

**Influencer Marketing and Agenda-Setting: Case Study Analysis of Modern
Communication Strategies**

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In the digital age we are in, the relationship between influencer marketing and agenda-setting theory has significantly reshaped public perception and brand narratives. As traditional media evolves, influencer marketing has emerged as a key strategy for brands seeking to engage with audiences in more personal and impactful ways. Influencers have the ability to craft authentic content and connect with specific audiences, function as agenda-setters, and shape public conversations that effect the perceptions of brands. This dynamic shows the growing importance of understanding how influencer marketing and agenda-setting theory intersect to influence consumer behavior and brand image. We will explore the relationship between influencer marketing and agenda-setting theory through the analysis of key campaigns that demonstrate the effectiveness of these strategies. Drawing from principles of agenda-setting theory, the case study will highlight how mass media traditionally framed public awareness and compares this to the decentralized approach of influencers in the digital sphere. With influencer marketing's evolution and its role in shaping brand image, we examine its integration into modern public relations strategies. We will also identify campaigns that show their success and failures, so that we can analyze their use of influencers, objectives, audience engagement, message framing, and measurable outcomes such as public perception and consumer behavior. This case analysis aims to provide a greater understanding of how influencer marketing complements agenda-setting theory, offering insights into building authentic consumer relationships and shaping public discourse.

Literature Review

When we look at agenda setting theory and its relationship with influencer marketing, we must analyze several key works in the industry to come to a better understanding of their relationship, as well as their individual importance. Agenda-setting theory, as discussed by

Matthew W. Ragas in “The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Reputation,” shows the media’s critical role in shaping public awareness and framing brand-related discussions. The idea is that, while media may not dictate what people think, it significantly influences what they think about, and guiding their attention toward specific companies, products, or issues (Ragas, 2013 pp. 151-165). Ragas emphasizes that agenda-building, involves strategic efforts by organizations to influence the media’s agenda, ensuring their narratives gain prominence. This dual interaction between what the media prioritizes and how organizations contribute to these priorities, affects public perception and brand positioning (Ragas, 2013 pp. 151-165). For brands, mastering agenda-setting tactics can help align their strategic communication with media trends, ensuring favorable coverage and enhancing brand equity. Understanding this interaction is essential for crafting effective public relations and marketing strategies. We also see agenda-setting theory, introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.” In this journal, both authors present that media significantly influences public perception by emphasizing certain issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972 pp. 177-181). The theory shows that the media’s power to shape what audiences consider important, is by prioritizing specific topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972 pp. 180-185). This framework has evolved to become a cornerstone of modern marketing strategies, particularly in a digital landscape that is filled with all sorts of information. This work shows that agenda-setting is pivotal in determining how brands and products capture public attention. Current marketing practices leverage this theory to influence consumer preferences through strategic content placement and messaging. For example, digital platforms use algorithm methods to amplify brand narratives, aligning with the theory’s emphasis on being prominent and framing the brands message (Ex. Google Ads). Agenda-setting’s presence extends to influencer marketing, where key opinion leaders serve as

gatekeepers, directing audiences' focus on specific products or services. This aligns with McCombs and Shaw's assertion that agenda-setting involves not just highlighting issues but also shaping the manner in which they are perceived (McCombs & Shaw, 1972 pp. 177-1870. By understanding agenda-setting's historical context and adapting its principles to evolving media landscapes, marketers can craft campaigns that resonate with target audiences, thereby reinforcing the theory's significance in marketing practices.

Influencer marketing has emerged as a transformative tool for shaping brand image, with current research highlighting its increasing influence on consumer behavior and corporate branding strategies. In the work "Trends in Influencer Marketing: A Review and Bibliometric Analysis," by Anshika Singh Tanwar, provides a comprehensive analysis of the field, tracing its evolution and identifying key trends that define its application. The study highlights the role of influencers in establishing authentic connections between brands and audiences, which is a crucial factor in building trust and enhancing brand perception (Tanwar et al., 2022 pp. 2-6). The authors emphasize the shift from traditional advertising to influencer driven campaigns, where the credibility and relatability of influencers drive consumer engagements. The research done by Tanwar is done through what are called, "Thematic Maps," which also highlights how influencer marketing adapts to digital landscapes and leveraging platforms like Instagram and YouTube to amplify audience reach (Tanwar et al., 2022 pp. 12-14). This process is also accomplished through network creations which is creating relationship structures to match a main theme or thought process (Tanwar et al., 2022 pp. 16). The analysis also identifies critical areas for further exploration, such as the long-term impact of influencer partnerships on brand loyalty and the ethical challenges surrounding disclosure and authenticity in promotional content. According to E. Erdal Yörük and M. Erhan Summak in the journal, "Influencer Marketing and Public

Relations: The New Dynamics of Building a Brand Image in the Digital Age,” influencer marketing leverages social media personalities to create authentic connections between brands and audiences, which fosters trust and credibility (Yörük & Summak, 2023 pp. 67-69). Unlike traditional advertising, this approach capitalizes on influencers’ established rapport with their followers, amplifying brand messages through personalized and relatable content. This journal also highlights, that the alignment between influencer identity and brand values is crucial for building a cohesive and impactful image. We also see how the use of analytics and audience insights enables public relations professionals to target specific demographics more effectively and ensuring that they resonant with the brand narratives (Yörük & Summak, 2023 pp. 70-75). This shift in marketing and public relations methods using influencers, reflects on the evolving role of public relations where strategic collaborations with influencers enhance visibility, engagement, and consumer loyalty, demonstrating the value of adapting to digital communication trends.

Case Study Analysis

When we take everything that we have looked at through the journals and studies we see that a very prominent case or campaign that comes to mind recently, is the Nike “Dream Crazy,” campaign. This campaign serves as a major case study for exploring agenda-setting theory and the strategic use of influencer marketing in brand management. Nike’s campaign was launched in 2018 and was built around former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick which sparked widespread conversation about social justice and corporate activism. The rationale for selecting this campaign is rooted in its significant social media presence and successful use of influencer marketing to shape public perception (Rucker, 2018). By leveraging Kaepernick’s high profile stance on racial inequality, along with Kaepernick’s heavy social media presence, Nike

effectively set the agenda for discussions surrounding corporate responsibility, aligning its brand with contemporary sociopolitical issues (Rucker, 2018). This strategic alignment demonstrates agenda setting theory in that Nike was setting the path for discourse, positive or negative, to show how brands can use prominent influencers to create a narrative that resonates with their target audiences while simultaneously elevating their position in the public discourse. My reason for selecting the “Dream Crazy” campaign, is because of how it is majorly impactful in its scale of size, measurable outcomes, and its alignment with agenda-setting principles. The campaign’s size is evidenced by its global reach, achieving tens of millions of social media impressions within days of launching, which Nike knew would become a major touch point with this partnership. I also wanted to see how the engagement metrics, such as shares, comments, and likes, reflected strong consumer sentiments, which with the campaign sparking both support and criticism, it kept Nike at the forefront of public conversation for quite some time. I also chose this case to show the measurable improvements in brand reputation and sales because, Nike’s online sales increased after the campaign, highlighting the tangible impact of agenda-setting efforts (Rucker, 2018). We see the success of tapping into emotionally charged themes and leveraging digital platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook where Nike has directed the public’s attention toward its broader mission and goals. Nike is solidifying its reputation as a culturally relevant and a purpose-driven brand. By placing Kaepernick, an influencer with a polarizing yet powerful image, at the center of its message, Nike not only shaped public opinion but also reinforced its brand identity as a practitioner of equality and progressiveness.

Discussion

As we have seen throughout this essay, influencers serve as agenda-setters in the digital space by strategically shaping the topics and narratives that dominate public discourse, thereby

influencing perceptions and behaviors. Influencers bridge the gap between brands and audiences by using their credibility and relatability to craft authentic connections (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023 pp. 82-84). Unlike traditional agenda-setting, where mass media channels control the flow and framing of information, influencer marketing thrives in a decentralized digital landscape (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023 pp. 84-87). In these digital spaces, influencers can curate content tailored to their niche audiences, driving organic discussions and amplifying brand visibility. The tactics we see out Kaepernick and Nike is that of influencer marketing, and it differs from traditional mass media. In the PRSA article done by Lisa Pinkerton, “The Power of Influencer Marketing,” she shows the same examples that traditional mass media is dictated by a few media gatekeepers, versus influencer marketing where there is little to none (Pinkerton, 2022). Influencers have direct unmediated access to their audiences, allowing for more authentic and personalized messages that can lead to deeper consumer engagement. This is beneficial to this case because, if a media gate keeper or platform deemed this campaign to be too controversial, they may not have published it as effectively or covered it in length like it has been.

Managing brand narratives and influencer marketing usage in the digital age presents unique challenges and opportunities, however. These challenges are relevant, particularly with the rise of influencer marketing as a tool for agenda-building. As mentioned previously with Nike’s campaign the backlash, one could argue, was as big as the as the positives. Though many praised Nike for their stance, many criticized Nike for following an athlete who allegedly appeared to be presenting the agenda of “anti-police,” and “anti-veteran,” due to his actions of kneeling during the national anthem. Brands must be careful with this dynamic, so that it may allow them to foster authentic and lasting relationships with consumers because, if this is not correctly there will be a massive PR nightmare on the business’s hands (Ex. Bud Light and

Dylan Mulvaney). It is with this understanding that a brand must weigh out the positives and negatives, to see where the influencer aligns with their vision and if the partnerships is worth the investment for the return.

In conclusion, the relationship between influencer marketing and agenda-setting theory shows the evolving dynamics of brand management in the digital age. Through the lens of Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, this case study highlights how brands leverage influencer driven strategies to set agendas and frame public discourse. The campaign demonstrates how influencers pose as agenda-setters to amplify brand narratives, directly engage audiences, and shift public perception through personalized, authentic messaging. This approach contrasts traditional agenda-setting methods by mass media, which rely on dissemination of information to shape public awareness through gatekeepers. This study shows the importance to achieve measurable outcomes, such as heightened media attention, enhanced brand reputation, and increased consumer engagement, can build a brands campaign into a successful outcome. As digital platforms continue to evolve, the synergy between these strategies will remain crucial for shaping brand identity, cultivating authentic relationships, and influencing public opinion in meaningful and measurable ways.

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