students, as affirmed by the Academic Planning Unit, University of Nigeria Nsukka.

A population of 35, 129 is indeed a large number to study within the time frame of this research and given this, a presentation of the population in small groups becomes necessary. The study adopted the multi-stage sampling technique and using the Australian calculator, the sample size of 380 was generated . For this study, two major instruments were used for data collection - questionnaires and personal interviews. Frequency tables and percentages were used to analyse the questionnaire responses, while the personal interview data was analysed on a question-by-question basis. The three (3) individuals interviewed are : Kathryn Clement, Val Okafor and Bethel Onyemachi.

Kathryn Esther Clement is an award-winning spoken word artist, a remarkable individual who has left an indelible mark on the world through her artistry and inspiring work as a spoken word poet, inspirational writer, content creator, and purpose coach. With a unique ability to captivate audiences with her words and touch the depths of their souls, Kathryn has emerged as a powerful voice in the realm of self-expression and personal growth. Through her awe-inspiring performances, compelling writings, captivating content, and transformative coaching, Kathryn has touched the lives of countless individuals, leaving an indelible impression on their hearts and minds. Her words are not mere ink on paper or sound in the air; they are catalysts for personal growth, instruments of empowerment, and agents of social change. With her unwavering dedication to her craft, Kathryn Esther continues to inspire, uplift, and ignite the flames of purpose within the hearts of all who encounter her work.

Val Okafor is a Youth development professional with a decade of proven experience empowering Africa's young population. He is renowned as a transformational speaker and social innovator. He's the CEO of The Val Okafor Company, a Nigerian Youth SDGs Champion, African Change Makers Fellow, Commonwealth Open Source Leaders, YALI West Africa Fellow and Fela Durotoye Leadership Network Ambassador. He has earned widespread recognition including the prestigious Award of Achievement from the 234 Project in Texas, USA.

Bethel Onyemachi is a thought leader who has revolutinised the social media space with through his skills as a social media strategist and a keynote speaker. He has trained on social media Ads skills empowering them to make money and impact from what they know and do. He delivers value in the area of growth, brand building, influence, skills, leadership and personal development.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1: Respondents response on the statement: Social media influencers help raise awareness about important youth-related issues

S/N	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
1.	Strongly Agree	152	40%
2.	Agree	77	20.3%
3.	Neutral	35	9.2%
4.	Disagree	73	19.2%
5.	Strongly Disagree	43	11.3%
	Total	380	100

Note. Data collected from the field survey, 2024

Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents, 60.3%, agree that social media influencers help raise awareness about important youth-related issues while 30.5% think otherwise.

Table 2: Respondents' response to: How likely are you to take action (e.g., join a campaign, donate, advocate) based on a social media influencer's content?

S/N	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
1.	Very likely	193	50.8%
2.	Somewhat likely	55	14.8%
3.	Neutral	15	3.9%
4.	Unlikely	51	13.4%
5.	Very unlikely	66	17.4%
	TOTAL	380	100

Note. Data collected from the field survey, 2024

Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents, 65.6%, agree that they are likely to take action based on social media influencers' content, while 30.8% think otherwise.

able 3: Respondents' response to: Do you believe that social media influencers have a positive impact on youth empowerment in Nigeria?

S/N	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
1.	Yes	293	77.1%
2.	No	87	22.9%
	TOTAL	380	100

Note. Data collected from the field survey, 2024

Table 3 depicts that 77.1% of respondents believe that social media influencers have a positive impact on youth empowerment, while 22 don't agree with the statement..

Table 4: Respondents'' response on: What is the biggest challenge you see in influencer-driven PR campaigns?

S/N	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
1.	Misinformation	225	59.2%
2.	Lack of authenticity	101	26.6%
3	Over-commercialization	54	14.2%
	TOTAL	380	100%

Note. Data collected from the field survey, 2024

Table 4 depicts that 59.2% of respondents believe that influencer-driven PR campaigns are usually filled with misinforming content, 26.6% of respondents see a lack of authenticity in influencer-driven PR campaigns, while 14.2% of respondents believe that influencer-driven PR campaigns are usually over-commercialized.

Responses from Interviews

In line with this goal, an interview was conducted with purposively selected social media influencers.

Those interviewed include:

- 1. Kathryn Esther Clement with 93,000 followers
- 2. Bethel Onyemachi with 23, 000 followers
- 3. Val Okafor with 15,000 followers

Interview question 1: What strategies do you use to build trust and maintain an authentic connection with your young audience, and how do you think these strategies contribute to their engagement and empowerment?

Kathryn Esther Clement: I use writing and creating inspiring content to draw people's attention to pressing issues going on in society.

Bethel Onyemachi: I adopt a content creation strategy that encompasses written, video, reels and Facebook Ads to reach out to youths on social media.

Val Okafor: I empower youths through teachings, live sessions on Facebook and videos of my leadership activities to inspire youths.

Interview question 2: Can you share an example of a campaign or initiative you were involved in that successfully empowered or engaged youth? What do you think made that campaign impactful?

Kathryn Esther Clement: Using my content creation strategies, I successfully achieved youth mobilization for the JPI Conference and 360° conference targeted at empowering the youth for social change.

Bethel Onyemachi: As a Facebook Ads expert, I help organizations and brands run Ads aimed at creating visibility for youth development programmes and initiatives.

Val Okafor: As a youth development professional, I have pioneered leadership and entrepreneurship programmes designed to inspire, challenge and transform youths into high-impact leaders. I equip young leaders with 21st-century skills for global impact.

Interview question 3: What challenges do you face when trying to influence and engage young audiences in positive and empowering ways, and how do you address these challenges?

Kathryn Esther Clement: Empowering youths to attend virtual conferences that will enlighten their minds and get them meaningfully engaged is usually filled with so many hurdles as a result of the low attention span of youths.

Bethel Onyemachi: The influencer space is becoming saturated, with many individuals becoming influencers and trying to reach similar target audiences.

Val Okafor: The young audience in Nigeria is diverse, with people coming from different tribes and ethnic groups; hence, influence cannot happen through a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What are the strategies social media influencers use to build trust and create authentic engagement with Nigerian youth?

Interview question 1 provides data on the strategies social media influencers use to build trust and create authentic engagement with Nigerian youth. The data analysis shows that the majority of the influencers utilize content-creation strategies to disseminate information to their followers. This content can be written, video or images. This is in line with Herzig, Mass and Roitman's (2014) argument that social media influencers can “disseminate interesting content, ideas or opinions to others, hoping to stimulate some intended reactions by potential readers, e.g., be endorsed, followed, cited, or even trigger an active discussion”. These strategies, when internalised by youths, establish the influencers as opinion leaders capable of shaping their opinions, and perspectives. This aligns with Kelman's 1958 social influence theory.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of influencer-driven public relations campaigns on youth empowerment and participation in social change?

To determine the impact of influencer-driven public relations campaigns on youth empowerment and participation, data from questions 1 to 3 of the questionnaire were used. From Table One, it is seen that the majority of the respondents, 60.3%, agree that social media influencers help raise awareness about important youth-related issues while 30.5% think otherwise. This is in tandem with Al-Rasheed (2023), who believes that influencers in society also have a role in leading these societies by using the language of dialogue and calm in solving all problems, repelling damage and restoring an atmosphere of trust.

From Table 2, the majority of the respondents 65.6% agree that they are likely to take action based on social media influencers' content while 30.8%, think otherwise. Drawing from this, the uses and gratification theory comes into play as it sees media users as active content consumers hence the ability of influencers to persuade youths into taking action. Herzig, Mass and Roitman (2014) argue that they can “disseminate interesting content, ideas or opinions to others, hoping to stimulate some intended reactions by potential readers, e.g., be endorsed, followed, cited, or even trigger an active discussion”. To this end, Gifu et al. 2014 posit that Influencer communication is usually persuasive, and with this persuasion technique, a product, idea, concept or suggestion can be sold. With this, people begin to comply with influencers' content by taking

action. This also aligns with the position of Olaojo (2020) that the informativeness of the influencer's post, the facilitative nature of the content, and the persuasive strategies used to impact how followers receive the message passed across to them.

Table 3 depicts that 77.1% of respondents believe that social media influencers have a positive impact on youth empowerment, while 22% don't agree with the statement. With this response, it isn't out of place for Al-Rasheed (2023) to state that influencers can spark social impact more than many people think. Their influence is getting wider at the local or global levels, with millions of impressionable followers who tend to imitate others.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges faced by influencers when engaging young audiences, and what is the effect on influencer-driven PR campaigns?

Answers to this question are obtained from data collected from interview question 3 and table 4. The interviewed social media influencers pointed out several challenges they face while getting youths and young individuals to take action. Some of these challenges include the short attention span of youths, saturation of the influencer space and industry and the diverse nature of the Nigerian youth audience which necessitates content diversification and multiple strategies to enlighten them. Hence why Gillin, 2008 believes that PR companies are continuously trying to find effective metrics to determine who are the most influential players, how far conventional metrics apply to new media, and what tools are lacking for measuring influencers in relation to PR activities. These challenges faced by influencers have an effect of misinformation, lack of authenticity and over-commercialization on influencer-driven campaigns. To this end, Karin (2019), points out that there are ethical issues associated with social media influencers such as lack of respect, bad influence, racial or sexual discrimination, harassment, breaking the law, accusing or discrediting others, greed, deceptiveness and inaccurate information, encouragement of atrocities, and lastly maintaining body ideals or shaming different body appearances.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The emergence of new media technology has disrupted the media space with a reaching effect on the Public Relations industry. This, if not well mitigated will cause a breach in information flow from PR professionals to the public. Hence, this paper sought to understand the role social media

influencers face as key PR agents in ensuring youth empowerment and engagement in Nigeria. With this study's contribution to the growing body of literature on digital communication for development by providing a framework for integrating influencer strategies into broader public relations, efforts aimed at youth empowerment can be achieved. Findings from the study show that social media influencers act as opinion leaders who shape the views and perspectives of youths by utilizing engaging written and video content to persuade youths to take action for social change. Notwithstanding the positive impact of influencer-driven campaigns, these social media influencers face a lot of challenges which invariably impact influencer-driven campaigns. Some of such challenges are misinformation, lack of authenticity, over-commercialization, etc.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations have been made:

- i. Structured partnerships should be encouraged between PR professionals and social media influencers to co-create authentic campaigns that align with organizational and youth needs.
- ii. Organizations that choose to use influencer-driven campaigns for youth empowerment and enlightenment should endeavour to research the influencer and their platform to ensure that they are a good fit for the information they wish to disseminate.
- iii. There should be an inclusion of Influencer Relations and marketing in the PR academic curriculum of higher institutions. This will prepare and equip PR scholars to better handle the demands of the digital society. This will ensure that the practice of public relations is still in the hands of professionals who truly understand the laws and ethics of the profession.

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