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The role social media influencer strategies on brand communication in telecommunication industry

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Abstract
Society is advancing in the digital era every other day. Thus, social media has become more of a basic need for many people, who check their social media accounts habitually. Influencers on social media have become a model used by companies to advance their brands. Influencers are independent of any third-party supporters who form the audience's attitudes via tweets, blogs, and others. Thus, the aim of the study was to establish the influence of social media influencer strategies on brand communication at Safaricom Limited. The study was built on social judgment theory and the target population was 269 Safaricom staff in the Social Media department. The descriptive research design was applied while primary data was collected using questionnaire administered electronically. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively using both descriptive and inferential statistics. From the result, the overall model was found to be significant given the p-value of 0.000< 0.05. The value of the R-Square was found to be 0.53, which means that the model explains 53.0% of the total variations in the dependent variable (Brand communication) resulting from social media influencer strategies. Based on the results, social media influencer strategies enhanced Branding communication at Safaricom Limited. Thus, generally, holding other factors constant, social media influencer strategies enhanced brand communication by 0.558 units. Results further showed that a unit change in social media influencer strategies improved branding communication at Safaricom Limited by 0.848 units. Given other factors held constant, the study recommends that the telecommunications companies in Kenya need to adopt the best social media influencers strategies for better brand communication. This is because the results revealed that this variable had a positive and significant influence on brand communication and, hence, the performance of telecommunication companies. Also, before implementing influencer strategies, telecommunication companies should clearly define their communication objectives.

Keywords: Social media, Facebook, telecommunication, branding, social judgment theory

Introduction

The rapid changes in technology have revolutionized human activities and experiences due to their wide application in various human spheres and business domains in the present world. Innovative technologies such as the internet, information technologies, and innovations like cloud computing, Big Data, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have become widely applicable in various business processes to improve overall business performance, such as financial and operational performance, as well as enhance competitiveness (Grafström, Jakobsson, & Wiede, 2018) [5]. Society is advancing in the digital era every other day. Thus, social media has become more of a basic need for many people, who check their social media accounts habitually. Hence, social media networks have turned into a vital brand communication platform, with social networking websites becoming popular means of brand promotion and marketing (Shen & Bissell, 2013) [14].

According to Lin, Crowe, Pierre, and Lee (2021) [10], influencers in social media are independent of any third-party supporters who form the audience's attitudes via tweets, blogs, and others. This is done through the regular creation and posting of videos, photos, and other posts that relate to the subject of their social profiles and social media pages, and

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then other people follow them to read their content. Hence, since social media is crowded with people that have wide experience in different fields, using social media influencers to communicate about a brand is a valuable and efficient means for a brand to communicate globally.

Social Media Influencer brand communication involves the use of media influencers to drive an organization's message and reach a particular population (Zahoor & Qureshi, 2017) [13]. Influencers are regarded as people who build a large following on social media and are reliable in a particular niche market. Thus, social media influencers' usage has spread globally, especially with the growth of digital brand communication. Statistics show that about 30% of the world's population is accessible and uses social media in their day-to-day activities; this has resulted in consumer behavior change (Zahoor & Qureshi, 2017) [13]. Social media influencers have gained significant prominence and influence on a global scale in recent years. These individuals, who have built large online followings and command considerable attention from their audiences, have become important figures in shaping various aspects of popular culture, consumer behavior, and even social and political discourse.

Social media influencers' strategies include choosing to collaborate with brands that align with their personal brand and values. They carefully evaluate the brand's reputation, mission, and product or service relevance to ensure a genuine fit. This alignment helps maintain authenticity and resonates with their audience (Enke and Borchers, 2021) [3]. Influencers often focus on a specific niche or topic that aligns with their interests, expertise, and target audience. By specializing in a particular area, they can establish themselves as experts and attract a dedicated following interested in that topic. Social media influencers strategies strive to maintain their unique voice, style, and values, which helps them build trust and credibility with their followers. This authenticity extends to their brand communication, ensuring that their audience perceives the brand messages as genuine and credible (Brorsson & Plotnikova, 2017) [1]. Also, Influencers have a deep understanding of their target audience. They engage in meaningful interactions with their followers, listen to their feedback, and address their concerns. This connection allows influencers to tailor their brands.

From a global perspective, social media influencers have transcended geographical boundaries and reached audiences across different countries and cultures. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter have facilitated the dissemination of content to a global audience, allowing influencers to connect with followers from diverse backgrounds (Enke & Borchers, 2021) [3]. This global reach has given influencers the ability to influence trends, opinions, and purchasing decisions worldwide.

In Africa, social media influencers have also emerged as powerful figures with a growing impact on society, culture, and commerce (Joseph, 2022) [9]. The continent has seen a rise in local influencers who have gained significant followings and have become influential voices within their respective communities and beyond. According to Iqani (2019) [7], one of the notable aspects of social media influencers in Africa is their ability to connect with and represent diverse African cultures and experiences. Africa is a continent with rich cultural diversity, and influencers from different countries and regions have been able to share their unique perspectives, traditions, and stories with global audiences. They have become important cultural ambassadors, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of Africa.

In Kenya, social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, which are widely used by people of all ages (Ong'ong'a, 2020) [12]. This popularity has risen due to several social media benefits, like increased communication and connectivity, as well as access to information and news. The constant evolution of social media has prompted brands to use it to reach their target audiences (Mwaisaka, 2017) [11]. As the internet becomes ubiquitous, it is expected that brand communication using influencers will become a lucrative option for traditional social media, traditional brand communication, and internet brand communication (Jarrar, Ayodei, & Adebola, 2020) [8].

Brand communication is a concept that has gained interest in recent years. Brand communication is consistent and compelling brand image that builds brand awareness, establishes brand loyalty, and differentiates the brand from competitors (Voorveld, 2019) [15]. It involves both internal and external communication efforts to deliver a cohesive and impactful brand message. The poor performance of in-brand communication among telecommunications companies can be attributed to various factors. By effectively planning, executing, and evaluating brand communication efforts, companies can strengthen their brand perception, build customer loyalty, and drive business success.

Even though social media influencers benefit brand communication, their influence has different dimensions. Empirical evidence on the influence of social media influencers' strategies on brand communication in the telecommunications sector in Kenya still lacks. In fact, none of the authors focused on the case of Safaricom Limited, which is the leading company in Kenya in terms of profitability. This study has sealed this void by providing a clear understanding of social media influencers in brand communication.

Social Media Influencers' Strategies
Organizations are currently benefiting from social media platforms as a strategy to influence many stakeholders, who are distributed geographically in different areas. This is due to the intensification of interactions between customers and firms (Gao, Tate, Zhang, Chen, & Liang, 2018) [4]. Notably, customers are also getting more empowered, so they can take control of their communication processes. More so, they are also becoming collaborators, creators, and commentators.

Companies are faced with the challenge of initiating social media campaigns and combining social media with their brand communication strategies to build long-term relationships with customers. This is because, though there are several opportunities in social media influencer communication, there is no clear framework or definition to act as a guide for the integration of social media brand communication strategies (Effing & Spil, 2016) [16].

Social media has transformed how customers and organizations interact and influence each other's consumption behaviors (Chen, Wang, & Xie, 2011) [17]. Social interactions are made up of actions that influence one another, whether actively or passively. Such can be like 'word-of-mouth' or through 'contagion effects.' These

social interactions, according to Muller and Peres (2019) [18], depend heavily on the structure of the social network, and they offer organizations the quantifiable value that is known as social equity. Thus, organizations have realized the significance of social influence in influencing consumer decisions. More so, research like that of Aral and Walker (2014) [19] has shown that the connection patterns of people and the strength of social ties can influence the strength of social interactions.

Social media influencers create a sense of accessibility for people and make followers feel like they are a part of a close, intimate community that is cultivated by influencers in social media (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017) [20]. Hence, influencers in social media are always under scrutiny since they share self-branding, online content, credibility, and authenticity, which are key factors for success regarding influencers on the social media platform and in enhancing the retention of followers. Social media influencers include Nano-influencers, who have 1–10k followers; micro-influencers with followers ranging from 10k–100k; macro-influencers with followers between 100k and 1 million; and mega-influencers with followers of 1 million and above (Campbell & Farrel, 2020) [2]. According to Campbell and Farrel (2020) [2], influencers in social media are active on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. However, they feel that Instagram and Facebook are the most successful. For social media influencers to be successful in influencing customers, there are some factors that need to be considered.

Social Judgment Theory
The Social judgment theory (SJT) was formulated by Muzafer Sherif and Hovland in 1961. This is a psychological theory that explains how people form and evaluate judgments or opinions about various issues, ideas, or other people. It involves the opinion and assessment concept through comparison with present attitudes. The theory argues that people usually judge immediately when they hear a message without even measuring the attitude. Thus, the social judgment theory involves the subconscious, which sorts out the ideas that occur and the instant perception. Thus, the assumption is that customers make a judgment regarding a brand immediately they receive the information regarding the brand (Zak & Hasprova, 2020).

Critics argue that SJT does not consistently predict or explain actual behavior. While the theory focuses on judgment formation, it does not always account for the translation of judgments into behavioral outcomes. Real-world decisions and actions are influenced by various factors beyond judgment, such as situational constraints, social norms, and personal motivations. As well as how the individual tolerates the opinions of other people and the impact of the commitment of the person passing the message (Zak & Hasprova, 2020) [21]. In the current study, this theory suggests that the commitment of an influencer towards a brand is a factor that influences how customers receive the brand message.

Social judgment theory has been applied in various fields, including communication studies, marketing, and conflict resolution (Grazzini, Acuti, & Aiello, 2021) [6]. It provides insights into how people process and evaluate information and how persuasive messages can be tailored to effectively influence attitudes and opinions. However, in such a situation, it is possible to change an attitude. Therefore, this current study tested these principles of the social judgment theory by looking at the communication of a brand to customers using social media influencers.

Thus, the study aimed at establishing the influence of social media influencer strategies on brand communication at Safaricom by answering the research question.'

What is the effect of social media influencer strategies on brand communication by Safaricom Limited?

Conceptual Framework
A conceptual framework provides a foundation for understanding, analyzing, and organizing concepts and ideas within a particular field or research study. The conceptual framework below illustrates the relationship between social media influencer strategies and brand communication at Safaricom Limited.
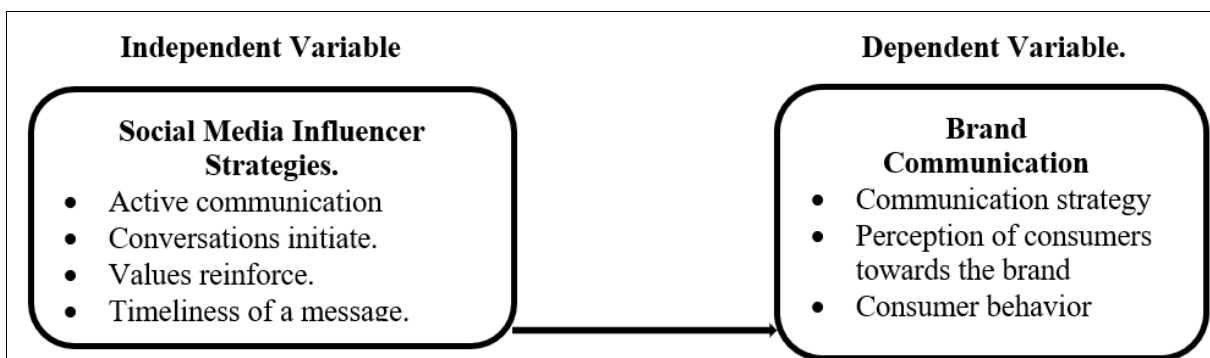
Source: Researcher (2023)

Research methodology
Research methodology refers to the systematic approach or framework used to conduct research and gather information in a structured and organized manner (Snyder, 2019) [22]. The choice of research methodology depends on the research objectives, the nature of the research topic, and the available resources. The present study used Quantitative Research methods. This was an appropriate method because the data was quantitative in nature.

The study design is a methodical collection and analysis of data so as to bring together the objectives, purpose, and relevance of research. A descriptive research design was used in carrying out the research. This design was appropriate because it ensured that the person conducting the research had minimal interference from the variables to reduce biases, and it helped to draw valid conclusions (Waringa, 2014) [23]. The study location was Safaricom Limited's headquarters office, located in Nairobi, Kenya.

Safaricom Limited has several outlets and agencies countrywide. The location is justified because it's among the leading and has dominated the telecommunications companies that have utilized largely the social media platform to communicate their brands, thus making it reliable as a location for the study.

The term target population refers to the specific group of individuals or entities that a researcher wants to study and draw conclusions about. It is the group to which the research findings are intended to be generalized or applied. The present study's target population was a total of 291 permanent staff working in the social media department at Safaricom Limited as of 2021 (Safaricom, 2021). The sample size was calculated using Yamane's 1967 formula. The sample of 168 arrived at was selected using a simple random sampling technique.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \quad N = 291 \; \varepsilon = 0.05 \; n = \frac{691}{1+291(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{291}{1+0.7275} = 168.4515$$

Sample size was 168 respondents

The researcher used well-structured questionnaires for primary data collection, which were designed using Google Forms. The questionnaires were administered electronically to the participants, who filled them out and submitted them for analysis. The data collected using the questionnaires was evaluated to ensure it was consistent, complete, and accurate. Then, using SPSS Version 22, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. The study employed descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. For the inferential statistics, multiple regression analysis was used. Data were analyzed and presented in tabular form, as well as incorporating graphs.

Findings and discussions

The table 1 below illustrates the response rate on the returned and unreturned questionnaires. A total of 168 questionnaires were administered electronically, of which 131 were well filled out and 37 were not. The percentage response rate was 77.98%, while the nonresponse rate was 22.02%. According to Luck and Gaspelin (2017) [24], the acceptable response rate for statistical analysis should be above 50%. Thus, 77% is regarded as the best response rate. The best response rate may be associated with administering the questionnaire electronically, while the non-response rate was due to unknown reasons.

Table 1: Response rate

Response	Frequency	Response Rate
Returned	131	77.98%
Not Returned	37	22.02%
Total	168	100.00

Source: Field data (2023)

Years worked with Safaricom Limited.

The study also assessed the number of years one has been in the company. The frequency distribution is presented in Table 2 below. Results revealed that workers who have been in the company for a period between 6 and 10 years formed the majority, accounting for 47 (35.9%), followed by those

who have worked at the company for a period of time between 0 and 5 years, accounting for 36 (27.5%) of the total respondents. Those who have worked at the company for a period between 11 and 15 years accounted for 30 (22.9%), and lastly, those who have worked for the company for a period of 15 and above were 18 (13.7%). This means that the majority have been working at the company for a substantial number of years to understand how the usage of social media influencers has evolved and how it influences brand communication at the Safaricom Company.

Table 2: Working experience at Safaricom limited

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0-5 years	36	27.5
6-10 years	47	35.9
11-15 years	30	22.9
Above 15 years	18	13.7
Totals	131	100

Source: Field Data (2023)

Descriptive statistics on social media influencer strategies and Brand Communication

To establish the influence of social media influencer communication strategies and Brand Communication at Safaricom Limited, eight statements were used. On the statement, whether customers listen to social media influencers and react passively to the brand message the mean of 3.7099 revealed that the respondents' majority moderately agreed to the statement. Additionally, the SD of 0.98049 implies that there were very few diverse responses regarding the statement. On the statement whether There is active communication between both social media influencers and customers about the company's brand, the mean of 3.3817 revealed that the majority of the respondents were neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement, while the Standard deviation of 1.32699 implies the presence of diverse responses regarding the statement.

Respondents were also asked to respond on whether customers initiate conversations that they share with social media influencers regarding the company's brand. The majority were in moderate agreement based on the statement given by the mean of 3.7481. While the SD of 1.19192 shows the presence of diverse responses regarding the statement, On the statement, whether the social media influencer's values reinforce the company's value Results show that the respondents moderately agreed with the statement; this was revealed by the mean of 3.5725, while the standard deviation of 1.18341 shows that there were some diverse responses regarding the statement that the social media influencer values reinforce the company's value.

The timeliness of a message is vital when using social media influencers. Most respondents were neutral on the statement revealed by the mean of 3.1183. While the SD of 1.02626 shows the presence of minimally diverse responses regarding the statement, On the statement, whether the social media influencers are expected to show consistency across the various social media platforms Results show that the respondents were neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement revealed by the mean of 3.3328, while the standard deviation of 0.99092 shows that there were some diverse responses regarding the statement that social media influencers are expected to show consistency across the

various social media platforms.

Lastly, on the statement whether social media influencers are more effective when given freedom to tailor their own messages, the results revealed that the majority of the respondents were to some extent in agreement with the statement that social media influencers are more effective when given freedom to tailor their own messages, as revealed by the mean of 3.5878. The SD of 0.95168 implies that there were very few diverse responses regarding the statement. Thus, social media influencers are more effective when given the freedom to tailor their own messages.

Generally, there was moderate agreement with most of the statements regarding social media influencer strategies and brand communication. This can be revealed by the average mean of 3.493014. Also, the average SD of 1.03506 shows that there are very few diverse responses regarding most of the statements on social media influencer strategies and brand communication. Thus, social media influencer strategies had a positive influence on brand communication at Safaricom Limited.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of social media influencer strategies and Brand Communication

Descriptive Statistics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customers listen to social media influencers and react passively towards the brand message	131	3.7099	.98049
There is active communication between both social media influencers and customers about the company's brand	131	3.3817	1.32699
Customers initiate conversations that they share with social media influencers regarding the company's brand	131	3.7481	1.19192
The social media influencer values reinforce the company's value	131	3.5725	1.18341
Timeliness of a message is vital when using social media influencers	131	3.1183	1.02626
The social media influencers are expected to show consistency across the various social media platforms	131	3.3328	.99092
Social media influencers are more effective when given freedom to tailor their own messages	131	3.5878	.95168
Valid N (listwise)	131		
Average		3.493014	1.03506

Source: Field data (2023)

Regression analysis

In order to establish the relationship between the study variables, regression analysis was conducted. The regression analysis shows the influence of changes in social media influencers' strategies on the branding communication at Safaricom Limited. Table 4 below presents the findings of the model summary.

From the results, the overall model was found to be significant given the p-value of 0.000< 0.05. The overall model summary showed that the model fit the regression line. The R-Square value was found to be 0.53, which means that the model explains 53.0% of the total variations in the dependent variable (Brand communication) resulting from social media influencer strategies. These findings agree with those by Enke and Borchers (2019) [3], whose results depicted a positive association between Social media influencers in strategic communication and brand communication. While 47.0% of the variations in the dependent variable may be associated with other factors not included in the model.

Table 4: Model summary

Model Summary					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	R square change	F change	df1	df2	Sig. F change
1	.728ª	.530	.526	.35207	.530	145.185	1	129	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Influencer Strategies

ANOVA

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether the differences between the observed group means were as expected due to random chance alone. The ANOVA assesses the variation between group means compared to the variation within each group. The ANOVA was conducted at a 95% confidence level. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results revealed that the overall model was found to be significant given the p-value of 0.000<

0.05. Results revealed that the model was statistically significant, with the F-value being 145.185 and a p-value of 0.000 < 0.05. Thus, fit and the independent variable (social media influencer strategies) were found to be significant predictors of the dependent variable (brand communication at Safaricom Limited). Hence, analysis can proceed given that the study variable was found not to be biased. Thus, the multiple regression analysis can proceed without any variable modifications.

Table 5: Anova

ANOVAª						
	Model	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17.996	1	17.996	145.185	.000ᵇ
	Residual	15.990	129	.124		
	Total	33.985	130			

a. Dependent Variable: Branding Communication

b. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Influencer Strategies

Coefficient of determination

The coefficient of determinations shows the actual influence

in terms of strength and direction on the independent variable. Based on the results, social media influencer

strategies enhanced Branding communication at Safaricom Limited. Thus, generally, by holding the social media influencer strategies constant, brand communication will improve by 0.558 units. Results further showed that a unit change in social media influencer strategies improved

branding communication at Safaricom Limited by 0.848 units. Given other factors held constant, these findings are in tandem with those by Luxton, Reid, and Mavondo (2015), who found that integrated marketing communication capability positively enhances brand performance.

Table 6: Coefficient table

Coefficients^a						
Model	**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardize Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
1 (Constant)	.558	.257		2.170	.032
Social Media Influencer Strategies	.848	.070	.728	12.049	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Branding Communication						

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to establish the role of social media influencer strategies used by Safaricom Limited in brand communication. Results revealed that there is a positive relationship between social media influencer strategies and the brand communication of Safaricom Limited. Based on the results, social media influencer strategies enhance brand communication at Safaricom Company Kenya. Thus, generally, holding the other factors constant, brand communication improves by 0.558 units. Also, the results revealed that unit changes in Social Media Influencer Strategies improved brand communication at Safaricom by 0.848 units while holding other factors constant. Strategy implementation systems, once properly employed in any sector, influence strategy implementation in the same sector and hence improve brand communication at Safaricom Limited. The study concludes that any sector, especially the telecommunications sector that is in pursuit of strategy implementation needs to adopt the best social influencers' strategies. Also, by utilizing influencers as strategic partners, companies can leverage their expertise, creativity, and influence to effectively convey brand messages and engage with their target audience. Further, while the related studies focused on one particular social media platform, this study has a general outlook on all the platforms, namely YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and LinkedIn. These platforms were the intervening variables of the study, hence bringing out the hypothesis that the social media influencers' influence on brand communication can be affected by the social media platform used.

Based on the findings, the telecommunication companies in Kenya need to adopt the best social media influencer strategy to enhance brand communication. This is because the results revealed that the variable had a positive and significant influence on brand communication and, hence, the performance of telecommunication companies. Since there is a positive relationship between influencer strategies and brand communication, the study recommends that before implementing influencer strategies, telecommunications companies should clearly define their communication objectives. Determine what specific goals the company aims to achieve through influencer partnerships, such as increasing brand awareness, driving sales, promoting new products, or improving brand perception.

Areas of further study

The current study focused on the role of social media influencers' strategies on brand communication at

Safaricom Limited.
1. The study recommends that the same study be done in other sectors other than telecommunications companies.
2. In addition to the current study concentrated in the private sector, a study can also be carried out in the public sector to determine the influence of social media influencers influence on performance in public sector organizations.

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