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# Use of Social Media Celebrity Influencers in Promoting Hospitality Business Brand in Nigeria: A Public Relations Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study takes a theoretical approach to examine the interconnectedness of brand management, influencer marketing, and public relations within Nigeria's hospitality industry, focusing on the growing role of social media celebrity influencers. Brands serve as symbolic constructs that shape consumer perceptions, emotional connections, and purchasing decisions. Successful branding extends beyond differentiation to foster trust, loyalty, and engagement. With the rise of digital media, public relations strategies have evolved, allowing hospitality businesses to leverage influencers for enhanced visibility and consumer connection. These influencers, perceived as credible and aspirational figures, play a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes and brand perception. To maximise the impact of influencer marketing, Nigerian hospitality business owners are to carefully select influencers whose values align with their brand identity. Reliable partnerships foster stronger consumer trust and engagement. Stakeholders need to integrate conventional and modern branding elements, focusing on consistent visual identity, consumer experiences, and reputation management. Emotional connections, built on shared values and positive brand experiences, are essential for long-term success. Additionally, PR experts should utilise data analytics to guide strategic decision-making in brand management, influencer partnerships, and service delivery. By adopting a holistic, data-driven approach to influencer marketing and public relations, hospitality businesses can enhance their competitive edge, sustain growth, and navigate the evolving dynamics of Nigeria's digital marketplace.

**Keywords:** : *brand management, influencer marketing, hospitality, public relations, social media*

## INTRODUCTION

Brand influence serves as a potent tool, occasionally mirroring traditional advertising and public relations (PR) strategies. One unique and notable strength which essentially defines brand is its potential to foster brand awareness. This involves a psychological process of imprinting the brand name in consumers' minds beyond the confines of a store, ensuring its recognition when they make purchasing decisions (Rossiter, 2012). Kotler and Keller (2013) delve deeper into the effectiveness of messages delivered by celebrities and prominent figures, noting their capacity to garner heightened attention and recall. The utilisation of celebrities as spokespersons and image maker are common

practices, tactics employed due to the credibility and association of these figures with key product attributes (Olumuji & Okunomo, 2022). An illustrative example is the case of Debo Adebayo, widely known as Mr. Macaroni, a social media sensation renowned for his viral catchphrase, 'Ooyin.' Presently, he serves as the prominent face for hospitality business promotion, a strategic move to capture the audience's attention.

The concept of leveraging a celebrity or authoritative figure to endorse a product, thereby certifying it as a must-have, is known as celebrity endorsement. When incorporated into PR campaigns, such endorsements create a sense of belonging among consumers, enhancing the brand's appeal. Belch and Belch (2012) assert that consumers are more susceptible to influence when the message emanates from someone relatable or close to them. Celebrities possess a unique ability to captivate attention, induce recall, elevate awareness and induce loyalty (Olumuji & Okunomo, 2022).

The hospitality industry in Nigeria is highly competitive, with brands constantly seeking innovative ways to enhance visibility, build trust, and attract a loyal customer base. Traditional public relations (PR) strategies in print and broadcast, have been supplemented by social media-based influencers, which allows brands to connect directly with their target audience. Celebrity influencers, with their vast social media followings and perceived popularity, have become powerful tools for shaping consumer perceptions and driving engagement. However, despite the increasing reliance on social media influencers, questions about the extent to which these endorsements influence consumer behaviour remain: the sustainability of influencer partnerships and the potential risks associated with over-reliance on influencers. Addressing these gaps is critical for businesses aiming to maximise their return on investment in influencer-driven PR strategies.

Moreover, while celebrity endorsement has been a long-standing PR practice, the digital landscape presents new challenges and opportunities that require further exploration. The authenticity of influencer marketing is often questioned, as some consumers view paid endorsements as less credible than organic recommendations. Additionally, the dynamic nature of social media means that influencer relevance can fluctuate, impacting the effectiveness of brand collaborations. There is also the risk of negative publicity when influencers face image controversies, which can, in turn, damage a brand's reputation. Given these complexities, this study seeks to critically examine the role of social media celebrity influencers in shaping consumer attitudes toward hospitality brands in Nigeria. By analysing the interplay between influencer credibility, consumer trust, and brand loyalty, the study aims to provide insights that can guide PR practitioners in developing more effective and sustainable influencer marketing strategies.

While the use of celebrity endorsements in PR is not a novel concept and practice, its efficacy remains potent. This study delves into the impact of social media celebrity endorsements in promoting the hospitality sector in Nigeria. By examining the dynamics of such endorsements, it aims to unravel their influence on customer preferences, brand loyalty, and overall business success.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

*Social media marketing*

The realm of social media marketing has emerged as a focal point for marketing experts, lauded for its efficacy in engaging consumers at minimal costs (Evans, 2010). Among the various social media platforms leveraged by marketers, Instagram stands out as a widely embraced application (Djafarova & Bowes, 2020). Functioning as a dynamic online photo and video sharing platform, Instagram allows users to share glimpses of their daily lives, yet scholarly research on this social media giant, particularly within the context of digital marketing, remains limited (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Nevertheless, the platform has become a robust digital space with users employing diverse strategies, from simple product photos on non-branded online shopping accounts to meticulously crafted content on professional branded product accounts (Djafarova & Bowes, 2020).

In the Nigerian context, Instagram has secured its position as the fourth most utilized social media platform, following WhatsApp, Facebook, and FB Messenger, as of 2022 (Sasu, 2023). Sasu (2023) reports that by 2022, the number of Instagram users in Nigeria reached 7.8 million, with a discernible upward trend. Notably, a substantial percentage (38.3%) of active Instagram users in Nigeria belong to the Millennial generation, showcasing intriguing patterns of impulsive buying behavior (Sasu, 2023).

The rapid expansion of web-based platforms has significantly altered human interaction, prompting the need for a revamped digital advertising approach among marketers (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). The traditional AIDMA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Memory, and Action) paradigm has given way to the contemporary AISAS (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, and Sharing) model, which better aligns with online consumer behavior, particularly on social media platforms like Instagram (Wei & Lu, 2013). The AISAS model delineates the mental processes guiding consumer choices in interacting with or acquiring new products or services. Customers are drawn to the product, leading to interest, followed by an online search for information. Armed with knowledge, they proceed to act by making a purchase, and finally, they share their consumption experience online. While the AIDMA model remains relevant to a certain extent, both models complement each other in elucidating consumer behavior in the digital landscape (Wei & Lu, 2013).

Instagram's unique features position it as an exceptionally potent digital marketing platform. Users can freely promote their products by establishing an Instagram account and harnessing the power of photo and video sharing (Jin & Ryu, 2020). According to Djafarova and Bowes (2020), users can employ custom visuals to showcase their products, 'tag' specific users to notify them of new products or services,

and leverage the 'caption' feature to provide written descriptions or explanations. The use of 'hashtags' represents another crucial aspect, enhancing the discoverability and reach of posted content (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

*Brand Engagement in the Digital Era*
The concept of brand engagement has garnered significant attention in the academic realm, captivating scholars across various fields such as marketing, management, PR, and information system management (Chan et al., 2014). Defined as behaviours extending beyond mere transactions, brand engagement focuses on the customer's behavioural manifestations with a brand or firm, driven by motivational drivers beyond the point of purchase. This engagement is intricately linked to the consumer's psychological state, emphasising sentiments and emotions towards a particular brand (Paruthi & Kaur, 2017). Traditionally centred on consumer emotions, recent perspectives highlight the evolving emphasis on interactions and relationships resulting from customer-brand interactions (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019). Hollebeek et al., (2014) underscore the increasing importance of brand engagement for effective brand management and the cultivation of an emotionally devoted customer base.

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, play a pivotal role in fostering brand engagement. Users can actively participate in brand promotion through photo and video sharing, tagging, captions, and hashtags (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2020). The dynamic and evolving nature of social media allows consumers to interact with brands, voice opinions, and even become brand ambassadors (Azar et al., 2016). In the digital era, consumers actively engage with brands on social media platforms, contributing resources beyond transactions. The depth of consumer-brand connections is exemplified by cognitive processing, affective responses, and behavioural actions (Hollebeek et al., 2014). While scholars may differ in their conceptualization of brand engagement, its multidimensionality is evident in its cognitive, emotive, and behavioural components (So et al., 2014; Bilro & Loureiro, 2020).

Positive brand engagement yields benefits such as value co-creation, customer loyalty, and even active involvement in new product development (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). However, it's crucial to recognise that brand engagement is not always positive, as dissatisfied customers may express negative engagement through public criticism or demonstrations.

In essence, the evolving concept of brand engagement highlights its significance in establishing and maintaining valuable customer-brand connections, offering a competitive edge to (hospitality) businesses in the digital age. The focus on managing

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relationships and generating value beyond transactions positions brand engagement as a key element in modern PR.

*Social Media Influencers*

Within the expansive realm of digital marketing, which encompasses diverse strategies like social media marketing, email marketing, and influencer marketing, the landscape is continuously evolving. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have become pivotal tools for communicators to achieve various goals, such as customer support, image building, advertising, e-commerce and PR (Dwivedi, 2021). Social media marketing is the strategic utilisation of social media technologies to generate and exchange valuable offerings, has transformed the way businesses and consumers connect, build relationships, and cultivate connections.

The emergence of social media influencers, particularly with the rise of platforms like Facebook in 2010, marked a shift in how companies engage with their audiences. Social media influencers, predating the term but embodying the concept, gained prominence alongside reality TV, becoming trusted sources for decision-making (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Influencer marketing, a subtype of social media marketing, has since become a prominent trend where retail brands collaborate with influencers to create branded content with the aim of enhancing consumer brand awareness and product acquisition (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

A social media influencer, possessing expertise or a significant connection with their audience, holds the power to sway their followers' decisions (Olumuji & Okunomo, 2022). More than mere marketing tools, influencers are valuable assets for organisations seeking to build and maintain positive image. The surge in popularity of social media influencers has led to the recognition of five types: celebrity influencers, mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers, differing primarily in their follower count (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

These influencers, often active on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, have the ability to reach and influence a broad audience (Budzinski & Gaenssle, 2018). Trust plays a crucial role in defining influencers, as they are viewed as engaged and empowered individuals, considered trustworthy sources by other users. The roots of using influencers can be traced back to the early days of celebrity endorsements in the late 19th century, evolving through different eras, from Santa Claus promoting Coca-Cola in 1931 to the Age of the Old Spice Man in 2010 (Ki et al., 2020). In recent times, social media influencers wield significant influence, attracting engaged followings that highly value their opinions. The COVID-19 pandemic further expanded the role of

influencers as businesses adapted this strategy to create, maintain and/or boost the image of their businesses.

Influencers have become an extension of word-of-mouth initiatives, with brands recognising influencers' impact on customer purchasing decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Businesses now collaborate with influencers to enhance customer connections and foster brand loyalty. This shift in marketing strategies has led to agencies restructuring to accommodate social media components, with some outsourcing to social agencies while others creating dedicated social media departments (Ki et al., 2020). As the dynamics of consumer-company interaction continue to evolve, social media influencer remains a powerful tool for businesses seeking effective and reliable engagement with their target audience and more recently in hospitality business in Nigeria.

*Hierarchy-of-Effects Theory*

The Hierarchy of Effects Theory provides a structured framework that illustrates the significant role of public relations in shaping consumer decisions regarding the acquisition or rejection of a product or service. This model outlines the sequential stages that consumers typically go through after being exposed to media message, from awareness to knowledge, liking, preference, conviction, and finally, purchase. Originating in 1961 by Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner, this theory expands upon the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) from the 1920s. Lavidge and Steiner introduced cognitive, affective, and conative stages as vital components of the consumer decision-making process. Jones (2017) emphasizes that communication efforts align their campaigns with these stages, recognizing the importance of guiding consumers through cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling), and conative (behavioral) phases.

The model encapsulates a sequence of mental stages experienced by individuals during a communication campaign. Specifically, the cognitive stage involves rational processing, encompassing learning impacts in mental and intellectual domains. The affective stage elicits emotional responses, incorporating the effects of other hierarchies related to learning about product qualities and benefits. In contrast, the cognitive stage focuses on behavioural effects, including customer feelings, liking, acceptance, interest, evaluation, preference, yielding, legitimization, want, satisfaction, emotion, feeling, attitude, and desire.

Importantly, the theory extends beyond individual consumer decisions, acknowledging three hierarchies: the buyer hierarchy, the supplier hierarchy, and the hierarchy of their interactions. It underscores the pervasive influence on consumers' choices and, in this context, its relevance to understanding how exposure to celebrity-

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endorsed awareness shapes perceptions and decisions in the context of hospitality business.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theoretical approach to examining the interconnectedness of brand management, influencer marketing, and public relations within Nigeria's hospitality industry. The methodology is rooted in reviewing relevant literature, theories, and case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. A qualitative research design was employed because it best suits the evaluation of how brand management strategies, influencer marketing, and public relations practices shape consumer perceptions and business performance in Nigeria's hospitality sector. This approach enables an in-depth investigation of various constructs, such as the credibility of social media influencers, consumer trust, and brand loyalty.

The study relies on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, industry reports, books, and reputable online sources. Key themes related to influencer marketing, branding, and digital PR in Nigeria's hospitality industry were identified and analyzed. The Hierarchy of Effects Theory serves as a guiding framework for interpreting consumer responses to influencer-driven branding efforts. Given that the study is based on secondary data, ethical considerations include ensuring proper citation of sources and avoiding misrepresentation of data. The research adheres to academic integrity standards, maintaining objectivity in analyzing different perspectives

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Public Relations and celebrity influencers in hospitality business brand*

Celebrity influencers wield significant influence by fostering compatibility, knowledge, and trust, all of which positively impact business performance. However, an influencer's appeal and loyalty do not directly affect the effectiveness of a product. Authenticity stands as the cornerstone of influencer endorsement. If an endorsement feels fake, the target audience can quickly discern it, potentially tarnishing the brand's reputation. To cultivate trust with your audience, ensure that the influencer genuinely utilizes and appreciates your product or service, rendering their endorsement authentic (Dwivedi, 2015).

Branding, a fundamental aspect of brand management, revolves around crafting and nurturing a distinctive identity and image for a product, service, or organization. It encompasses various elements such as brand name, logo, design, and overall brand experience. As noted by Keller (2013) that a brand is a promise, a set of associations and expectations that consumers have about the offering and the company behind it.

Successful branding not only sets a company apart from its competitors but also fosters a profound emotional connection with consumers, cultivating loyalty and trust. Public relations through positive image building has proven to be a key approach to successful brand management.

Cultivating a positive perception of a brand among consumers is a crucial objective for every company striving for excellence within its industry. Consequently, companies must possess the capability to foster a favorable brand image among consumers, utilizing PR strategies to bolster their success and credibility in the industry. In today's business landscape, particularly in the hospitality sector, organizations aspire to cultivate customer loyalty to secure a loyal customer base.

Furthermore, safeguarding the reputation of a brand holds significance within the context of the human brand. The term "human brand" denotes any well-known individual who becomes the focus of marketing communication (Rindova, 2006). From a public relations standpoint, a brand may pertain to a product, company, or service. However, celebrities are often viewed as brands themselves due to their professional management and the additional associations and attributes they embody (Thomson, 2006). Human brand figures endorse and advocate for product brands through endorsements and persuasive messaging, imbuing inanimate brands with personality traits to stimulate consumption.

Therefore, when the endorser enjoys positive publicity as the human brand, consumers tend to perceive the associated brand positively. The collaboration between companies and influencers to market products to their respective target audiences has significantly risen. A brand influencer, typically a celebrity, is remunerated to influence or endorse a specific company's public image, products, or services, serving as a trusted face for the audience. In essence, a brand influencer becomes a credibility factor for brand consumers, as they place faith in a product or service based on the individual through whom it is promoted; these influencers can stem from various fields such as entertainment, sports, politics, business, among others. Regarded as cultural or identity symbols, brand influencers function as a promotional tool that epitomizes personal achievement and product commercialization (Sari & Wahjoedi, 2022).

A brand influencer acts as a promotional instrument representing individualism's triumph, human grandeur, and product promotion. Companies enlist brand influencers to sway consumer preferences towards their products and serve as advocates. The primary objective of a brand influencer is to ensure compatibility between their persona and the brand, as this alignment significantly influences the company's image positively. Positive consumer perception enhances a brand's reputation, and the presence of a suitable brand influencer amplifies brand awareness. Thus, ensuring harmony between

the brand and the celebrity's endorsement persona is imperative for effective brand influence.

Bailey, Bonifield, & Elhai (2021) investigated the impact of celebrity endorsements on business promotion in the Nigerian consumer goods sector utilizing a cross-sectional regression methodology. The study examined the role of brand image in the association between celebrity influencer endorsements and business promotion, as well as customer patronage. The regression findings revealed that celebrity fit significantly influences consumer patronage, indicating that consumers are more inclined to purchase products or brands that share physical characteristics or traits with the endorsing celebrities. Moreover, the results demonstrated a positive and highly significant effect of celebrity credibility on customer satisfaction. Additionally, the study identified a relationship between public relations, celebrity influencers, and business promotion.

Numerous social media platforms offer analytics and insights enabling businesses to monitor the performance of influencer collaborations. By analyzing key metrics such as reach, engagement, and conversions, hospitality enterprises can assess the effectiveness of their PR initiatives and make informed decisions for future campaigns. Notably, employing social media celebrity influencers to promote hospitality businesses in Nigeria can be a strategic approach from a public relations perspective, providing avenues for enhanced reach, targeted audience engagement, authenticity, and measurable outcomes. Nonetheless, it remains imperative for businesses to meticulously select influencers whose values align with their brand and objectives to ensure the efficacy of their PR endeavors.

*Brand Management, Social Media Influencers, and the Hospitality Business*
In the dynamic business landscape of the 21st century, effective brand management has become a pivotal component of marketing strategy. Brands wield substantial influence in shaping consumer perceptions, impacting purchasing decisions, and establishing enduring relationships between businesses and their target audience.

Brands permeate various aspects of individuals' lives, playing a significant role in economic, social, cultural, sporting, and religious contexts (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). Consumers, viewed as symbolic beings capable of infusing the material world with intricate meanings (Belk & Costa, 1998), ascribe meaning to consumption. Brands are comprehensively studied through semiotics, anthropology, economics, sociology, history, and philosophy, reflecting postmodern consumers' need to imbue consumption with significance.

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At the core of brand management lies branding, a foundational pillar involving the creation and nurturing of a distinctive identity and image for a product, service, or organization. This encompasses elements such as brand name, logo, design, and overall brand experience. As per Keller (2013), a brand represents a promise, a set of associations and expectations that consumers hold about the offering and the company behind it. Successful branding not only differentiates a company from its competitors but also fosters a robust emotional connection with consumers, cultivating loyalty and trust.

A positive brand image is deemed essential for organizational excellence within the industry (Lahap et al., 2016). Companies aspire to create customer loyalty by establishing a positive brand image in the minds of consumers. The human brand, referring to any famous persona used in marketing communication (Rindova, 2006), includes celebrities who act as brands, contributing personality qualities to inanimate brands and influencing consumption (Holmes, 2014). Positive publicity associated with a human brand enhances consumer perception of the endorsed brand.

In today's practice, the collaboration between companies and influencers has become more pronounced. Brand influencers, often celebrities, serve as credibility factors for brands, influencing consumer trust and belief in products or services. Brand influencers, chosen based on their alignment with the brand's persona, act as artistic and identity icons, symbolizing individualism and commercial product promotion (Sari & Wahjoedi, 2022).

The hospitality industry in Nigeria is a significant contributor to the country's economy has witnessed transformative changes. Short-Let apartments which is a short term rentals of a furnished property, a niche in the hospitality sector, gained prominence during the COVID-19 lockdown, outperforming traditional hotels. The pandemic, rather than undermining the short-Let industry, propelled its growth due to factors such as the lower cost of home-like short let apartments, concerns about crowded hotels, and the ability to choose preferred accommodations. Short let apartments captured a substantial share of the hospitality business in terms of transaction volume and value, presenting an unexpected and economically fruitful development in the industry (Okafor, 2021).

The success of the short-let market in Nigeria underscores the evolving nature of the hospitality sector and the opportunities it presents for strategic investors. This shift is evident in the increased occupancy rates of short-let apartments compared to traditional hotels, emphasizing the changing preferences and expectations of consumers in the hospitality domain.

CONCLUSION

The modern business environment demands a sophisticated and strategic approach to brand management, particularly within the realms of social media influence and the fast-changing hospitality sector. Brands, deeply embedded in consumers' daily lives, play a crucial role in shaping perceptions, guiding choices, and building lasting connections. Effective brand management—anchored in distinctive branding strategies—enables businesses to stand apart from competitors while fostering emotional bonds with their audiences. Within this context, collaborations with influencers have become a powerful force in contemporary public relations. By aligning brand values with an influencer's persona, businesses can strengthen credibility, enhance consumer trust, and increase visibility in highly competitive markets.

For Nigeria's hospitality sector, thriving in this evolving landscape requires both mastery of traditional branding practices and the adoption of innovative approaches powered by influencer partnerships. The convergence of strategic brand management, effective influencer collaboration, and adaptive responses to industry change positions businesses for sustained success. Ultimately, the pathway to long-term growth lies in combining strong brand identity, meaningful partnerships, and a deep understanding of consumer expectations.

From a public relations perspective, Nigerian hospitality businesses are encouraged to harness the potential of influencers by selecting those whose values authentically align with their brand. This ensures genuine promotion and fosters trust-based relationships with consumers. A holistic approach to brand management should also be adopted, blending conventional strategies such as consistent design and messaging with modern methods that highlight values and experiences, thereby strengthening emotional connections with customers. Moreover, hospitality organizations should embrace data analytics to inform strategic decisions across branding, influencer engagement, and service innovation. By leveraging consumer insights and continuously evaluating performance indicators, businesses can refine their strategies, maximize the impact of influencer collaborations, and remain responsive to evolving consumer demands.

BIODATA

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