



# Online influencer marketing

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## Abstract

Online influencer marketing (OIM) has become an integral component of brands' marketing strategies; however, marketers lack an adequate understanding of its scope, effectiveness, and potential threats. To fill this gap, this article first describes the phenomenon's background, defines OIM, and delineates its unique features to set the conceptual boundaries for the new concept. Drawing insights from practitioner and consumer interviews, and in line with social capital theory, the authors propose that OIM can be understood as leveraging influencer resources (including follower networks, personal positioning, communication content, and follower trust) to enhance a firm's marketing communication effectiveness. Six novel propositions illustrate the benefits and potential threats of OIM, which may spur progress toward a theory of OIM. Finally, this article outlines key strategies for effectively managing OIM and identifies important literature–practice gaps to suggest avenues for further research.

**Keywords** Online influencer marketing · Online influencers · Social capital theory · Marketing communication

*Online influencer marketing (OIM)* is a strategy in which a firm selects and incentivizes online influencers to engage their followers on social media in an attempt to leverage these influencers' unique resources to promote the firm's offerings, with the ultimate goal of enhancing firm performance. As brands increasingly empower online influencers—such as the Italian fashion influencer Chiara Ferragni, American car influencer Supercar Blondie, or Chinese beauty influencer Austin Li—to present and promote their products, OIM has emerged as a global phenomenon and integral component of brands' marketing strategies. Related spending is poised to reach US\$13.8 billion in 2021 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). In response to the growing

popularity, recent marketing research has explored the impact of certain influencer characteristics (e.g., Breves et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2019; Valsesia et al., 2020) and content characteristics (e.g., Evans et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019) on influencer- and brand-level outcomes. However, researchers and marketers still lack an adequate understanding of the mechanisms through which OIM creates opportunities and challenges for firms. Thus, there is a mounting need to advance our knowledge about how OIM works and what managers could do to realize its benefits and mitigate potential risks.

This article aims to outline fundamental features of OIM and offer a set of propositions that may spur progress toward a theory of OIM. We start by interviewing and collecting narratives from practitioners and consumers to gain real-world insights into the phenomenon. On the basis of this theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al., 2020) and drawing upon social capital theory (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), we suggest that OIM, as a new form of marketing, can be understood as leveraging influencer resources to enhance a firm's marketing communication effectiveness. Specifically, the use of OIM allows firms to leverage influencers' resources including their follower network, personal positioning, communication content, and follower trust. We put forth six novel, testable propositions

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illustrating four benefits and two potential threats of OIM. We also outline key OIM management strategies and suggest avenues for further research to stimulate conceptual and empirical explorations in this emerging marketing domain.

Through these efforts, we aim to offer four main contributions. First, OIM has garnered growing attention in marketing research (e.g., Hughes et al., 2019; Valsesia et al., 2020), but a clear definition and conceptualization is still lacking. Therefore, we provide a theoretically informed, formal definition, to set conceptual boundaries for this new concept. In particular, we highlight three unique, necessary features of OIM: (1) Firms select and incentivize online influencers, (2) influencers engage their followers for commercial purposes, and (3) firms leverage influencers' unique resources to promote offerings. These features theoretically differentiate OIM from other marketing strategies, such as celebrity endorsement, seeding or viral marketing, customer review programs, and native advertising, and provide a conceptual foundation to support knowledge development in this area.

Second, prior OIM research has predominately focused on studying the effects of specific influencer and content characteristics, without a broader understanding of the inherent benefits and threats of OIM. In this article, we draw on social capital theory to conceptualize OIM as a new marketing approach that enables a firm to leverage influencer resources (e.g., follower network, positioning, content, and follower trust), to which firms gain access through their connections with select influencers and through the influencers' connections with followers.

We contribute to the marketing literature by identifying the complex mechanisms through which OIM is able to deliver marketing communication effectiveness. With insights gleaned from interviews with practitioners and consumers, we put forth a set of six unique propositions highlighting the benefits and threats associated with OIM. In particular, we posit that a firm's use of OIM provides targeting benefits (P1), positioning benefits (P2), creativity benefits (P3), and trust benefits (P4). It also may engender content control (P5) and customer retention (P6) threats. These six propositions provide an initial framework to deepen our understanding about OIM's effectiveness and challenges.

Third, despite the prevalent use of OIM, many marketers still lack an adequate understanding of how OIM can be more effectively managed (Haenlein et al., 2020). In this article, we delineate four key OIM management strategies that are important for realizing the benefits and circumventing the potential threats of OIM. Specifically, we suggest that firms can (1) *select* influencers who fit the firms' marketing needs, (2) *monitor* influencers' content creation process, (3) *measure* the performance of OIM, and (4) *repurpose* influencers' content in firm-led marketing communications. The identification of these OIM management strategies provides practical insights to firms on how they can better ensure that

their OIM efforts translate into higher marketing communication effectiveness.

Finally, we identify key trends and issues associated with the OIM practice and illustrate important literature–practice gaps to develop a rich set of research directions. For example, extant research identifies several selection criteria, such as influencers' network characteristics (Hughes et al., 2019; Valsesia et al., 2020), credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and fit with the brand (Torres et al., 2019). We call for more studies of influencers' costs, network dynamics, and qualitative attributes. Recent literature also examines how the content (e.g., informative and hedonic value) and unique features (e.g., campaign incentives, sponsorship disclosure) of OIM might drive campaign outcomes (Evans et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Extensions of such research should examine diverse content formats, beyond text and images, and how their effectiveness may vary across different product types and social media platforms. Novel topics related to the measurement of OIM performance and integration of OIM with other firm-led marketing communications are also promising research directions. This agenda aims to fuel insightful research in OIM.

## Online influencer marketing fundamentals

### Background of online influencer marketing

The Internet has introduced new ways of sharing, consuming, and marketing. Unlike Web 1.0, which involved a one-directional provision of information to consumers, Web 2.0 allowed people to contribute content and connect. Early blogs gave users a means to maintain online journals for self-expression, life documentation, or connection purposes, and content advertising allowed bloggers to feature ads along with their blog content. Web 3.0, which introduced mobile devices and applications, accelerated the popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and made it possible for anyone to build an online following.

Changes in consumer behavior also have propelled OIM. Consumers express growing skepticism toward brands' direct marketing and are less inclined to trust traditional advertising (Gerdeman, 2019). In turn, for firms that find it more difficult to nudge consumers, online influencers who talk about brands and products on social media represent a viable alternative. Influencers weave brand endorsements into their personal narratives, which makes the OIM content appear more authentic and reflective of the influencers' own styles.

Moreover, shortened economic cycles have caused many firms to become more cost conscious with regard to their marketing expenditures. Instead of paying exorbitant fees to hire renowned celebrity endorsers, firms generally find OIM

more affordable, especially when they work with micro-influencers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that OIM yields higher sales and returns on investment (ROI) than traditional marketing efforts (Ahmad, 2018). Overall then, technological, cultural, and economic changes in the past two decades all have propelled the development of OIM, from relative obscurity to a prominent and promising marketing method.

### Online influencer marketing definition and scope

Online influencers are individuals, groups of individuals, or even virtual avatars who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers. Some influencers build such a huge following that they achieve celebrity status online; however, a fundamental difference between influencers and celebrities lies in their source of fame. Unlike celebrities who have succeeded in some credentialed, institutional setting (e.g., acting, music, sports), influencers are not certified by any formal institutions and accumulate followers by actively sharing content on social media (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Through blogging, vlogging, or generating short-form content (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), online influencers create and disseminate content that allegedly portrays their everyday lives, experiences, and opinions. They maintain active relationships and regularly respond to and interact with followers. By carefully managing their content, image, and endorsements, influencers aim to create a distinct personal brand (Lee & Eastin, 2020; Thomson, 2006). Followers then self-select to follow influencers whose identity resonates with them.

We define *online influencer marketing* as a strategy in which a firm selects and incentivizes online influencers to engage their followers on social media in an attempt to leverage these influencers' unique resources to promote the firm's offerings, with the ultimate goal of enhancing firm performance. This definition captures several key features that differentiate OIM from other marketing strategies (see Table 1 for a detailed comparison of OIM with other related marketing strategies).

First, firms *select and incentivize online influencers* to help market an offering. It differs from organic word of mouth (WOM), which occurs when existing customers share information about a firm's offering without any direct prompting by marketers (Kozinets et al., 2010). With OIM, firms purposely select and pay online influencers to spread WOM. While traditional seeding or viral marketing campaigns also require firms to "select" seed agents to facilitate the diffusion process (Dost et al., 2019; Haenlein & Libai, 2017), firms usually equip the seed agents with firm-generated content, which the seed agents are only encouraged but not required to promote. Moreover, seeding or viral marketing usually does not involve a formal incentive structure

such as pay per click and commission on sales. Instead, online influencers are obligated to create content and promote the firm's offering in their posts in exchange for a fee based on contractual agreement. The fees vary greatly across influencers and are determined by a range of factors, such as the size of the influencer's following, previous engagement rates, the category or industry, and content format. They also may be compensated non-monetarily, such as with free products or experiences.

Second, OIM attempts to get online influencers to *engage their followers* with the intention of promoting the firm's offering and influencing followers' attitudes and behaviors. Firms use social media to engage directly with customers too, typically by creating firm-generated content that provides informational or entertainment value (Kumar et al., 2016). But with OIM, they empower influencers to engage and interact with followers, for purposes such as increasing awareness, reinforcing favorable brand attitudes, or increasing sales. Related strategies, such as celebrity endorsements, customer review programs, native advertising, and product placement, serve commercial purposes, but they do not seek to maintain an audience nor prompt deep engagement, as OIM does (Haenlein & Libai, 2017).

Third, firms leverage online influencers' *unique resources*, including their *follower networks*, *personal positioning*, *communication content*, and *follower trust*, to promote the offerings. Like seeding or viral marketing campaigns, OIM helps firms reach influencers' follower networks and leverage followers' trust in the influencers. But OIM also actively uses influencers' positioning and content to promote the firms' offerings. Firms typically provide content briefs that outline the campaign's objectives, key messages, and deliverables, which the influencers generally are expected to convey. Otherwise, firms grant influencers a great deal of freedom to compose content as they choose, in alignment with their own personal positioning, so that the content resonates with followers. Unlike celebrity endorsements, over which the firm maintains full control, or viral marketing of messages developed and shared deliberately by the firm to stimulate WOM (Hinz et al., 2011; Van der Lans et al., 2010), OIM requires firms to relinquish substantial control to influencers, in terms of how they communicate about the offering. This critical feature of OIM represents both a great strength and a potential risk.

### Understanding OIM: Leveraging influencer resources to enhance marketing communication effectiveness

We adopt a social capital perspective to explicate the mechanisms through which a firm's use of OIM creates benefits and potential threats for the firm. We use *marketing communication effectiveness*, or the extent to which a firm's

**Table 1** Online influencer marketing versus related marketing strategies

Constructs/Definitions	Key Elements		Strengths and Weaknesses Relative to OIM	Examples	Representative Papers
	<i>Select and incentivize third parties to market firms' offerings</i>	<i>Empower third parties to engage consumers</i>	<i>Leverage third parties' unique resources (network, positioning, content, trust)</i>		
<p><b>Our Conceptualization:</b></p> <p><b>Online Influencer Marketing:</b>  A firm selects and incentivizes online influencers to engage their followers, in an attempt to leverage the influencers' unique resources to promote the firm's offering, with the ultimate goal of enhancing firm performance</p> <p><b>Related Strategies:</b></p> <p><b>Celebrity Endorsement:</b>  A person who evokes public recognition uses this recognition on behalf of a brand by appearing with it in an ad</p> <p><b>Seeding or Viral Marketing:</b>  A firm targets specific customers and equips them with products or firm-generated content (FGC) to accelerate and expand the contagion process</p> <p><b>Customer Review Program:</b>  A firm encourages regular or satisfied customers to share their experiences with products or services on online channels</p>	<p>✓ Select influencers to help market the firm's offering</p> <p>✓ Influencers charge a fee and are required to promote the offering to their followers</p>	<p>✓ Empower influencers to engage and interact with their followers to promote the firm's offering</p>	<p>✓ Leverage influencers' follower network, personal positioning, content, and follower trust to promote the firm's offering</p> <p>✓ Grant influencers a great deal of freedom to create content</p>	<p>Chiara Ferragni, a mega online influencer, works with numerous fashion brands to promote their products on social media</p>	<p>Hughes et al. (2019); Valsesia et al. (2020)</p>
<p><b>Celebrity Endorsement:</b>  A person who evokes public recognition uses this recognition on behalf of a brand by appearing with it in an ad</p>	<p>✓ Select and incentivize celebrities to endorse the brand</p>	<p>✗ Celebrities typically do not engage nor interact with consumers for commercial purposes</p>	<p>✓ Leverage celebrities' fans network, personal positioning, and earned trust from fans to endorse the brand</p> <p>✗ Celebrities do not have primary control over content creation</p>	<p>George Clooney, a U.S. actor, has long been a celebrity endorser for Nespresso and represents the persona of the brand</p>	<p>Biswas et al. (2006); McCracken (1989)</p>
<p><b>Seeding or Viral Marketing:</b>  A firm targets specific customers and equips them with products or firm-generated content (FGC) to accelerate and expand the contagion process</p>	<p>✓ Select seed agents to facilitate the diffusion of a product or FGC</p> <p>✗ Seed agents are not incentivized and are only encouraged (not required) to promote the product or FGC</p>	<p>✓ Seed agents engage with their peers to promote the product or FGC</p>	<p>✓ Leverage seed agents' social network and earned trust from peers to facilitate diffusion</p> <p>✓ Sometimes leverage seed agents' personal positioning</p> <p>✗ Firms equip seed agents with FGC to be promoted</p>	<p>Philips gave away electric toothbrushes and rebate vouchers to reach over 1.5 million potential customers; Old Spice launched "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like" campaign that went viral online</p>	<p>Dost et al. (2019); Haenlein and Libai (2017); Hinz et al. (2011); Vander Lans et al. (2010)</p>
<p><b>Customer Review Program:</b>  A firm encourages regular or satisfied customers to share their experiences with products or services on online channels</p>	<p>✓ Encourage satisfied customers to write online reviews</p> <p>✓ Customers are sometimes incentivized</p>	<p>✗ Does not typically involve audience maintenance nor deep engagement</p>	<p>✓ Leverage customers' social network and earned trust from peers</p> <p>✓ Customers create and control WOM content</p> <p>✗ Does not leverage customers' personal positioning</p>	<p>Alibaba rewards customers who write reviews with points and badges</p>	<p>Khern et al. (2018); Sahoo et al. (2018)</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Constructs/Definitions	Key Elements			Strengths and Weaknesses Relative to OIM	Examples	Representative Papers
	<i>Select and incentivize third parties to market firms' offerings</i>	<i>Empower third parties to engage consumers</i>	<i>Leverage third parties' unique resources (network, positioning, content, trust)</i>			
Product Placement: A firm incorporates branded products by means of visual, audio, verbal, and plot elements in mass media programs to influence audiences	✓ Select and incentivize mass media programs to blend the firm's offering into programs	✗ Does not typically involve audience maintenance nor deep engagement	✓ Leverage mass media programs' audiences and positioning to promote the firm's offering ✓ Brand/product is placed in the programs' contexts	(+) Firms maintain control over the positioning of the brand/product (-) Considered less authentic	James Bond films are well-known for featuring product placements for various automobile brands, such as Aston Martin	Karniouchina et al. (2011); Wiles and Danielova (2009)
Native Advertising: Paid advertising that takes the form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher itself	✓ Select content publisher to promote ad content ✓ Ad content is paid and takes the appearance of editorial content	✗ Does not typically involve audience maintenance nor deep engagement	✓ Leverage content publisher's audience network to promote the firm's offering ✗ Does not leverage distinct persona with unique positioning ✗ Publishers do not have primary control over content creation	(+) Firms maintain control over the native ad content (-) Lacks distinct persona with unique positioning (-) Considered disruptive to the viewers' experience	Fidelity inserted an online article on <i>Forbes'</i> site, aligned with the publisher's editorial and stylistic guidelines, that contained useful financial insights	Wang et al. (2019); Wojdynski and Evans (2016)



marketing communications generate favorable diagnostic (e.g., awareness, preference, loyalty) and evaluative (e.g., sales, market share, ROI, firm value) outcomes (McAlister et al., 2016), as a holistic measure to gauge the performance impact of OIM.

*Social capital theory* holds that actual and potential resources available through networks of relationships can be mobilized for purposive actions (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Drawing upon this perspective, OIM might be understood as leveraging influencer resources to enhance a firm's marketing communication effectiveness. Specifically, OIM allows firms to leverage selected influencers' (1) follower networks, (2) personal positioning, (3) communication content, and (4) follower trust to affect consumer attitudes and enhance firm performance. According to social capital theory, an influencer's social capital can be multifaceted, consisting of structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The structural dimension refers to the configuration of connections among network members, which provides valuable access and information benefits (Burt, 1997). The relational dimension entails resources derived from interactions, such as trust, norms, and identification. The cognitive dimension reflects shared representations, interpretations, or meanings among network members (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). From this perspective, the four influencer resources (follower networks, positioning, content, and follower trust) represent valuable resources, to which firms gain access through their connections with select influencers, as well as through the influencers' connections with followers. To theorize about OIM as leveraging influencer resources, we draw insights from social capital theory and seek to explain the performance-enhancing capabilities of OIM.

We conducted in-depth interviews with company representatives (practitioners' perspective) and a qualitative survey with consumers (consumers' perspective) to gather their insights and inform our theoretical development. For the practitioner interviews, we relied on theoretical sampling to ensure that the respondents were knowledgeable about OIM and able to provide novel insights (Zeithaml et al., 2020). We recruited these respondents through the authors' extensive network of leading firms, which allowed access to senior executives. The executives agreed to participate in interviews or referred us to a knowledgeable firm member who could provide the necessary insights. We thus interviewed 20 practitioners from 20 firms across diverse industries (e.g., apparel, beauty products, food products), with a range of tenures (1 to 16 years) who were directly involved in managing OIM in their firms. The interviews lasted 45–60 min each and were recorded and transcribed (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide).

For the consumer survey, 60 masters students from a large university in Hong Kong participated in exchange for course

credit. Two respondents did not follow any online influencer on social media and thus were excluded from the analysis. Our final sample of 58 respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25.34$  years, 62.07% women) all follow different types of influencers, with varying levels of engagement. They constitute a suitable sample, because 18- to 29-year-old consumers are the most active social media users among all age groups (Pew Research Center, 2019). The respondents indicated their levels of engagement with influencers and views on the effectiveness of OIM (see Appendix 2 for survey questions). Table 2 provides additional sample details.

Two researchers independently conducted systematic qualitative data analyses, using open, axial, and selective coding of the interview transcripts and survey responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). They discussed the identified codes and checked for consistency after each coding step, then condensed the common codes into a final set of six propositions that illustrate the benefits and threats of OIM (Zeithaml et al., 2020). To increase confidence in our findings, we presented our emerging theory to all practitioner respondents. They expressed strong agreement with the framework, with minor suggestions for clarifying some concepts. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that summarizes the set of propositions.

### Leveraging influencers' follower networks

A social network is defined by a set of actors and the relationships (ties) among them. According to social capital theory, the structural configuration of a person's network—that is, who that person reaches and how—constitutes a valuable resource, because it enables access to network members for information exchanges and diffusion (Burt, 1997; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). For example, social hubs who are well-connected to others can facilitate the diffusion of new ideas or products (Goldenberg et al., 2009; Libai et al., 2013), and those who have strong ties with network members can influence others' opinions more powerfully than people with weak ties (Chen et al., 2017). By working with influencers, firms can gain access to the influencers' follower networks, such that they leverage the structural capital embedded in these networks.

Firm-led approach to segmentation and targeting is to segment consumers on the basis of potential drivers of purchase behavior (e.g., demographic and psychographic attributes, loyalty and usage behaviors, benefits sought), evaluate the characteristics of the identified consumer segments, and then choose one or a few segments to target (Kara & Kaynak, 1997). OIM complements this firm-led approach by changing the focus from targeting desired consumer segments to targeting influencers who can reach those segments, which yields two benefits.

**Table 2** Interview and survey sample descriptions

Panel A: Practitioners (Interviews)					
#	Job Description	Tenure (Years)	Industry		
1	Marketing director	2	Sportswear		
2	Digital marketing manager	3	Cosmetics		
3	Chief executive officer	3	Electronics		
4	Brand manager	16	Feminine care products		
5	Chief marketing officer	1	Skin care products		
6	Founder	7	Snack products		
7	Marketing director	2	Ice cream products		
8	Digital marketing director	3	Cosmetics		
9	Chief executive officer	2	Home care products		
10	Marketing director	6	Food products		
11	Founder	3	Alcoholic beverages		
12	New media operations manager	2	Healthy food products		
13	Digital marketing manager	2	Personal care products		
14	Chief marketing officer	5	Food products		
15	Chief executive officer	1	Skin care products		
16	Marketing director	2	Health supplements		
17	Founder	7	Apparel		
18	Founder	10	Marketing agency		
19	Founder	6	Apparel		
20	Founder	10	Baby care products		
Panel B: Consumers (Surveys)					
#	Age	Gender	Influencers Followed	Type(s) of Influencers Followed	Frequency of Checking Posts
1	23	Male	Over 200	Food, gaming, travel	Very frequently
2	22	Female	Over 100	Beauty, fashion, travel	Very frequently
3	22	Female	3	Pets, travel	Very frequently
4	23	Male	9	Beauty, fashion, cars	Moderately
5	23	Female	2	Beauty, fashion	Frequently
6	23	Female	20 to 30	Beauty, fashion, travel	Frequently
7	23	Female	Over 500	Beauty, fashion, travel	Very frequently
8	24	Female	10	Fashion	Moderately
9	24	Female	2	Beauty, food, travel	Moderately
10	22	Female	Over 10	Beauty, food, pets	Frequently
11	25	Female	10	Beauty, fashion, travel	Very frequently
12	24	Female	Over 300	Beauty, fashion, food	Frequently
13	24	Male	2	Gadgets, gaming	Not frequently
14	24	Male	Over 20	Cars, gaming, social issues	Frequently
15	24	Female	3	Beauty, personal growth	Moderately
16	26	Female	1	Beauty, food, science	Moderately
17	23	Female	100	Beauty, fashion, travel	Frequently
18	24	Female	Over 100	Beauty, personal growth	Frequently
19	23	Male	Over 100	Cars	Moderately
20	26	Female	10	Beauty, food, social issues	Not frequently
21	23	Male	20	Cars, gaming	Moderately
22	24	Male	5	Food, gaming, social issues	Not frequently
23	13	Female	10 to 15	Beauty, fashion, gaming	Very frequently
24	24	Female	50	Fashion, food, travel	Moderately
25	23	Female	150	Beauty, gaming	Frequently

**Table 2** (continued)

26	23	Female	70	Beauty, fashion, travel	Very frequently
27	27	Female	10	Beauty, fashion	Moderately
28	24	Male	10	Food, social issues	Moderately
29	23	Female	50	Beauty, food, social issues	Moderately
30	22	Female	Over 50	Beauty, fashion, food	Moderately
31	28	Female	Over 50	Beauty, fashion	Not frequently
32	31	Male	5	Finance, gaming	Moderately
33	23	Female	50	Beauty, gaming, pets	Very frequently
34	27	Male	Over 100	Fashion, food, travel	Frequently
35	22	Male	30	Cars, gaming	Moderately
36	26	Female	40	Beauty, fashion, food	Moderately
37	23	Male	10	Gaming, social issues	Moderately
38	26	Male	Over 500	Cars, food, gaming	Very frequently
39	35	Female	8	Beauty, fashion, travel	Not frequently
40	27	Male	20	Beauty, fashion	Not frequently
41	38	Male	100	Gaming	Moderately
42	31	Male	10	Fashion, faming, travel	Very frequently
43	26	Female	10	Social issues	Frequently
44	25	Male	Over 20	Music, social issues, travel	Moderately
45	30	Male	5	Parenting, travel	Frequently
46	28	Female	10	Beauty, fashion, travel	Not frequently
47	27	Female	Over 50	Beauty, fashion	Moderately
48	32	Female	Over 30	Fashion, pets, travel	Not frequently
49	25	Female	Over 300	Beauty, fashion, gaming	Very frequently
50	28	Female	15	Fashion, food, travel	Moderately
51	28	Female	8	Arts, beauty, fashion	Frequently
52	27	Female	3	Food, travel	Frequently
53	23	Female	20 to 30	Beauty, social issues	Frequently
54	24	Male	100	Gaming, travel	Moderately
55	30	Male	2	Cars, food, sports	Moderately
56	28	Male	220	Photography	Frequently
57	27	Male	100	Fashion, pets, travel	Not frequently
58	27	Female	10	Parenting, travel	Not frequently

First, online influencers build distinct personal brands (Lee & Eastin, 2020) and draw identity boundaries that attract homogenous, like-minded people (McQuarrie et al., 2013). The segmentation of consumers thus occurs naturally as followers self-select into a “segment” by following a specific influencer whose content, style, and tastes they like and with whom they identify. The natural groupings of influencers’ follower networks increase *segment homogeneity*, defined as the degree to which members of a segment are similar to one another (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). For example, the influencer Mr. Bags has a targeted following of affluent consumers interested in luxury handbags; the food influencer Lucia Lee draws followers interested in simple dinner recipes. Such segmentation reflects the homophily principle (McPherson et al., 2001), which states that people with similar backgrounds, tastes, and interests tend to consume similar content or products (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). With the

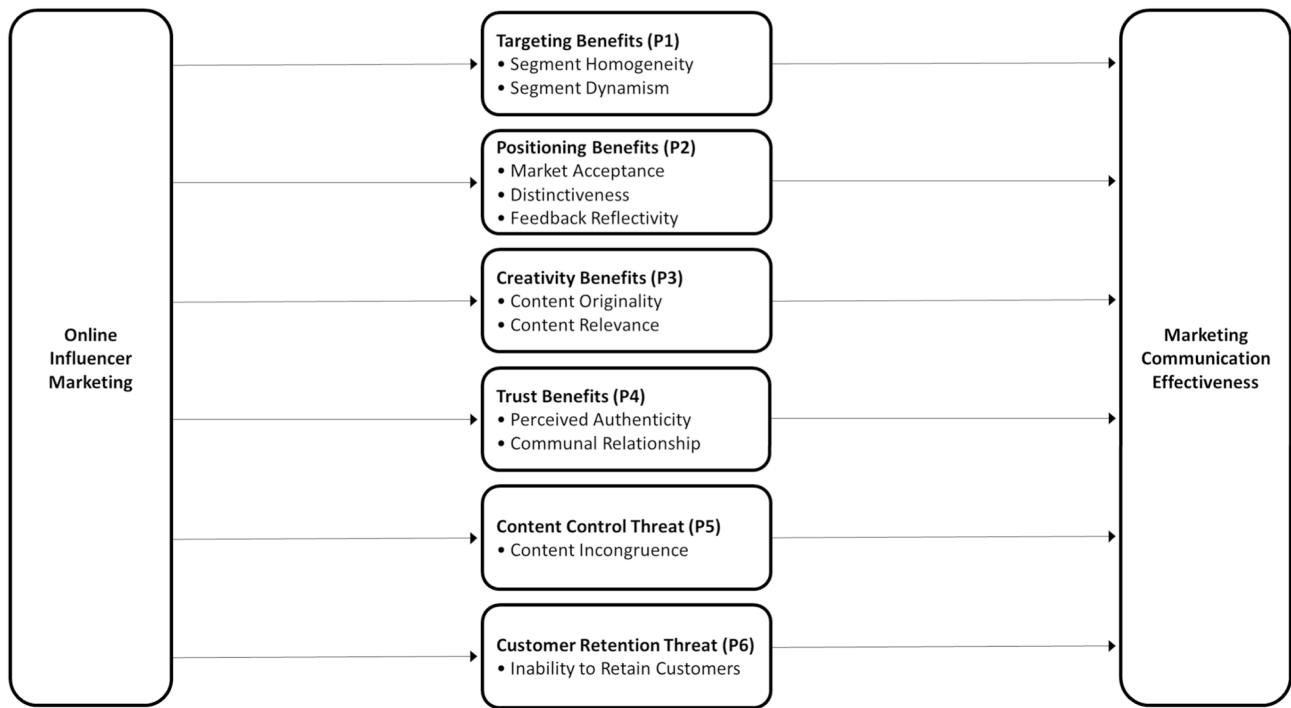
use of OIM, firms gain a new channel to reach homogeneous consumer segments. As the marketing director of a sports-wear brand (Practitioner 1) mentioned:

We want to build a sports apparel brand with a fashionable and healthy image, so we pick influencers with that image to publicize our products. These influencers have fans who have similar characteristics and are more likely to buy similar products.

The digital marketing manager of a cosmetics brand (Practitioner 2) shared a similar view:

As a cosmetics brand, we invest in beauty influencers, so the consumers these influencers reach are those who like and need cosmetics products. This allows us to target our consumer groups directly and precisely.





**Fig. 1** Effect of online influencer marketing on marketing communication effectiveness

Second, leveraging influencers' follower networks allows a firm to capture consumers' changing preferences. Traditional segmentation approaches tend to apply static segmentation variables, leaving them unable to identify when customer needs change (Parasuraman, 1997). With OIM, consumers control the content to which they are exposed, by dynamically following and unfollowing influencers (Phan & Godes, 2018), according to their spontaneous needs and interests. As the founder of a marketing agency (Practitioner 18) explained:

Influencers grow and their audience changes constantly. Some followers may leave them, and at the same time they can keep attracting new followers.

This point was echoed by the founder of a baby care products brand (Practitioner 20):

We need to keep looking for new customers because our existing customers' kids will outgrow our baby care products someday. Working with influencers is helpful in this regard because their followers change. A baby care influencer sees her followers come and go as their kids grow older. For us, working with this influencer makes sure our message reaches those people who really want to receive baby care information.

Thus, leveraging an influencer's follower network likely increases *segment dynamism*, defined as the degree to which a segment reflects consumers' actual, changing needs. By employing OIM, firms can reach dynamically changing consumer segments and match their needs in the moment.

Working with online influencers thus allows firms to leverage influencers' follower networks and gain access to their homogeneous, dynamically adapted consumer segments, which constitute the **targeting benefits** of OIM. By targeting influencers who can reach these segments, OIM complements the firm-led targeting approach to increase the chances that a firm can reach its desired consumer segments and generate favorable consumer responses.

**P1** The use of OIM allows firms to target consumer segments that exhibit high levels of (i) segment homogeneity and (ii) segment dynamism (**targeting benefits**), which enhances their marketing communication effectiveness.

### Leveraging influencers' personal positioning

A well-positioned brand that possesses a clear set of product or service attributes and occupies a distinct place in the minds of target consumers can maximize consumers'

perceived utility (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). In order to achieve this, a firm usually need to define a product market, assess key attributes for the product category, evaluate the importance of each attribute, and acquire information about how competing brands are positioned on these attributes (Kaul & Rao, 1995). We posit that OIM complements this firm-led positioning, allowing firms to leverage influencers' personal positioning to create, improve, or adapt the firms' brand-specific associations.

Influencers strive to build their personal brands by positioning themselves according to unique characteristics that distinguish them from other influencers (Lee & Eastin, 2020). Prior research suggests that personal brands, such as those of celebrities or well-known persons, serve as intangible resources that firms can strategically harvest to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kupfer et al., 2018; Thomson, 2006). Influencers manage the positioning of their personal brands by sharing posts, images, and stories on social media that are independent of any specific brand's strategic intervention, at their own cost. People choose to follow a particular influencer whose personal positioning is appealing, and then as a community, they form shared perceptions of the influencer's positioning, identity, and values (Berthon et al., 2009). According to social capital theory, such shared understanding or meaning constitutes valuable cognitive capital that can be leveraged to facilitate firm performance (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). With OIM, a firm enters into a type of brand alliance with influencers (Kupfer et al., 2018), so followers may transfer their shared understanding of the influencers' positioning to the brand. For example, by collaborating with Teesh Rosa, Zara's #iamdenim campaign evoked the impression that its products were more accessible than high-fashion clothing (Barker, 2021). Utilizing influencers' personal positioning to complement firms' overall positioning strategy may offer several benefits.

First, influencers' positioning tends to evoke high *market acceptance*, or high level of satisfaction among target consumers that merits its continued offering (Griffin & Page, 1996). Reflecting theories of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, the influencers who can develop a positioning that appeals to a group of followers get "selected" for survival, whereas those who fail to gain or sustain a following, due to their poor positioning strategy, ultimately leave the market. As the founder of a snacks brand (Practitioner 6) explained:

There is fierce competition among influencers, so they must make high-quality content to maintain their followers' attention.

The competitive environment serves as a selective force that supports influencers who have tapped a unique need and prompted a shared understanding of what their

positioning means among a relevant group of followers; it eliminates others. When a firm leverages the influencer's market-tested positioning, it likely creates or reinforces desired brand associations.

Second, most influencers focus on specific domains of interest and manage their content to reflect their precisely defined positioning. According to the founder of a marketing agency (Practitioner 18):

Influencers have distinctive styles. For example, some foodie influencers are food critics who know how to comment on the taste of dishes professionally, while some influencers portray a high-end lifestyle by sharing their experiences at pricey restaurants. There are also foodie influencers who are young, good-looking, and trendy. They are great for promoting new cafes or hip restaurants. I match them with different clients according to the clients' needs.

The *distinctiveness*, or the perceived uniqueness, of influencers' positioning (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) enables a firm to associate its brand with specific attributes (e.g., tasty, high-end, or trendy in the preceding comment). This benefit is consistent with prior literature suggesting that consumers' favorable perceptions about individual brands drive their evaluations of a brand alliance (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). The distinctiveness of an influencer's positioning facilitates a brand to achieve differentiated, favorable positioning for the brand (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). Firms may also establish a multidimensional image by working with diverse influencers. The marketing director of an ice cream brand (Practitioner 7) suggested:

Some influencers are really good at testing products and giving product reviews, so they are great for reinforcing our products' great taste and quality. Some influencers are family-oriented and have a group of mommy followers, so they can help position our brand as a family product. Other influencers are good at leading trends so they can help us position as a trendy ice cream brand.

By working with a portfolio of influencers with distinctive positioning, firms can imbue their own brand with unique elements and thereby improve their positions in dynamically changing attribute spaces. As the founder of an apparel brand (Practitioner 19) noted:

We work with edgy, cool fashion influencers to portray a "cool girl" positioning for our brand. We also like to work with influencers who love traveling and have unique hobbies, which adds authenticity to our brand. I think doing so helps us create a more real, three-dimensional positioning.

Third, influencers' positioning evokes high *feedback reflectivity*, defined as the ability to reflect whether a positioning works for an endorsed brand or product. Provided that firms have performance measurement routines in place to timely track followers' responses to influencers' posts, firms can evaluate the effects of different positioning strategies of the selected influencers. Practitioners thus experiment with different types of influencers, as revealed by the marketing director of an ice cream brand (Practitioner 7):

We initially promoted a foreign brand positioning and worked with influencers who reflect Western lifestyles. This positioning did not work well though, so the brand shifted toward emphasizing quality, family, and trendiness brand associations.

The founder of an apparel brand (Practitioner 19) also shared:

At one point, we tried working with fashion influencers who portray perfect, glamorous looks and lifestyle. But those campaigns totally failed, so we know this is not the right angle for our brand.

Through this process, firms experiment with alternative positioning strategies, in a real market, at a relatively low cost. In this sense, OIM serves as a customer-driven, real-time brand innovation lab that enables firms to test and select their best brand positioning. Prior literature of brand positioning recognized the problem of incongruence between what managers intend consumers to perceive and what consumers actually perceive, and the difficulty of isolating the impact of positioning on bottom-line measures (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). OIM provides a possible solution to these, due to its relative ease of experimenting with alternative positioning strategies. We note the importance of firms' ability to establish proper performance measurement routines to realize this feedback reflectivity benefit of OIM.

Taken together, leveraging the personal positioning from the portfolios of influencers enables firms to imbue their brand positioning with market-accepted and distinctive elements that are responsive to customer feedback. We refer to this complementarity in improving firm-led positioning as the *positioning benefits* of OIM.

**P2** The use of OIM allows firms to leverage influencer positioning that exhibits high levels of (i) market acceptance, (ii) distinctiveness, and (iii) feedback reflectivity (**positioning benefits**), which enhances their marketing communication effectiveness.

## Leveraging influencers' communication content

Influencers are content creators. Each influencer acts as his or her own self-contained creative agency and is capable of engaging followers by producing quality content with various tools, including text, images, and videos. With OIM, firms empower selected influencers to participate in the creative process of generating marketing communications on social media. According to social capital theory, "much valuable information is socially embedded" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 250). Influencers' connections with their followers are important sources of their unique and in-depth insights. By leveraging influencers' content, firms essentially gain access to their tacit knowledge about what to talk about with followers and how, which constitutes an important resource for the firms. By leveraging these insights and content, firms can attain the following benefits.

Brand-related influencer-generated content (IGC), defined as sponsored content about a product, service, or brand created by the influencer, usually exhibits creativity, because its execution is both original and relevant to target consumers (Rosengren et al., 2020). Firstly, IGC tends to be *original*, or novel, divergent, and unexpected (Rosengren et al., 2020). In contrast with firm-generated content created by a few marketing professionals, IGC leverages the content creation capability of the group of influencers. Numbers breed creativity (Schreier et al., 2012), so OIM increases the likelihood of novel content. Moreover, influencers can introduce their own interpretations of brand messages or demonstrate new uses for the promoted products, without ignoring key features the firm wants to convey. As the digital marketing manager of a cosmetics brand (Practitioner 2) suggested:

We control the main direction of content, such as by asking influencers to communicate our campaign's slogan. But for the content details, such as how the influencers interpret the slogan or interpret the product usages, we let influencers freely create. We respect influencers' diverse opinions, and focus more on cocreating content with the influencers, because limiting what they say will restrict their creativity.

Because influencers are market-based, not subject to firm hierarchies, they may be less mentally rigid or organizationally constrained in their content and positioning decisions (Pavlika & Vaughan, 2017; Schreier et al., 2012). They can integrate their vision and style into personalized content that features original perspectives and creative twists, rather than repeating firms' official communications. As indicated by the brand manager of a feminine care brand (Practitioner 4):

Influencers can use their personal perspectives to create very original content that their followers like, rather than being limited to official content created by

us. We once asked influencers on TikTok to use fun, interesting ways to convey our new product's functions and positioning. They created short videos with humorous plots in their own dialects, which generated millions of views and shares in just 8 days.

Furthermore, IGC generally is more *relevant* to target consumers, such that it seems useful, interesting, and worthy of their attention (Schumann et al., 2014). Through frequent interactions with followers and experiments with different kinds of content, influencers learn followers' likes and dislikes and the kinds of content they seek. From a social capital perspective, ongoing relationships with followers create and sustain the influencer's knowledge relevance (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Influencers also carefully devise content to avoid jeopardizing their connections with followers, such as due to a mismatched sponsored post. They tailor their content to resonate with the attitudes and interests of their followers to maintain the connections (Belk, 2013). Our consumer respondents recognize this effort:

This online influencer provides a lot of content that suits my taste and meets my needs, so to continue obtaining these contents, I pay attention to this influencer. (Consumer 49)

Influencers have a close relationship with their community; they cannot risk this by overwhelming the community with meaningless content. They have to consider what their community likes or is interested in. They must also be sensitive in selecting the right brand or product. (Consumer 16)

This benefit is analogous to the outcomes that firms pursue when they adopt a customer-centric perspective (Palmatier et al., 2019). Influencers put their followers' interests first, and they aim to understand and satisfy their needs with targeted, relevant content. Thus they might embed product promotions in situations related to consumers' preferences, as the new media operations manager of a healthy food brand (Practitioner 12) suggested:

Influencers are very familiar with the kind of content that their followers like and can integrate their followers' preferred content with branded content. For example, some influencers we worked with can integrate information about our food products into their tweets about post-workout meals that their followers are interested in.

Because influencers can post content that connects the brands' products with consumers' goals, evoking higher content relevance, IGC may be perceived as less intrusive than traditional advertisements, which should enhance

consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses to that content (Jung, 2017; Varnali, 2012).

Therefore, working with online influencers allows firms to leverage influencers' communication content that is characterized by high originality and relevance. These **creativity benefits** of OIM, as we call them, should lead to greater communication effectiveness.

**P3** The use of OIM allows firms to leverage influencer content that exhibits high levels of (i) content originality and (ii) content relevance (**creativity benefits**), which enhances their marketing communication effectiveness.

### Leveraging follower trust in influencers

Social capital theory suggests that a key source of social capital accruing to an actor's social relations is high levels of trust (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). When trust is present in relationships, people are more willing to engage in social exchange and cooperative interaction (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). As consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional marketing tactics, the trust that influencers earn from followers constitutes a valuable resource that firms can capitalize on. Influencers generate trust among followers because they appear more authentic than marketing firms or brands. *Authenticity* results from a perception that a person behaves according to his or her true self (Moulard et al., 2015). To spark perceptions of authenticity, influencers must demonstrate a genuine passion for a specific topic (Audrezet et al., 2020), such that their content and social media activities appear driven by their intrinsic motivations, not commercial goals. For example, the fitness influencer Ewa Chodakowska's love and enthusiasm for fitness is clear in her Instagram content, and millions of loyal followers go to her for inspiration and advice. With their content, influencers establish their individuality and publicly display their interests and tastes. They also interact with followers in their own words, giving the impression that they genuinely enjoy and are immersed in the communication process (Jun & Yi, 2020). Even when their posts contain commercial mentions, consumers generally do not perceive the influencers or the content as inauthentic; rather, they believe that the appearance of products and brands serves to validate the influencers' taste leadership (McQuarrie et al., 2013). According to the marketing director of a sportswear brand (Practitioner 1):

Everyone knows that traditional advertising like TV commercials is just advertising. But the recommendations made by influencers feel more self-motivated, real, and trustworthy.

Influencers are also authentic to the extent that they share honest, unbiased opinions. Celebrity endorsers read scripted



lines, whereas influencers offer greater credibility because they write honest reviews, which are not always positive (Gerdeman, 2019). By sending free samples to beauty influencers but also giving them the freedom to provide unbiased reviews, Sephora fosters genuineness that consumers appreciate.

Consumers also consider influencers trustworthy because their relationships with followers are more communal than those with brands. Prior work has conceptualized consumer–brand relationships along a communal–exchange continuum (Aggarwal, 2004; Clark & Mills, 1993). *Communal relationships* resemble friendships, in which people take care of others' needs and have a genuine concern for their well-being; *exchange relationships* are transactional and quid pro quo in nature (Aggarwal, 2004). In OIM, followers' sense of connectedness with influencers can be heightened if influencers frequently post new content to maintain and engage them. In posts, influencers encourage followers to live vicariously through them, “participate” in their day-to-day activities, and interact through comments and replies. This form of involvement makes followers feel as if they know the influencer intimately (Escalas & Bettman, 2017), which prompts strong relational bonds (De Veirman et al., 2017). In consumers' words:

Influencers are not distant from their followers; we feel very close to them. They spend a lot of time answering followers' messages and interacting with them, and you look at them and feel like you know them personally. (Consumer 50)

I think online influencers have close relationships to their community. They often share about their real life or real self—at least that is what they try to project. They show their vulnerable side, talk about what is going well or wrong in their life, and share their concerns. Based on that they can build trust and kind of a friendship relationship with the followers. I feel much more related to and have more trust in them. (Consumer 16)

Moreover, when followers witness their favorite influencers become successful, they may feel like part of the success. For example, followers of fashion influencer Arielle Charnas celebrate with her whenever she gains another 100,000 followers. Through these relational processes, consumers' relationships with influencers become more communal than their relationships with brands. Although certain brand relationships incorporate degrees of communality, their commercial nature is inherent too (Goodwin, 1996).

Taken together, because consumers perceive influencers as authentic and have communal relationships with them, they are likely to trust influencers. When firms work with influencers, such *trust benefits* of OIM are likely to transfer

to brand-related outcomes to enhance marketing communication effectiveness.

**P4** The use of OIM allows firms to leverage influencers' (i) authenticity perception among consumers and (ii) communal relationships with consumers (**trust benefits**), which enhances their marketing communication effectiveness.

### The potential threats of OIM

An inherent tension in OIM is that it provides firms with the creativity benefits of leveraging influencers' content, but it also creates content control problems, due to sourcing from a group of influencers. As independent content creators with considerable creative freedom, influencers' quality varies. Some influencers produce IGC that suffers *content incongruence*, defined as the extent to which an IGC is dissonant with the official brand message (Berthon et al., 2008). Even if the message might be positive, the incongruence with the official brand message can create confusion (Berthon et al., 2008). Consistent messages can establish an integrated brand memory network that is strongly associated with the brand's core concept, so it produces synergized communication effects (Chang, 2018). In traditional mass media settings over which firms have complete control, such as television and print ads, they can attain consistency effects, but OIM transfers control away from firms. According to the CMO of a skin care brand (Practitioner 5):

When you make a TV commercial, there is one message and the message is set. But if you use 3,500 influencers, then you essentially have 3,500 messages. So how to systematically manage and integrate so many messages at the same time is a challenge for brands.

When consumers receive inconsistent IGC that deviates from the official brand message, they may doubt the credibility of the source or the accuracy of the product claim (Berthon et al., 2008), potentially harming the brand's communication effectiveness. We refer to this as the *content control threat* of OIM.

**P5** The use of OIM brings content incongruence (**content control threat**), which dampens marketing communication effectiveness.

With OIM, consumers likely sense initial confidence in an endorsed brand when their trusted influencers advocate for the brand. Essentially, consumers' trust in the influencers transfers to the brands (Stewart, 2003). However, whether a firm can maintain that initial brand trust and convert it into brand loyalty is beyond the capability of a single OIM campaign. In a consumer respondent's words:

In the minds of consumers, an influencer recommends a product because he has used it and found it practical. So, we are willing to try the product. But whether I will continue to buy it is related to many other things. (Consumer 21)

Several practitioners also suggest that OIM is valuable for acquiring new customers but is not a direct tool for retaining existing customers. As the marketing director of a sports-wear brand (Practitioner 1) revealed:

The followers follow an influencer and trust her recommendations. But, to get from someone who doesn't know about my brand, to someone who tries our products, to someone who loves my brand and makes repurchase is a long process. It's not as simple as just converting influencers' followers to become my brand's fans.

The brand manager of a feminine care brand (Practitioner 4) concurred:

One main objective of OIM is customer acquisition. We utilize the power of influencers to bring more exposure to our products and to let more people know about us. Influencers can help our brand obtain attention from followers in a short period of time. Afterwards, the brand needs to find ways to retain the consumers itself.

This inability to retain customers represents OIM's **customer retention threat**, which limits firms' ability to achieve long-term communication outcomes such as brand loyalty. This is analogous to the role of salesperson in consumer-firm relationships, in which there is limited direct association between trust of the salesperson and anticipated future interaction with the firm because "long-term intentions are driven primarily by expectations about the supplier firm" (Doney & Cannon, 1997, p. 42).

We suggest that firm-led behaviors are more important than influencer-led behaviors for the retention of customers. Prior work has suggested various ways to increase customer retention, such as ensuring customer satisfaction with the brand's offerings, sustaining competitiveness of the brand's value proposition (Gustafsson et al., 2005), engaging with customers through brand communities (Adjei et al., 2010), and managing loyalty programs (Palmatier et al., 2019). Therefore, to maintain the transferred trust from influencers and elevate it to brand loyalty, firms must invest in continued firm-led relationship management efforts. Firms aiming for retaining customers and building customer loyalty must be cautious about OIM's limited capacity in this regard.

**P6** The use of OIM brings an inability to retain customers for the brand (**customer retention threat**), which dampens marketing communication effectiveness.

## OIM management strategies

The extent to which firms can realize the benefits and circumvent the threats of OIM depends on firms' employment of specific management strategies. Online influencers are external to the firm, so firms need to manage them in a way that aligns with the firm's goals. Ouchi (1979) proposes broad relationship management strategies available to firms: Select actors "who fit its needs exactly" (p. 840) or else design a system to instruct, monitor, and evaluate them. In line with extant governance typologies (e.g., Heide, 1994; Wathne & Heide, 2000), we suggest that firms can (1) *select* an influencer who fits the firm's marketing needs, (2) *monitor* the influencer's content creation process, and (3) *measure* the performance of OIM. In addition, the unique features of OIM also mean firms can (4) *repurpose* the influencer's content in firm-led marketing communications. These four strategies—from influencer selection, process monitoring, performance measurement, to content repurposing—represent the managerially relevant sequence of actions that helps to translate firms' OIM efforts into greater marketing communication effectiveness.

## Influencer selection

Influencer selection is the first, and an important step, to effective OIM management. *Selection* refers to screening and identifying influencers who possess certain traits that indicate their "fit" with the firm's goals (Heide, 1994; Wathne & Heide, 2000; Wathne et al., 2018). Prior OIM research suggests that brands might select influencers based on their abilities to build a sizable network (De Veirman et al., 2017), interact with their network (Ki & Kim, 2019), post frequently (Stephen et al., 2017), and deliver content values (Hughes et al., 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Brands also might prefer influencers with certain favorable traits (e.g., sincere, authentic, credible; Audrezet et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019) or whose personal positioning is congruent with that of the brand (Breves et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2019). Firms with distinct OIM goals might adopt different influencer selection criteria, but the overall selection strategy implies that a firm can identify a "bundle of partner traits" (Stovel & Fountain, 2009, p. 505) that then determine each influencer's fit with its marketing efforts.



Only when firms select influencers whose audience, positioning, and abilities provide a good fit with their brands could firms reap the benefits of OIM to enhance marketing communication effectiveness. For example, firms need to select influencers whose audience aligns with the firms' desired targets, and whose personal positioning aligns with that of the brand, to realize the targeting and positioning benefits of OIM, respectively. Careful influencer selection can also resolve the inherent tensions in OIM. Selecting influencers who possess the right skills and motivations for the focal tasks allows firms to not only reap creativity benefits of OIM, but also ensure that the IGC aligns with the firms' central message to reduce content incongruence. Likewise, selecting influencers who provide a good fit with the brand allows the trust embedded in influencer-follower networks to be more readily transferred to brand-related outcomes, while also alleviates customer retention threat when firms repeatedly collaborate with these influencers to maintain the transferred trust.

### Process monitoring

After a firm selects and mandates an influencer, it must monitor his or her content creation process. With *monitoring*, the firm adopts strategies to direct and supervise the processes through which influencers are expected to produce the desired campaign outcomes (Heide et al., 2007). It often involves guidelines and procedures to monitor influencers on which activities are to be performed and how they should be performed. For example, the firm might share a content brief highlighting the campaign's objectives, key messages, and deliverables with the influencer to outline its expectations. As the founder of an apparel company (Practitioner 17) explained:

We are very careful with how we draft the brief, so influencers will not say things that are not aligned with my brand. It will include our brand's unique features, the key selling points, and information about the product like the fabric and cutting.

Requiring approval before the influencer can publish the post represents another form of commonly accepted monitoring strategy, to ensure that the influencer does not provide wrong, sensitive, nor illegal information (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Too much monitoring may be perceived as intrusive (Heide et al., 2007) and can constrain influencers' creative freedom; however, prudent monitoring of the influencer's content creation process is crucial for balancing the benefits and threats associated with leveraging influencer content. Specifically, monitoring helps to ensure that the influencer will generate content that is original and relevant to the target audience, thus allowing the firm to reap creativity

benefits. At the same time, it minimizes potential content incongruence by ensuring that the influencer will provide appropriate content.

### Performance measurement

*Measurement* refers to measuring and evaluating the performance of a select influencer and his or her content (Heide et al., 2007). Depending on the goal of an OIM campaign, the firm can track different performance metrics. For instance, firms can measure the lift in awareness by tracking reach, engagement (e.g., likes, comments, shares, mentions), sentiments, follower growth, press and media, and website traffic. Whereas to gauge OIM's effectiveness in driving direct responses, firms can track sales, signups, click-throughs, and downloads depending on the product or service.

This emphasis on actual outcomes can enhance influencers' attributions of causality and motivation to perform (Wathne & Heide, 2000). It can also help firms identify which influencers and content work or not, and thus inform future OIM decisions relating to influencer selection and content management. For example, firms can remove ineffective content and retain more successful versions to inspire other influencers. As explained by the CEO of a skincare brand (Practitioner 15):

When you do influencer marketing at scale, it is inevitable that some influencers you work with don't yield very good results. The key here is how companies can quickly test and experiment, identify influencers whose positioning can bring high ROI, and replicate what works to brief others.

In addition, to reap the feedback reflectivity benefit of OIM, firms must establish timely performance measurement routines to evaluate the effects of different positioning strategies of the selected influencers. Only by closely tracking performance metrics and followers' feedback on influencers' posts can firms determine what positioning element works or not.

### Content repurposing

Finally, *repurposing* involves reusing and integrating influencers' content in firm-led marketing communications (Backaler, 2018). With performance measurement, the firm can learn which OIM content elicits favorable response among its target consumers, then reuse that content in a different manner or to target a different audience. Firms can repurpose successful influencer content on other media channels, such as brand-owned website, social media page, online shop, email communications, or even paid social media ads. As an example, if an influencer did a photo shoot

for a brand on Instagram, some of those photographs could be repurposed (or reused) as photographs for digital ads. The founder of an apparel brand (Practitioner 17) shared:

We often reuse influencer content that worked really well on our online shop. For example, an influencer might look really good wearing our wide-legged jeans with trendy sneakers. Then we would include the influencer's photo or video on our online shop to help my customers understand that our products can be trendy too.

Repurposing thus allows the firm to make use of creative content from influencers in its other firm-led marketing communications to enhance the creativity of the firm's overall communications. It also allows the firm to leverage and incorporate influencers' personal positioning to enrich the firm's overall brand positioning. With proper repurposing strategies, the firm not only amplifies the reach of the original IGC, but also adds authenticity and social proof to various brand communication efforts, as well as steers the firm's communications around what is proven to work among target audiences.

### Avenues for further research

In this section, we detail some important gaps between OIM in practice and existing research. We suggest avenues for research in four broad aspects of OIM—*influencer selection*, *content design*, *performance measurement*, and *integrated communications*—which largely relate to the OIM management strategies discussed above. Table 3 presents a summary of prior OIM literature, and Table 4 lists the suggested research directions.

#### Influencer selection

To understand who, among an ever-expanding pool of influencers, to work with, prior studies suggest several useful screening criteria. Specifically, influencers might be selected on the basis of their network characteristics, such as numbers of followers and followees (De Veirman et al., 2017; Valsesia et al., 2020); credibility, in terms of their attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Hughes et al., 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020); perceived personality, reflected by sincerity and authenticity perceptions (Audrezet et al., 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2020); or brand fit (Breves et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2019). Yet in practice, marketers also look at other factors—such as influencers' costs, network dynamics, and qualities. Cost clearly is an important consideration, but no study, to the best of our knowledge, has examined OIM costs in terms of effectiveness, elasticities, or what constitutes a fair price to pay for a certain engagement goal. A lack of access to influencer

cost data might explain the rarity of such research, but as marketing activities come under substantial accountability pressures, managers need detailed information about the effects of OIM spending.

Influencers' follower segments may vary in terms of dynamism. Dynamic changes in an influencer's network, such as increasing numbers of followers, changes in follower composition (e.g., demographics, interests, homogeneity), and trends in followers' engagement activities (e.g., likes, comments), all provide valuable insights for influencer selection practices. Yet, extant research has rarely taken a dynamic perspective in assessing these influencer characteristics. Moreover, additional research could leverage advanced techniques to examine influencers' quality. For example, researchers might trace influencers' posts and interactions with followers, then use text mining with machine learning to extract the influencers' personality traits (e.g., humor, confidence, down-to-earth) and the follower networks' degree of homogeneity, closeness, or trust. They could also code engagement quality, such as whether followers inquire about the promoted products or how readily the influencer converses with followers. With information about these qualitative attributes of the influencers and their follower networks, researchers can test brand fit or match-up hypotheses too (Torres et al., 2019).

As marketers call for long-term collaborations with influencers, future research could examine whether repeated selection of the same influencers is indeed beneficial for the firms. On the one hand, firms can increase the intensity of their collaboration with selected influencers to strengthen the brand alliance and alleviate customer retention threat. As the founder of an apparel company (Practitioner 19) described:

We collaborate a lot with an influencer called Nikki, as her fans think she looks best when she wears our brand, and our brand's fans think our clothes look best when worn by her! We see us as a long-term alliance. When our brand appears on Nikki's posts once in a while, her fans will think that she still loves our brand and that the brand is still "hot".

On the other hand, strengthening the brand alliance might undermine the influencer's perceived authenticity as he or she might appear too closely affiliated with the brand. Researchers could examine such tradeoffs, in particular, on how a tactic may help realize a benefit or circumvent a threat, while at the same time hurt the realization of another benefit or intensify another threat.

Another research avenue is at the OIM campaign level, as marketers are increasingly designing integrated campaigns that combine multiple categories of influencers to achieve different firm objectives. For example, firms may adopt a concentrated approach and mandate multiple specialist

**Table 3** Online influencer marketing empirical research

Authors	Research Contexts	Key Constructs	Methodology	Theory	Key Findings
Breves et al. (2019)	Experiment and survey about Instagram influencers	Influencer-brand fit <sup>A</sup> ; parasocial relationships <sup>MO</sup> ; perceived credibility <sup>O</sup> ; brand evaluation <sup>O</sup> ; behavioral intentions <sup>O</sup>	Online experiment; survey	Social adaptation; attribution theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencer-brand fit affects the influencer's credibility, which has a positive effect on brand evaluations and behavioral intentions</li> <li>• Low levels of parasocial relationships enhance the impact of influencer-brand fit</li> <li>• Influencers with more followers are more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular</li> <li>• If the influencer follows very few accounts, it can negatively impact popular influencers' likeability</li> <li>• Influencers with high numbers of followers are not ideal for promoting divergent products</li> <li>• Sponsorship disclosure (vs. no disclosure) negatively affects brand attitudes through enhanced ad recognition, which activates ad skepticism and negatively affects the influencer's credibility</li> <li>• Source credibility and brand attitude are only negatively affected when the influencer uses a one-sided (vs. two-sided) message</li> </ul>
De Veirman et al. (2017)	Experiments about Instagram influencers	Number of followers <sup>A</sup> ; perceived popularity <sup>ME</sup> ; opinion leadership <sup>ME</sup> ; number of followers <sup>MO</sup> ; product divergence <sup>MO</sup> ; likeability <sup>O</sup>	Online experiments	Heuristic processing; naïve theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencers with more followers are more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular</li> <li>• If the influencer follows very few accounts, it can negatively impact popular influencers' likeability</li> <li>• Influencers with high numbers of followers are not ideal for promoting divergent products</li> <li>• Sponsorship disclosure (vs. no disclosure) negatively affects brand attitudes through enhanced ad recognition, which activates ad skepticism and negatively affects the influencer's credibility</li> <li>• Source credibility and brand attitude are only negatively affected when the influencer uses a one-sided (vs. two-sided) message</li> </ul>
De Veirman and Hudders (2020)	Experiment about Instagram influencers	Sponsorship disclosure <sup>A</sup> ; advertising recognition <sup>ME</sup> ; skepticism <sup>ME</sup> ; source credibility <sup>ME</sup> ; message sidedness <sup>MO</sup> ; brand attitude <sup>O</sup>	Experiment	Persuasion knowledge model; reactance theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsorship disclosure (vs. no disclosure) negatively affects brand attitudes through enhanced ad recognition, which activates ad skepticism and negatively affects the influencer's credibility</li> <li>• Source credibility and brand attitude are only negatively affected when the influencer uses a one-sided (vs. two-sided) message</li> </ul>
Evans et al. (2018)	Experiment about Instagram influencers	Sponsorship disclosure language <sup>A</sup> ; ad recognition <sup>ME</sup> ; brand attitude <sup>O</sup> ; purchase intention <sup>O</sup> ; sharing intention <sup>O</sup>	Experiment	Persuasion knowledge model; reactance theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosure language featuring "Paid Ad" positively influences ad recognition, which interacts with participants' memory of a disclosure and mediates the effect of disclosure language on attitude toward the brand and sharing intentions</li> </ul>

**Table 3** (continued)

Authors	Research Contexts	Key Constructs	Methodology	Theory	Key Findings
Hughes et al. (2019)	Sponsored influencer posts from Motherhood	Blogger expertise <sup>A</sup> ; hedonic value <sup>A</sup> ; campaign incentive <sup>A</sup> ; campaign intent (awareness vs. trial) <sup>MO</sup> ; platform type (blogs vs. Facebook) <sup>MO</sup> ; post engagement <sup>O</sup>	Heckman selection model; experiment	Elaboration likelihood model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For sponsored posts on blogs, high blogger expertise is more effective when the advertising intent is to raise awareness (vs. increase trial). However, source expertise fails to drive engagement for sponsored posts on Facebook</li> <li>• For sponsored posts on Facebook, posts high in hedonic content are more effective when the advertising intent is to increase trial (vs. raise awareness)</li> <li>• Campaign incentives increase (decrease) engagement on blogs (Facebook)</li> <li>• Attractive, prestigious, expert, informative, and interactive influencer contents positively affect influencers' taste and opinion leadership, which in turn influence consumers' desire to mimic the influencers, WOM, and purchase intentions</li> <li>• Consumers report more favorable attitudes toward a high-sincerity influencer, and envy is a significant moderator that enhances attitudes toward a low-sincerity influencer</li> <li>• High-sincerity influencers are more effective in eliciting favorable brand attitudes from consumers when endorsing a utilitarian (vs. symbolic) product</li> </ul>
Ki and Kim (2019)	Online survey with social media users	Attractiveness <sup>A</sup> ; prestige <sup>A</sup> ; expertise <sup>A</sup> ; informative value <sup>A</sup> ; interactivity <sup>A</sup> ; taste leadership <sup>ME</sup> ; opinion leadership <sup>ME</sup> ; desire to mimic <sup>ME</sup> ; WOM <sup>O</sup> ; purchase intentions <sup>O</sup>	Online survey; structural equation modeling	Influence framework	
Lee and Eastin (2020)	Experiment about Instagram influencers	Perceived sincerity <sup>A</sup> ; consumer envy <sup>MO</sup> ; product type <sup>MO</sup> ; attitude towards influencer <sup>O</sup> ; brand attitude <sup>O</sup> ; purchase intention <sup>O</sup>	Online experiment	Brand personality; schema theory	

Table 3 (continued)

Authors	Research Contexts	Key Constructs	Methodology	Theory	Key Findings
Lou and Yuan (2019)	Online survey with social media users	Informative value <sup>A</sup> ; trustworthiness <sup>A</sup> ; attractiveness <sup>A</sup> ; similarity to followers <sup>A</sup> ; perceived trust <sup>O</sup> ; brand awareness <sup>O</sup> ; purchase intentions <sup>O</sup>	Online survey; partial least squares path modeling	Source credibility; advertising content value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The informative value of influencer content and the influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity to followers positively affect followers' trust in influencers' branded posts, which affect brand awareness and purchase intentions</li> <li>•Brand attitudes and purchase intentions are influenced by the digital influencer's attractiveness and the congruence between the influencer and the brand</li> </ul>
Torres et al. (2019)	Online survey with followers of online influencers	Influencer-brand fit <sup>A</sup> ; attractiveness <sup>A</sup> ; consumer attitudes <sup>O</sup> ; purchase intentions <sup>O</sup>	Online survey; structural equation modeling	Meaning transfer model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Following fewer others, conditional on having a substantial number of followers, has a positive effect on a social media user's perceived autonomy and influence</li> <li>•Greater perceived influence affects content engagement (e.g., likes, retweets)</li> <li>•Perceived attractiveness, similarity, procedural fairness, and interpersonal fairness positively affect the strength of followers' parasocial relationships with influencers, which mediate the effects on followers' interests in influencer-promoted products</li> </ul>
Valsesia et al. (2020)	Twitter posts; lab experiments about influencers	Number of followers <sup>A</sup> ; number of followers <sup>MO</sup> ; perceived autonomy <sup>ME</sup> ; perceived influence <sup>ME</sup> ; engagement <sup>O</sup>	Correlational study; lab experiments	Heuristic processing	
Yuan and Lou (2020)	Online survey with social media users	Perceived credibility (expertise; trustworthiness; attractiveness; similarity) <sup>A</sup> ; perceived fairness (distributive, informational; interpersonal; procedural) <sup>A</sup> ; parasocial relationship <sup>ME</sup> ; product interest <sup>O</sup>	Online survey; structural equation modeling	Source credibility; communication justice	

Notes: <sup>A</sup> = antecedent; <sup>ME</sup> = mediator; <sup>MO</sup> = moderator; <sup>O</sup> = outcome

**Table 4** Avenues for further research

OIM Strategic Focus	Research—Practice Gaps	Research Opportunities
Influencer Selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior studies suggest some useful criteria for selecting influencers, such as influencers' network characteristics (e.g., number of followers, followees), perceived credibility (e.g., attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise), personality (e.g., sincerity, authenticity), and influencer–brand fit</li> <li>• Firms consider other influencer factors, such as costs, network dynamics, and qualitative attributes</li> <li>• Integrated OIM campaigns combine multiple categories of influencers to achieve different campaign objectives</li> <li>• Some firms work with virtual influencers to promote their offerings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the cost of OIM to understand its effectiveness or elasticities, or what is a fair price to pay for a certain engagement goal</li> <li>• Study dynamic changes in influencers' networks, such as changes in follower size, follower composition (e.g., demographics, interests, homogeneity), or followers' engagement (e.g., likes, comments)</li> <li>• Trace influencers' posts and interactions with followers to extract the influencers' personality measures, quality of engagement, and relational attributes of the follower network</li> <li>• Explore how a tactic may help realize a benefit or circumvent a threat of OIM, while at the same time hurt the realization of another benefit or intensify another threat</li> <li>• Examine how firms can effectively combine influencers, content formats, and platforms, as well as design the timing and sequencing of these elements, into an integrated OIM campaign</li> <li>• Explore potential fraud, such as forged engagement data, or reputational risks of influencers</li> <li>• Examine consumers' perceptions of virtual influencers to understand whether they are perceived as more objective and trustworthy, or else less interactive and engaging</li> <li>• Delineate fundamental characteristics of various forms of content (e.g., short videos, livestreaming) and their effects on consumer responses and OIM outcomes</li> <li>• Quantify video and audio properties to help firms gauge what makes for good content</li> <li>• Examine the interplay of content formats and strategic factors (e.g., product/service type) to provide insights into when a certain format works best</li> <li>• Delineate characteristics of different types of social media platforms and determine which types of content work best for a particular platform</li> <li>• Measure OIM outcomes with various engagement data, social media traffic, campaign hashtags, and sentiment data</li> <li>• Track sales conversions using links embedded in OIM posts, platform-specific metrics, influencer-specific coupons, and promotional codes</li> <li>• Incorporate cost and stock market data to examine other evaluative marketing metrics beyond sales, such as profit and firm value</li> <li>• Identify OIM effects on novel outcomes, such as brand image renewal, brand extension success, product innovativeness, and new product success</li> <li>• Study how firms can more effectively repurpose IGC, such as when and where to repurpose it, to maximize downstream effects</li> <li>• Explore the effects of integrating OIM with firms' customer relationship management as a way to alleviate customer retention threat associated with OIM</li> <li>• Investigate how firms can plan the timing of and optimally coordinate OIM with other media types at different stages of the consumer decision journey</li> </ul>
Content Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior studies examine the impact of content values (e.g., informative and hedonic values) and unique features (e.g., campaign incentives, sponsorship disclosure) of brand-related IGC</li> <li>• Influencers also use rich, diverse content formats beyond text and images, such as short videos and live streaming</li> </ul>	
Performance Measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior works evaluate OIM effectiveness by measuring participants' perceptions of influencers (e.g., likeability, credibility, trust, attitude) or brand-level outcomes (e.g., attitude, awareness, purchase intentions), as well as using objective data from field studies (e.g., engagement metrics, product sales)</li> <li>• Firms increasingly use other advanced metrics to measure the ROI of OIM campaigns</li> <li>• Firms use OIM for a variety of novel purposes, such as to reenergize stagnant brand images, reach new target segments, or serve as a product innovation lab</li> <li>• Firms repurpose IGC on other channels (e.g., own website, own social media accounts, email campaigns, offline advertisements, paid ads on social media) to amplify its reach</li> <li>• Firms also can combine OIM with other new and traditional media to realize cross-media synergy</li> </ul>	
Integrated Communications		



influencers to post content across multiple platforms simultaneously. Firms may also opt for a staged approach, where they first select a few mega-influencers to boost awareness, then a large group of micro-influencers and specialist influencers to diffuse the information. Noting the complexity of these campaigns, it appears that the number of influencers to use in a single campaign may depend on factors such as the campaign's objectives and choice of platforms. Moreover, a clear understanding of how to combine influencers, content formats, and platforms effectively, as well as design the timing and sequencing of these elements, would provide valuable insights for firms.

To further our understanding about the potential dark sides of OIM, more research could investigate agency problems that may arise in the relationship between the brand and influencers. From an agency perspective, OIM can be considered a contractual arrangement between a brand (i.e., the principal) and an online influencer (i.e., the agent). Information asymmetry and motivation problems occur because principals and agents have differing goals and desires, and it is infeasible for the principal to completely verify the agent's performance (Gu et al., 2010; Mishra et al., 1998). For example, influencers may falsify their engagement data to meet brand requirements, because brands usually consider such data as indicators of performance. Future research can explore under what contractual arrangements the brand could better motivate influencers so that their relationship will operate more efficiently.

Spillover risks could also arise if a poor performing influencer transfers negative impressions to the brand. Even if brands hire influencers only for short-lived campaigns, a scandal still might embroil an influencer, especially those with more active profiles. Perhaps in response to such risks, another emerging OIM trend involves the use of virtual influencers (e.g., Lil Miquela, Shudu). Brands regard virtual influencers as safer bets because the avatar does not burn out and stays permanently under the control of company (Bram, 2019). Research should test consumers' perceptions of virtual influencers to understand whether they might be regarded as more objective and trustworthy, or else less interactive and engaging, than human counterparts. Simulations powered by augmented reality are shaping many spheres of life, so research into the effectiveness (and potential dark sides) of virtual influencers should be worthwhile.

## Content design

To effectively monitor and guide influencers' content creation process, marketers must understand what content works. Recent literature explores how the characteristics of influencer content might drive OIM outcomes. Regarding the value of brand-related IGC, studies suggest that informative value positively affects brand attitudes and purchase

intentions (Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019), while hedonic value leads to greater arousal and deeper customer engagement (Hughes et al., 2019). Influencer content thus might need to combine informative and hedonic value, to balance sales with engagement outcomes. Other content features are unique to OIM contexts. For example, some influencers give followers free items or entries into a lottery, in exchange for follows or likes. Such campaign incentives elicit responses and engagement from consumers (Hughes et al., 2019). In line with the persuasion knowledge model and reactance theory, when influencers disclose their commercial interests, consumers express more skepticism and lowered attitudes toward the influencer and the brand (Evans et al., 2018). But such disclosures are increasingly required, so to enhance their credibility, influencers might need reactance reduction techniques, such as using two-sided messages in OIM posts (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020).

Several interesting avenues for research thus relate to the design of OIM content. First, general trends appear to be moving toward richer, more diverse content. Prior research mostly addresses text or images (Li & Xie, 2020), but many influencers also create short videos for brands on video-sharing social networks. For example, Mucinex launched a successful OIM campaign on TikTok by asking a group of influencers to create short videos showing their transformations from being ill to looking fabulous after taking the medicine. Other influencers host livestreams to demonstrate and sell products through real-time interactions with followers (Backaler, 2018). As these formats gain popularity, researchers should delineate their fundamental characteristics and effects on OIM outcomes. For example, short video IGC may be more effective if it exhibits higher vividness, greater entertainment value, and more organic product inclusions. Streaming IGC may work better if influencers offer clear product demonstrations, stimulate audience conversations, and respond to audience comments in real-time. Researchers should quantify which video and audio properties make for good content.

Second, the effectiveness of various content formats may depend on the type of product or service being promoted or the OIM campaign's purpose. As the CMO of a skin care brand (Practitioner 5) revealed:

Live streaming and short videos are more suitable for cosmetics products since demonstrating the make-up process and the final effect will be more impactful for the audience.

Research could examine the interplay of content formats and strategic factors to derive practical insights into when a certain format works best.

Moreover, there is an array of social media platforms from which consumers can choose, which differ in key traits (e.g., private versus public access, media richness, types of

connections; Kietzmann et al., 2011) and consumer motivations (e.g., connect with others, seek information, fill free time, be entertained; Voorveld et al., 2018). For instance, Hughes et al. (2019) suggest that the levels of content search and platform distraction differ across blogs and Facebook, and these differences affect the impact of content characteristics on engagement outcomes. Academic research could delineate the characteristics of other social media platforms further, then determine which types of content work best for a particular platform.

## Performance measurement

Even though measuring ROI can be difficult, about 70% of companies attempt it for their OIM campaigns (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021), using metrics such as engagement (e.g., likes, comments, shares), traffic, campaign hashtags, sentiment data, and sales (Influencer Intelligence, 2018). A review of emerging, growing literature on OIM reveals at least two approaches to evaluating OIM effectiveness. First, experiments and survey-based studies usually gauge participants' perceptions of influencer-level outcomes such as likeability, credibility, perceived trust, and attitudes toward the influencer (Breves et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019) or brand-level outcomes such as brand attitude, brand awareness, purchase intention, and WOM (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Evans et al., 2018; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Torres et al., 2019). Second, objective data can be gathered from field studies. Hughes et al. (2019) collect sponsored influencer posts to determine which factors affect post engagement, in terms of number of likes and comments. Kupfer et al. (2018) use movie data to show that a partner brand's (i.e., actor's) social media power potential and power exertion lead to higher composite product sales (i.e., box office revenues).

By leveraging advanced technologies and deeper collaboration with social media platforms, influencer platforms, and individual influencers, research can go beyond existing performance metrics to track sales conversions using trackable links embedded in OIM posts, platform-specific metrics, influencer-specific coupons, and promotional codes. These methods may enable greater precision in assessing OIM effectiveness. Researchers also can review cost and stock market data to gather evaluative marketing metrics beyond sales, such as profit, ROI, and firm value (McAlister et al., 2016).

From our interviews with practitioners, we note some other important, underresearched effects of OIM. Some brands use OIM to reenergize their stagnant images, reach completely new target segments, or serve as a product innovation lab. Pechoin, the 88-year-old Chinese skincare brand, has relied on beauty influencers to claim a younger, fresher positioning. Other brands hire influencers to help

them revise negative brand perceptions, such as when General Motors sought to transform public perceptions that it only produces gas-guzzling SUVs and achieve a more eco-conscious positioning. When brands tap influencers' unique perspectives, networks, and capabilities, they also might cocreate new products (Backaler, 2018). As the digital marketing manager of a cosmetic brand (Practitioner 2) told us:

We collaborated with Austin Li, one of the top beauty influencers in China. He has a puppy called Never, and it's so interesting that many of his followers are also fans of Never! We were fascinated by this kind of strong bond and introduced an eyeshadow palette with Never's picture on the cover, which was an instant big hit.

As these examples show, companies use OIM for a variety of novel purposes. Research might investigate OIM effects on various outcomes, such as brand image renewal, brand extension success, product innovativeness, and new product success, to establish a more comprehensive, sophisticated understanding of OIM effectiveness. Moreover, while our qualitative survey with consumers is limited in scale, further research might benefit from more extensive consumer surveys or interviews to uncover other consumer-level responses unique to the OIM context.

## Integrated communications

As mentioned, a notable OIM management strategy involves repurposing IGC in other channels, which serves as a way to integrate OIM with firm-led communications. Brands see tremendous value in repurposing, because they know which content worked and can effectively extend its shelf-life. Continued research should establish guidelines for how firms should repurpose influencer content, such as when and where, to maximize its downstream effects.

Besides content repurposing, researchers can study how else firms can integrate OIM into firm-led communications. For instance, future research could examine the effects of integrating OIM with firms' customer relationship management as a way to alleviate customer retention threat associated with OIM. Customer relationship management might encompass firm-led brand communities on social media platforms or information-enabled relationship marketing (Ryals & Payne, 2001). Through these efforts, firms gain insights into customers' evolving tastes and needs, strengthen their relationships with newly acquired customers, and enhance their brand loyalty. As the founder of an apparel brand (Practitioner 17) revealed:

Influencers are helpful in that they can convince their followers to try our products for the first time. After that, how good our products are, how frequently we

launch new products, and how we manage our direct communications with customers are the things that will help retain them as loyal customers.

The marketing director of an ice cream brand (Practitioner 7) agreed:

After we acquired customers from influencers, we rely on our own CRM system. We have our VIP pool and they regularly receive our newsletters, promotions, and fun activity calls. This is how we try to have them stay with our brand.

Thus, though firms must be cautious about using OIM for customer retention, researchers could validate whether firms can avoid this threat by adopting customer relationship management programs to strengthen their own relationships with customers.

As a new way for firms to reach and communicate with consumers, OIM joins an increasingly rich array of media choices. Our analysis delineates several important benefits of OIM, but we also note that “communications used in tandem are more powerful when they interact and create synergistic cross-effects with other communications through proper sequencing” (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 136). Instead of running separate OIM campaigns, firms might reach target consumers from multiple angles by integrating OIM with other new media (e.g., search ads, mobile, e-mail) or traditional media (e.g., television, print, offline) to realize synergy, as emerges when the combined effect of two or more media exceeds their individual effects on outcomes (Naik & Raman, 2003). For example, OIM may be more effective when combined with television advertising to create awareness and interest or when followed by search engine marketing to drive traffic to firms’ websites or online stores. To extend prior literature on integrated marketing communications that emphasizes cross-channel effects across new and old media (e.g., Dost et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2016), a fruitful research direction would be to investigate how firms can plan the timing of and optimally coordinate OIM with other media types to tap into different stages of the consumer decision journey.

## Conclusion

The rapid growth of OIM has prompted fundamental changes in how businesses conceive of and practice marketing, as well as how consumers experience brands and products. Many marketers integrate OIM with traditional firm-led approaches to marketing, but we have lacked an adequate understanding of its scope, effectiveness, and potential threats. With this article, we combine insights from academic research, trending business practices, and

first-hand practitioner and consumer knowledge to clarify how OIM works.

In outlining OIM fundamentals, we formally define OIM and conceptually delineate its unique features, differentiating OIM from other marketing strategies. We draw on insights from practitioners and consumers to propose that OIM can be understood as crowdsourcing influencer resources to enhance a firm’s marketing communication effectiveness. Crowdsourcing occurs when a company takes a function once performed by employees and assigns it to a large network of people, external to the company (Bayus, 2013). With OIM, firms assign the function of marketing communication to selected influencers to meet different objectives. Through the crowdsourcing process, firms gain access to and leverage influencer resources including their follower networks, personal positioning, communication content, and follower trust. In so doing, they possibly reach more targeted customer segments, create positioning with greater market acceptance and relevance, and generate more creative and trusted content than they would otherwise achieve. These communication benefits will likely translate to favorable customer attitudes and behaviors, impacting firm performance.

We offer a framework of propositions that capture the fundamental benefits and risks of OIM. Specifically, the unique benefits of OIM—targeting, positioning, creativity, and trust benefits—help explain its superior effectiveness, accompanied by content control and customer retention threats. We delineate specific OIM management strategies (i.e., influencer selection, process monitoring, performance measurement, and content repurposing) needed to realize the proposed benefits and mitigate the dark sides of OIM. Dynamic business practices associated with OIM already have a head start over scholarship. The growing prevalence and incontestable importance of OIM in firms’ marketing strategies means that it is time to strengthen theory, understanding, and knowledge in this burgeoning area. We hope our theoretical perspectives on OIM stimulate further conceptual and empirical inquiries.

## Appendix 1

Practitioner interview guide.

### PART 1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Please describe your job position and the specific tasks you are responsible for in your firm.
- For how long have you been working in this firm?
- For how long have you been working in this particular job position?

### PART 2: UNDERSTANDING OF ONLINE INFLUENCER MARKETING

A. Understanding potential benefits and threats of online influencer marketing.

- How effective was online influencer marketing for your firm? Why do you think it was effective (or ineffective)?
- From your experience, what are the benefits of working with online influencers?
- Were there any downsides of working with online influencers?
- Were there any surprises or unexpected outcomes of online influencer marketing?
- What do you think are the greatest challenges of managing online influencer marketing?

B. Probing arguments for the if–then beliefs.

- Why do you believe online influencer marketing leads to the benefits and downsides that you mentioned?
- Under what conditions does online influencer marketing work best in driving the benefits you mentioned? Why?
- Under what conditions does online influencer marketing not lead to the benefits you mentioned? Why?
- What does your firm do to mitigate the downsides and challenges of online influencer marketing that you mentioned?

## Appendix 2

Consumer survey questions.

- Do you follow online influencers on social media (e.g., Instagram, Weibo, TikTok)?  
○ Yes ○ No.
- Around how many online influencers do you follow on social media?
- What kind of online influencers do you mostly follow on social media? You may choose up to three categories.  
○ Fashion ○ Beauty ○ Travel ○ Cooking.  
○ Gaming ○ Cars ○ Religion ○ Personal growth.  
○ Parenting ○ Social issues ○ Others (please specify).
- Generally, how frequently do you check the online influencers' posts on social media?

1 = Never / 5 = Very frequently

- Why do you follow these online influencers?
- Online influencers often introduce or promote brands/products on their social media posts. What do you think of the brands/products that they endorse?
- Do you think brand/product endorsements by online influencers is an effective form of marketing strategy? Why?

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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