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INFLUENCER MARKETING STRATEGY: THE NORM OF DIGITALIZATION IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation of influencer marketing strategies which has rapidly diffused into Thailand due to digitalization, which has become the norm in today's business. Descriptive analysis was used to examine the current situation, the conceptual model, and guidelines of influencer marketing used by influencers and business units in Thailand. The data were collected qualitatively by using research instruments including structured and unstructured interviews as well as observations, and a literature review was also a crucial part of the study. Five key informants were part of the data collection. Meanwhile, practitioners and general informants were also interviewed to help understand influencer marketing in the Thai context. The findings indicated a number of factors that affect consumer perceptions including personality, authenticity, consistency, networks, and value, which must be considered when implementing the strategy. The findings contribute significant knowledge, proposing innovative marketing and communication strategies which can be used in modern communication.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is no denying the domination of information and communication technology (ICT) that has had a huge impact on Thai culture and society. The awareness of cultural change caused by ICT has been raised from time to time because Thai culture may eventually be transformed uncontrollably if the boundaries continue to be pushed. For example, the emergence of social media has provided generous opportunities for many industries; the advertising and public relations industries are rapidly expanding and there is more competition than ever before. Meanwhile, some business models need to adapt to survive the wave of transformation which has crashed

radically into Thailand's development. Moreover, the wave of globalization has brought many changes to Thailand's technological infrastructure. Digitalization is now playing an important role in people's lives, as indicated by a research article named "Digital infrastructure in Thailand is improving", a study by the Oxford Business Group (2016) which concluded that digital trends are considered as a "valuable factor" that should be included as a part of a country's development plan in both the public and private sectors. Many applications have started to appear in many areas, such as the government including ICT as part of its master plan. Within Thailand, some provinces have been targeted to develop "smart cities" where better connections, in various aspects, will be utilized. Furthermore, the development of digital communications has been a heavy focus, as Thai people mostly use mobile devices for effective communication, while, according to recent studies, Thailand ranks in the world's top 10 for social media usage. Facebook has the highest active usage across all available platforms. Fascinatingly, social media statistics reflect the need to use social media within the brand promotional strategies that have become a crucial aspect of improving online transactions in the modern business world (Nguansuk, 2018).

Hence, marketing strategies have a role in boosting the decision-making of consumers who changed their buying behavior due to the overload of ads and information appearing continuously on available online platforms. Influencer marketing was considered as an effective strategy that helps generate awareness and sales of the goods. However, many brands still underestimate the power of implementing a specific strategy and struggle to find a suitable direction because of the misperceptions about influencers, while many influencers are also lost in the sea of information and struggle to find the uniqueness and value that can be beneficial to both businesses and consumers. In recent years, finding a conceptual model and guidelines that explain the use of the influencer strategy has been rather complicated, and usually simply follows examples of success. However, most of the models and guidelines were not systematically explained, and were just opinions that sometimes confuse starters who want to implement an influencer marketing strategy. In this case, the author hopes the findings better indicate the factors that will help facilitate the utilization of influencer marketing for both businesses and influencers, who may be interested in using this type of marketing in the future.

2. Literature Review

It is accepted that the emergence of social media has had a huge impact on many aspects of Thai culture, especially in conducting online transactions, which can hardly be avoided due to the instruments deployed by the government and private sector as they utilize digital applications in their platforms. The Royal Thai Embassy, Washington D.C., stated that due to the roll out of digital payment systems such as "PromptPay", a digital payment service operating at the Thai national level, significant amounts of money will be saved over the traditional payment approaches (Chanjaroen, 2017). For instance, people can undertake many different types of payments and transactions, both domestically and internationally, by using mobile apps provided by banking companies such as KPlus, SCB EASY, or KrungThai NEXT, which are generally free to use. Most web browsers can store and link payment accounts to help in providing quicker transactions for customers. However, in many cases, the apps will give users benefits which will help in convincing them to engage with mobile services rather than continue with their attachment to traditional services that generally take a longer time to process.

Eventually, these new E-payment approaches will steadily bring Thailand towards becoming a “cashless society”, as stated by SCB bank (SCB, n.d.).

The fact is that digital technology is currently being promoted by the government, to drive the country’s economy and society (MDES, n.d.); it is one of the important factors that will affect people’s behaviors which will eventually lead to issues of cultural change. In recent years, consumerism and materialism have become hot topics that have been discussed among researchers and practitioners. Technology has changed the ways people consume things. Various types of modern content appear in several contexts, especially regarding the media industry, where most people source their content. As previously mentioned, the “cashless society” has been greatly embraced by Thai people, and even elderly people have adapted to get used to the current technology trends. Websites and social media platforms are accessed to provide better communication, which surprisingly provides faster online activities, especially “online transactions”. Today, advertising and public relations strategies are heavily focused on multiple online platforms. Most advertisers know that the internet is being used for several reasons, so their communication strategy needs to be adapted to fit the context of the modern consumer. As mentioned earlier, in the case studies, many corporations and companies have offered several options to customers as part of the changes they want to develop. To sell products and services, various marketing strategies are needed. Transforming from traditional to more modern strategies is a challenge that most companies have encountered and cannot avoid.

The ETDA (Electronic Transactions Development Agency), a public organization, reported on the internet use of Thai users in 2018. The results showed that Thai people spent about 10 hours per day using the internet, which was over 3 hours more compared to the previous year. Furthermore, online transaction activity is ranked 5th among activities that commonly occur on the internet. Interestingly, most of the participants who answered the survey were from “Gen Y” or were “millennials”, who are considered to be the generation driving the digital transformation. Therefore, the survey reflects the impact of the internet on Thai people; digital life is being slowly embraced by internet users without a doubt. However, what is interesting about all the changes that have happened in Thailand is that social media, including YouTube, LINE, and Facebook, are the platforms that have stayed on top of the game in recent years. Furthermore, more than 50 percent of participants stated that buying products and services via the internet has become the core of their modern lifestyle.

Speaking of buying online, it is quite obvious that one of the reasons people use the internet as a channel to buy things is because it is faster and more convenient; it is being pushed by modern sellers who seize all available opportunities to reach out to new consumers. Moreover, modern consumers love to create and develop good relationships with brands rather than just buy products and services (Mekhum, 2020). There are no other ways that are cheaper, simpler, and are more powerful than promoting brands than using the available online platforms that have been mentioned earlier. However, due to the overwhelming use of online advertising from people around the world, building “trust” in a business is a factor that has become an unavoidable aspect of online marketing nowadays. Consumers filter out whatever makes them uncomfortable, which can have a huge impact on a business’s activities. Therefore, it is no surprise that some mobile apps and plug-ins have been developed to help consumers avoid getting “illicit” advertisements.

In the past few decades, branding and marketing strategies in Thailand have relied heavily on traditional communication such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. But due to the rise of digitalization, many more

channels have begun to appear in the advertising and public relations industry which have radically changed the communication methodology. Hence, that is when advertisers had to come up with a new marketing strategy called “influencer marketing” (Patel, 2019). Nowadays, it is a very good tactic to grab buyers’ attention, increase sales, and to promote a good corporate image; fascinatingly, Dan Schawbel (2015) stated that “only 1% of the millennials trust advertisements while 33% trust blog reviews for their purchases”. Those reviews are mainly produced by social media influencers who behave as “cultural intermediaries” and act as a company’s representatives, responsible for communicating a “believable message” to their customers (Zhang, 2018).

According to Dan Schawbel, although his report was conducted on the basis of the American context, referring to what the ETDA mentioned about the participation of Thai people in online activities, some similarities can be related to what we are about to study: the millennials. Many studies show that the newer generation of Thai people has a positive attitude towards digital culture; they believe that actions can be undertaken faster and better by using the appropriate tools or platforms. Being an entrepreneur is no longer especially difficult when compared to the past era, because millennials believe that they are a “technology-driven” generation and that becoming social media influencers may finally lead to a successful business (Augulanon, 2016). However, relying on technology can cause many follow-up issues, and the market has become very competitive. Therefore, understanding modern business strategies and knowing how to utilize social media platforms are the “key factors” that will assist. There is a large amount of information regarding business advice and guidelines, as well as instructions to help the millennials to become successful entrepreneurs. However, most of the available knowledge on the internet is not from those who have become prosperous; better advice is often not published formally, sometimes causing difficulties in perceiving a “trustworthy” source of information for the viewers.

From the rationale and issues that have been stated previously, it is very clear that looking through the lens of economic development, the digital movements that have been mentioned are greatly beneficial to the various industries. However, in terms of cultural development, this is an area that still needs more exploration to create a better understanding and to be able to keep up with the rapid changes. This research will help generate empirical knowledge by extracting educative information from a number of online influencers who have become very successful in their online business, which will provide clearer guidelines as well as a conceptual model of online influencer marketing for the brands or the millennials who are interested in establishing a modern business via digital media platforms.

3. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research methodology utilizing populations and subjects from a range of platforms. Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is sometimes impossible to identify the number of research participants who are involved in the online influencer marketing phenomenon and are capable of providing information relevant to the specific study, since this is the exploration area of interest; however, quality of data is the main focus of this study. The total number of research participants is 25, considered sufficient to help in explaining the occurrence of the phenomenon. There are three types of informants involved, including “key informants” who have made

a substantial impact on modern society by using influencer marketing strategies. Moreover, the group was selected by using criterion-based selection, meaning the key informants will be those who have 10,000 to 100,000 followers or more on social media platforms, and who are capable of generating “online social movements” by performing various actions. The second group of informants is “general practitioners” who sustainably develop and implement interest strategies into their online marketing. The last group of informants is “general participants” who naturally follow online influencers and mostly make their purchase decisions based on products identified by the influencers. As mentioned, 25 people were expected to participate in the study including 5 key informants, 10 general practitioners, as well as 10 general participants. Therefore, several research instruments are required to assist in gathering the various types of information that may need to be collected in various ways, depending on the scenarios.

The research instruments include observation forms, in-depth interview forms, and focus group interviews. The forms were sent to a panel of experts for their comments and feedback. For validation purposes, the panel of experts was selected by considering the experts’ expertise in the areas of communication arts, research measurement, and research evaluation. After receiving their comments and feedback, some modifications were made to the original instruments.

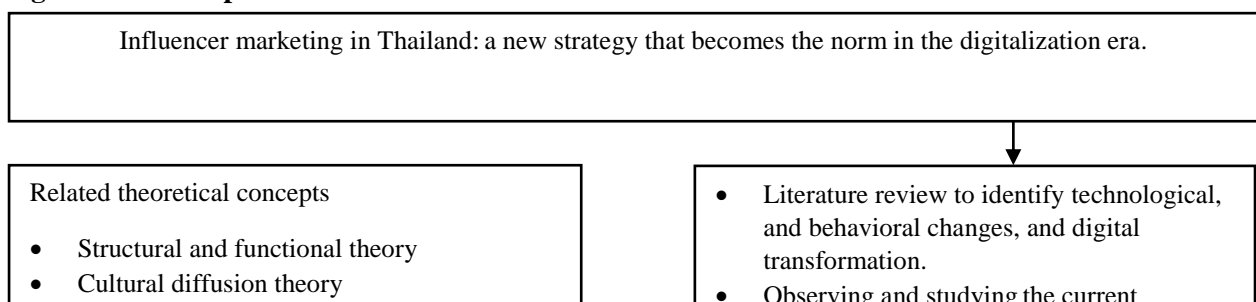
Research ethics are considered in this study. All informants will provide permission before having an interview session. The majority of informants are discovered through the snowball method, while some informants are officially found on online platforms. There are key informants, practitioners, and general informants participating in this research.

This study is a social study that intensively focuses on technological changes and the transformation of consumer perceptions and behaviors. Many areas of development are crucial, so multiple theories were notably required to help explain the progress of changes in the study areas. Consequently, the data collected will be gathered and analyzed by structural and functional theory, cultural diffusion theory, system theory, and presented by descriptive analysis.

Conceptual Framework

To study influencer marketing in Thailand, a strategy that is being utilized by top-level corporations down to the individual level, some theoretical concepts will be involved in the study process to help identify and explain the various marketing strategies that occur on online platforms. The structural and functional theory will help to analyze and explain the need for influencer marketing, which later causes cultural diffusion. All the changes, including technological changes, cultural changes, and consumer behavior changes, can be explained by using system theory. According to deliberations, the results of this study will create knowledge and a conceptual model that will be valuable in various applications of influencer marketing in Thailand, and might be useful for new starters who want to have a future career as influencers.

Figure 1. A conceptual framework



4. Results and Findings

Current situation of influencer marketing in Thailand

The findings of this study are divided into two parts. The first part will describe the situation and application of online marketing strategies in Thailand, emphasizing social media platforms. Focusing specifically on influencer marketing strategies, this part will analyze the information from the literature review, the collected data, and related theoretical concepts. Moreover, suggestions and advice from both Thai and foreign influencers describe key strategies and factors that help them to achieve their goals. The second part will further describe the conceptual model and creates guidelines that will help to facilitate the workflow when establishing an online influencer marketing program. Also, the trend of influencer marketing in Thailand will be discussed to predict the trends that might occur in the future.

It is undeniable that the internet is part of today's marketing, especially social media applications that cannot be avoided if any business is looking forward to generating awareness and increasing sales. Thus, influencer marketing is an approach that is highly commended by different studies showing the accomplishments of adopting influencer marketing. In Thailand, Facebook and YouTube seem to be the platforms predominantly embraced by Thai people because of its functionalities that allow a user to discover new content on the internet which can help them make better buying decisions, rather than receiving ads from brands without any interaction (Paobthongwiset, interview, 2020). In today's business, it is all about two-way communication by sharing

the story, generating interest, and giving feedback toward the things that are of particular interest because this can help break down the wall between the consumers and the brand (Glucksman, 2017; Albee, n.d.).

However, it is important to understand the current situation of “influencer marketing” in the Thai context. Observing one specific phenomenon that has a huge impact on Thai culture and society should be considered as part of the study. Recently, running has become a very popular physical activity and is being embraced by Thai people who seem to be more proactive in achieving more well-rounded wellbeing. In addition, the rapid appearance of running events in Thailand can help in estimating the popularity of the running activity. Many corporations and organizations are interested in organizing running events to gain various benefits and help to boost the corporate image which is a part of strategic communication. Therefore, the way people consume information has drastically changed; they prefer more interactions between themselves and others, as well as anyone who appears to influence them to believe in something. For this reason, the generous numbers of Thai influencers have been rapidly increasing to meet the needs of digitalization.

Sneaker On Sight (SOS) is a Facebook page that provides very insightful information, trends, and news about the sneaker culture in Thailand. As of 2020, the page has more than a hundred thousand followers and keeps growing consistently. This is one of the best online sources for “sneakerheads” (people who love or collect sneakers) who search for the upcoming products that they will eventually end up buying. Throughout the year, SOS obtained sponsorships from many shoe companies that directly contacted the page owner in the hope that SOS will help them promote their products, which he will be receive free of charge. Some companies are willing to pay him for promoting products via his platforms, including his website, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Lately, he has been working internationally with many famous brands including Nike, Adidas, and Vans by joining opening events organized by those brands in different countries.

This is all about a modern marketing strategy in which most companies are willing to invest their budget. As mentioned earlier, nowadays consumers tend to believe in the influencers more than they believe in the companies because they are closely bonded together due to the interactivities between the influencers and their followers.

Tanawat Nutsatit, the owner of SOS, mentioned in his recent interview that one of the key factors that can influence him to follow other online influencers is a “distinct style” that can be developed through different aspects such as personality and a unique storytelling technique, which is a challenging aspect that is difficult to invent and replicate once it is developed. Therefore, that is the reason why influencers have a higher impact on their followers, because of the capability of influencers to create better engagement through content for their fans. Hence, there are no shortcuts for influencers who want to gain trust from their audience. The key strategy that cannot be overlooked is to make better content to be able to create conversations with the brand’s customers (Tanawat Nutsatit, interview, 10/042020).

Furthermore, a recent interview was conducted with Pathumas Chatchang, an influencer and famous female runner who has been working on various platforms and is an ambassador for famous sports and cosmetics brands. She recently participated in many charity campaigns and was invited to be on TV

interview programs. As an influencer, to dominate the heart of the audience, “a personality” and “consistency” are key factors to build up the trust which will help earn audience loyalty, said Chatchang (Chatchang, interview, 19/04/2020).

Pat Wongvanakit a lecturer from Khon Kaen University, Thailand, has been working on different social media platforms where he can share his artworks, opinions, and his interests, specifically on running. He has currently reached almost 20,000 subscribers on YouTube and has more than 26,000 followers on “Where2RUN”, a Facebook page that can be considered as a form of enthusiast media. Pat suggested, as an online influencer who started from scratch, that being an online influencer is always challenging due to the highly competitive nature of the business. It is hard to stop once you have settled into his route, although keeping up with trends and the market is a factor that he strongly believes will help to boost the reachability from the targeted audience. In summary, improving oneself by focusing on global trends and individual skills are the “must” factors that should be considered to grow sustainably on online platforms (Wongvanakit, interview, 2020).

Information is also provided from an interview with Kiattikhun Yaowarat, admin of “Runner’s Journey”, a famous running Facebook page that currently has almost two hundred thousand followers. He has been featured in many interviews conducted by brands and organizations because the work that he has launched on his social media platforms help influence others to start physical activities such as running and cycling. He mentioned that he started working on online platforms with his current intention because when he was studying for a master’s degree, he was assigned to conduct marketing research which was part of a content marketing course. He then came up with the idea that he wanted to inspire people who struggle with their fitness journey by telling “inspiring stories” from different perspectives which could encourage them to believe in the process of body transformation. Nonetheless, the type of content seems very generic but it was successfully perceived by the audience due to the “value” that comes from the combination of aspects including story, message, production quality, and guesswork about who will be invited to his next interview (Yaowarat, 2019). This shows that success does not come overnight but it needs to be accumulated over time.

Therefore, to analyze the market situation and the importance of online influencers in marketing in Thailand, information is collected from one of the biggest retail businesses in Thailand, from the observation of the “Ari Running Concept Store”. Throughout the year, it is very obvious that Ari has been working with influencers to increase their sales as well as to create awareness when launching new products. In recent years, working with influencers seems to be the better option due to the changes in consumer behavior which lead them to a greater propensity to consider shopping online. Many times, online influencers can create a better impact by making interesting content that contains high creativity and is more relatable to the customer (Ari Running Concept Store, interview, 02/05/2020).

To create a clear guideline that demonstrates the application of strategies by using an influencer marketing methodology, it is first necessary to observe and analyze some theoretical concepts, conceptual models, research papers, and successful influencers who are recognized at an international level. This can help the author to create constructive guidelines and a model that can be utilized for influencer marketing in various scenarios. Therefore, the following

summarizations will describe the idea of the market situation and some guidelines toward influencer marketing.

Paobthongwiset (2020) referred to the recent study conducted by the research department of Dentsu Aegis Network, a company that offers marketing services for brands in Thailand. The result of the study showed that over 52 million Thai users have been active on social media, which is equal to 75 percent penetration of the current state of mobile, internet, and social media, which is surprisingly high in terms of online usage. Moreover, 90 percent of the Thai users aged between 16 to 64 have searched online for a product or service to buy. Accordingly, this reflects the way that Thai consumer behavior will heavily rely on the internet, and is important for brands which expect to take advantage of the shifting situations. Influencer marketing is one of the key strategies to help a business grow sustainably. There are a number of reasons which help provide a constructive explanation of why influencers are making an impact on society. Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) explained that there are three dimensions when talking about influencers or cultural intermediaries, including: 1) Framing: these people are always involved in a specific framing of goods (services, products, ideas, behaviors), and they have extra processes that reflect the influencer's capability in understanding the goods when compared to general consumers; 2) Expertise: influencers know how to communicate effectively with people while providing different forms of "value" to receivers, and 3) Impact: influencers are implicated in the construction of legitimacy but the level of intended impact and accomplishment will be varied depending on their overall context.

Adib Rifqi Setiawan (2020) suggested that there are certain elements which can help one to become a very successful influencer. Sexuality is part of the "value" that naturally gains the audience's attention, but this type of value can be later objectified and eventually cause the audience to drift away from the intended message; obviously, being well-known and of good appearance would help increase one's recognition. However, in some specific areas where a combination of aspects matter, establishing a good "parasocial relationship" is required to develop a strong bond between the influencer and the audience. The relationship can be influenced most strongly by content authenticity, content attractiveness, and personal content which later gives trustworthiness in the view of the audience. Theoretically speaking, the digital era involves two-way communication where people need to be part of the communication process (Lockie, 2019).

From the stated information, to extract clearer pictures of the concepts and guidelines that can be later utilized, particularly on the internet content creation, some of the mega-influencers who have more than a million followers need to be analyzed. Fortunately, the following influencers have recently shared their concepts and guidelines that can be used in our analysis.

A Swedish YouTuber named Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg is known online as PewDiePie, and has recently surpassed 100 million subscribers (followers) on YouTube, making him the most-subscribed individual user on YouTube (Alexander, 2019). He explained his strategies and how he has become very successful on the platform in the videos including "How to get started on YouTube", and "How to get big on YouTube". He explained that there are strategies that will help influencers to be better perceived, which are to create their uniqueness and avoid replicating others, which will draw the audience's

attention. Additionally, “personality” is also a key that will help influencers to maintain their audience. Without a transparent personality, people will not stay with the creator and will later lose interest because that is the only reason they came to consume the content in the first place (Kjellberg, 2017).

A former photographer named Peter McKinnon who has over four million followers on YouTube and worked with brands like Cannon, DJI, and other photography equipment companies once talked about strategies that helped him become one of the most influential creators on the internet. He suggested in this video titled “3 years on YouTube - This is what I would tell you” that there are five components that he wished he had known when he started a YouTube channel, which can be summarized into the following statements: 1) Avoid focusing on the statistical side of the platform, because it will introduce the mental illness to any influencer; 2) Focus on self-happiness rather than focusing on the revenues which can distract the influencer’s attention and causes stress on the go; 3) Equipment does not matter; what matters the most is a unique “storytelling”, meaning influencers do not require high-end production equipment to produce content; 4) Titles and thumbnails of content are key to draw audience attention, and 5) A good way to grow your audience is to “create more” without expecting to ask for help from successful influencers or channels. Instead, focus on creating quality and useful content that contains value. This way it will eventually bring people, and brands as well as collaborations to the influencer’s world, without attempting to ask for those in the first place (McKinnon, 2019).

Therefore, on the basis of the findings in this study, the conceptual model and guidelines were eventually constructed and can be used as a guideline among the content creators (person, brand, influencer, or cultural intermediary) to help to facilitate the influencer marketing strategy, especially in an online and social media context. There are groups of creators who will benefit from the study. First, for a person or influencer who needs to increase their potential and develop a better bond with the audience. Second, for the business unit looking for criteria to help consider collaborating with different levels of influencers (nano, micro, mid-tier, macro, mega) (Dizon, 2019). Properly put, to be well-received on any desired platforms using an influencer marketing strategy for both creators or business units, the following guidelines need to be considered. The influencer needs to develop related skills and abilities including overall well-rounded characteristics (personality, mind, wisdom, social skills), authenticity, consistency, networks, and values that fit with the target audience, as well as providing a balance of happiness (well-being aspects). As stated, these are factors that will facilitate the use of influencer marketing in the Thai context and can be good starting criteria when using this type of strategy on any digital platform. In addition, a given conceptual model can be used as a starting point when implementing influencer marketing. According to the findings, conceptual models are shown as the following diagrams.

Figure 2. A conceptual model demonstrates the implementation of influencer marketing from business to consumer

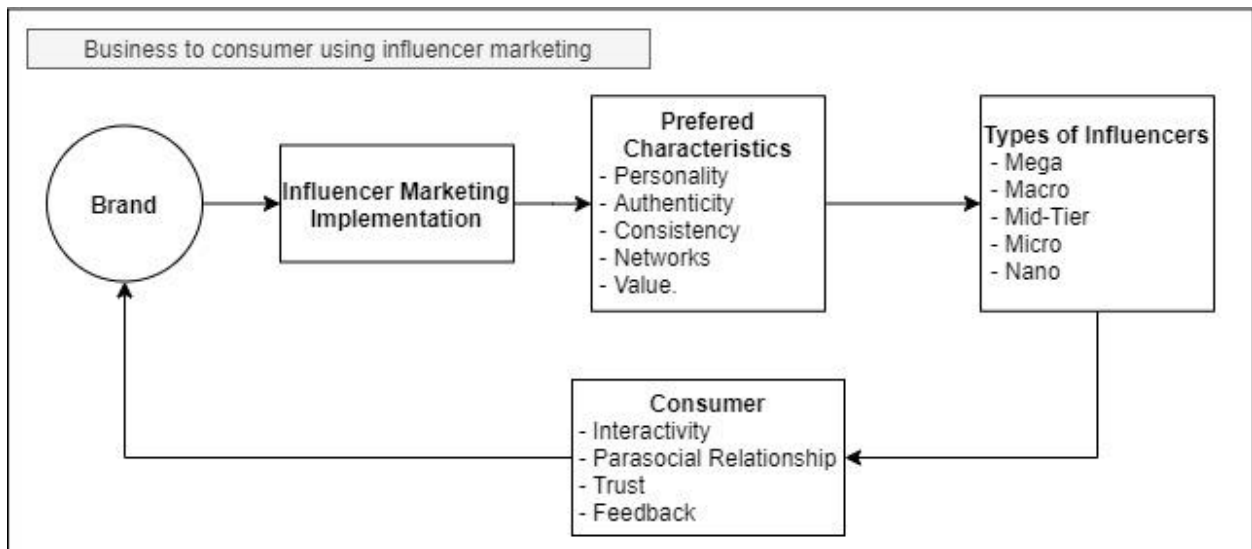
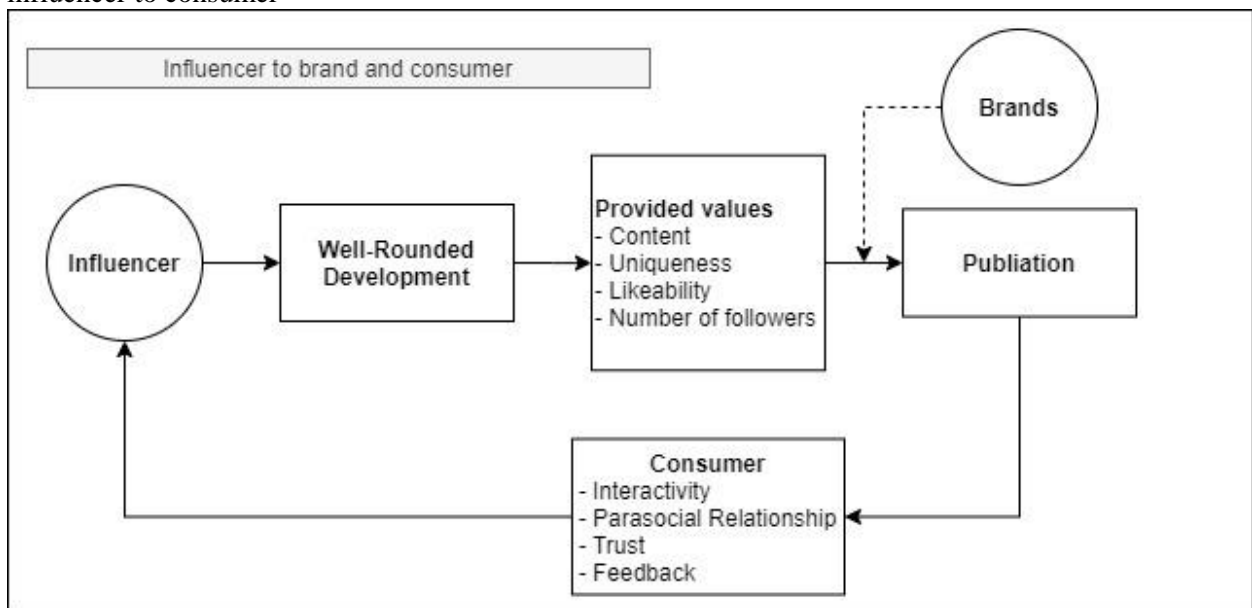


Figure 3. A conceptual model demonstrates the implementation of influencer marketing from influencer to consumer



The diagrams presented above show significant factors explaining how businesses and influencers implement strategies for the marketing process to help increase the possibility to be well-received and to positively affect consumer perceptions and behavior. Nevertheless, different business areas may require other applications to achieve similar results.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current situation of influencer marketing in Thailand results from the change of digitalization which has influenced consumers and brands to adapt to its potential and prospects. It is statistically shown that Thai internet users, including the private sector and business units have been transformed into the digital era. Many business areas have been implementing specific strategies with high expectations to stay relevant in the online world and appeal to the modern consumer. Running is one of the areas that is very competitive because of its popularity; thus, selling and promoting goods via online channels is

considered to be the most effective way to increase awareness and recognition of the brands. The discussion of the results suggests that the importance of influencer marketing is unquestionably high and is very rewarding once accomplished. However, there are no simple shortcuts when applying influencer marketing, particularly in Thailand. Business units cannot rely purely on the statistical side (number of followers) and hope to be well-received when collaborating with an influencer. Also, the following factors must be considered when utilizing the influencer marketing strategy: personality, authenticity, consistency, networks, and values which need be consistent with the brands. Meanwhile, the influencer should also develop the mentioned factors to create uniqueness and personal value that will allow them to have more opportunities in the future.

However, this research was focused on an area that may only provide perspectives related to sports businesses and did not cover other areas such as entertainment, education, and lifestyle goods. A possible avenue for future research is to conduct an in-depth investigation of other industries that implement influencer marketing to facilitate the operation. The findings from such a study will provide a greater understanding of implementing influencer marketing in wider areas that will benefit creators or investors who will be establishing a business in Thailand.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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