Influencers in Intercultural Communication: Analysis of Opportunities and Risks

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Abstract
As a new Internet media, the influencer phenomenon, due to some of its communication characteristics, becomes one of the latest and most popular forms of intercultural communication. This research report focuses on the opportunities and risks brought by the characteristics of influencers within intercultural communication. And the research leads to the conclusion that influencers have huge opportunities for the development of multiple cultures, intercultural communication in a diverse background, and corporate marketing in global markets but meanwhile if opportunities of influencers cannot be used properly, or lack the control of a professional team, any information dissemination through influencers may lead to negative results.

Keywords
Internet; Influencers; Intercultural; Opportunities; Risks.

1. Introduction
Influencers on social media and their follower groups have formed a new type of cultural communication mode. Because of the cross-regional and instantaneous nature of the Internet, this communication always has a cross-cultural characteristic. Followers from different countries and regions, with diverse cultural backgrounds, have gathered together because of a cultural theme of common concern, and have frequent exchanges on the content dissemination and comment platform built by influencers.

2. Five Elements of Communication
The Five Wes of Communication are five words that begin with the letter W. The five words are WHO, says WHAT, to WHOM, in WHICH channel, with WHAT effect? And it is an excellent model to analyze the communication. We will use the Five Wes to analyze the characteristics in intercultural communication associated with influencers.

2.1. WHO
Influencers are the senders in intercultural communication. Influencers are often ordinary people. Compared with superstars, they are closer to the people. People are more willing to accept content and trust what they say. This kind of trust is essential, which makes the intercultural communication easier to spread and understand.
Equipping with a professional team is the right thing to do. Influencers should pay attention to the legality, morality, and politics of the content. But most of the influencers are often lack of professional training and assistance. The amateur influencers without professional guidance are likely to cause cultural misunderstanding and cultural appropriation because of their cultural limitations.

2.2. Says WHAT

According to the 5W theory, the "what" in the theory examines the message or contents. The content that the influencers spread has the following characteristics:

(1) Contents are photos and videos.
(2) Contents can be traced back any time.
(3) Fraction of information selection is high.

Influencers like to send pictures and videos to share on social platforms. Videos and photos increase the readability of the content. Compared with boring texts, videos and pictures can bring people a real communication context and easy to understand.

The Internet has memories, that is to say, the content spread by Influencer will exist all the time, which is hard to terminate completely. This is conducive for followers to search at any time. Even ten years later, high-quality content can still be searched out, bringing another's popularity for influencers with the help of the Internet.

Followers love and value the contents by following the people they like. The social platform uses advanced technology to ensure that the followers can watch the latest content that he follows on the mobile device immediately. Expectation of reward is maximized; effort required is minimized. That makes the possibility of selecting the contents very high.

2.3. To WHOM

Influencers on social media have millions of followers. The followers come from all over the world. The culture backgrounds are various. But they gather on the Internet to follow the same influencer.

As the receivers of communication, followers have a psychology that they tend to support all opinions of Influencer and oppose other opinions that contradict it. As mentioned in the book —The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind: Once an individual enters the group, his personality is eliminated, the group's thinking dominates, and the group's behavior manifests itself as no objection, emotional and low IQ. Public sentiment will not be questioned, and it is easy to be moved by extreme emotions and thus be used [1]. So, this psychology of conformity magnifies the conflict of different Influencer followers' groups.

2.4. In WHICH Channel

In the intercultural communication led by influencers, social media plays the role of the channel. (1) Social media platform provides functions to interact.
(2) High visibility

In the modern knowledge society, advanced technology and new forms of media create excellent opportunities for the exchange of information as well as for exchanges and cooperation beyond races, culture, and nationality. The development and the widespread of social media allow international audiences to communicate about these influencers, which then generates intercultural communication. Social media provides functions to interact with the Influencers in various ways, including follow, comment, like, share, repost, etc. And these functions are conducive to expand the influence of Influencer itself.

High visibility is one feature of social media. With the increased use and popularity of social media over the years, social media visibility has become an important consideration for
organizations. It is how frequently social media users discuss an individual, organization, or related issue [2].

2.5. With WHAT Effect

As an opinion leader of a particular culture, Influencers can effectively reduce the "spiral of silence" effect of the niche culture in the transmission. The spiral of silence theory is a political science and mass communication theory proposed by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. It states that a social group or society might isolate or exclude members due to the members' opinions[3].

In this multi-cultural world, minority cultures or weak groups are challenging to get enough opportunities to express. Their views are always covered by the opinions from strong cultures and mainstream people, so they need opinion leaders to speak for them. The Influencers provide opportunities to minority cultures and weak groups to express. Every influencer with a certain culture is a spokesperson for that culture. Influencers attract intercultural audiences from various cultural backgrounds and communicate different contents and opinions of this culture to them. This encourages followers with the same cultural background to speak together and no longer be silent.

3. Opportunities in Intercultural Communication

Through social media, international audiences communicate through these Influencers, which generate intercultural communication. Some characteristics facilitate intercultural communication and promote intercultural interaction.

3.1. Social Media Platform Provides Functions to Interact.

YouTube is a video-sharing website that "allows individuals to interact with the global community by viewing and sharing user-generated video content" [4]. It provides the opportunity for Influencers to communicate with their followers who come from different cultures. People can communicate and discuss across cultures by following the Influencer, leaving comments, and likes on the videos or people could share or forward to other people. Intercultural communication plays an essential role in the globalized world. And social media provides space for people to communicate and share values.

3.2. Influencers with Their Authenticity Promote Cultures to Break the Stereotype

Influencers are ordinary people. They obtain the attention and preference of followers with their unique talents and resources. People feel close to them. This psychology makes followers easy to accept what they convey and what they say. Interaction with the influencers, which represent their cultures, reduces the traditional stereotypes of particular groups of people and cultural misunderstandings.

Taking "Ychina" as an example, they convey comments from people with different backgrounds on Chinese society from their unique identity perspective. In 2017, Raz led a creative team of more than 20 people that is made up of a variety of cultural backgrounds to launch the "Ychina" channel [5]. The most popular theme is "since these foreigners misunderstood China" because, with the theme of "stereotype" in the form of street interviews, Raz Galor integrated stereotypes that foreigners have on Chinese people by conducted interesting communication and introduced the correct values to the world. According to the report on New Media Research, until October 2019, they have 129 videos with 134,00 subscribers and 13 million views on YouTube[6]. They use humorous language to discuss a wide range of topics include dating culture, bargaining culture, Spring Festival culture, local food culture, Chinese dialects, etc. in their videos. YChina communicates with international audiences through social media and
generates intercultural communication to help international audiences "change the way certain are viewed" and [7]reduce stereotypes that people have on a group of people because of the limited information that they received. These stereotypes present an incomplete, subjective, and unrealistic or erroneous view of reality in some cases. Influencer promotes the integration of cultures and breaks the barriers between different cultures.

If the government produced the same content as the Ychina has shared in their videos, it might end up with a different result because more people are losing trust in their government. According to research shows, —two-thirds of adults think over Americans have little or no confidence in the federal government. || [8]. The data shows that people in the United States might not accept the information or values that the government shared, which means that the government is not able to help their citizens to reduce the stereotypes and promote intercultural communication. Internet Influencer uses social media as a tool to help people get in touch with other, and they feel different cultures surround each other every day, which allows they build closer and more connected relationship no matter how far apart they are.

### 3.3. Influencers Help Reduce the Spiral of Silence

Influencers with distinctive cultural characteristics can effectively reduce the spiral of silence of the minority cultures and weak groups they represent. This is a very good opportunity for this culture to expand its influence.

In the famous cartoon Moana produced by Disney, the demigod seemed to be an Influencer which attracts countless fans and huge social attention. The minority culture he represents: the religious significance of Maori tattoos, almost no people in the mainstream social groups paid attention to it before. Even if an opinion leader of an ethnic group occasionally mentions it to the public, it will soon be drowned out in the noise of popular culture and members of ordinary ethnic groups. And the general members of the ethnic group are in a weak position; their words don’t carry much weight. So, they don’t have the ability and interest to spread their own culture. This is, of course, a spiral of silence, and the person who breaks the silence is Maui, the demigod, even though he is a fictional character in the cartoon.

The influencers we are talking about can spread a certain niche culture to the mainstream public. Influencers publish bizarre and interesting content with various distinctive cultures on social media every day in countless niche areas, the content represents a certain niche culture or weak group. Influencers’ opinions are followed by his fans and are spread to mainstream society. Once a certain sound is blown to the whistle, then other sounds that resonate will no longer be silenced and will sound one after another. The cultural diversity comes from here and thrives here.

### 3.4. Videos and Photos Are Highly Readable and Easy to Spread

Influencers usually take photos or videos as a way of content creation. This kind of creation style has the advantage of spreading. The reason lies in it has high readability and acceptance. No matter the age and educational level of the audience, photos and videos can play a perfect role in broadcasting.

The Influencer permeates his cultural background and emotional strength through his language, posture, expression, environment, and dressing. This information expressed in videos and pictures is easier to understand than words. As a popular saying among young Chinese, "The photo can tell the truth." Under such circumstances, this mode of communication is beneficial for people in different contexts to understand the content spread by Influencer and to accelerate the integration of different cultures. In this process, unnecessary misunderstanding caused by words can be reduced. Another advantage is that through pictures and videos to spread, it will be more vivid, the language, posture, expression, environment, and dressing between pictures and videos can help to attract fans’ attention and deepen their preference.
Compared with boring texts, videos, and photos can bring people a real communication context. In this process, it helps to reduce the estrangement caused by cultural differences. Specifically, the high readability of pictures and videos in cross-cultural communication can overcome the barrier of the language barrier.

For example, in all of Li Ziqi’s videos, there are almost no lines and only a few narrators. Li Ziqi shows the process of planting crops, picking fruits, and cooking food to foreign audiences. This process can surmount the barriers brought by language. The culture she conveys does not need to be explained in too many words. Therefore, the readability of video content plays a key role, which provides a new idea and a great opportunity for many cultural disseminators.

3.5. Contents Can Be Hot Again Due to the Characteristic of Traceability

With time elapsing, pictures and videos will exist in the online world all the time, coupled with the impact of globalization on online resources, which brings opportunities for cross-cultural communication. While people are in the era of big data, a quality culture is constantly pushed to the front end of the Internet. This has undoubtedly increased the exposure and search volume of Influencer and the content he spreads and even attracted worldwide attention.

Most Influencers update the content frequently, and as a result, they accumulate over time. It is tough for the audience, especially those with different cultural backgrounds, to fully understand a theme or viewpoint from other cultures through one or two contents. At this time, the traceability of the content disseminated under the Internet plays its role. People can deepen their understanding of the culture spread by Influencer by watching and digging up all the content released by Influencer in different periods and other people’s comments about the content. For example, if you look at the comments on Li Ziqi’s YouTube video, the cultural connotation behind the video can be easily understood.

3.6. Fraction of Selection Is High; More People Choose Contents of Influencers

The use of artificial intelligence and big data technology of the Internet, social platforms provide influences and their followers with increasingly intelligent personalized content push services. In the process of idealized intelligent push, on the one hand, the "expected of reward" in the formula of Fraction of Selection is maximized because the default logic of intelligent push is to push the information that the users care about and is most interest in the social media. On the other hand, it minimizes the users' "Effort Required" to obtain the information that they need. Therefore, compared with traditional media, for example, radio, television, the new mode of communication enables the audiences to acquire the connection that they interest in by using the shortest amount of time, money, and energy. From this perspective, using social media as a tool for intercultural communication between Influencer and their followers is the optimal solution. It provides more efficient intercultural communication opportunities for influencers, individuals, or cooperative enterprises because it matches the maximum of Fraction of selection.

4. Risks in Intercultural Communication

Due to the increasing popularity of Influencers, the number of online followers can skyrocket in a short time, which leads to serious problems during intercultural communication caused by its tremendous popularity. Followed are risks that may enhance barriers within intercultural communication.

4.1. Problems and Crisis Caused by Lack of Professional

Influencers are usually ordinary people that make videos specializing in a certain field. Although this may encourage more people to be a part of it, risks concerning lack of public
relations and ways of building positive images can be very serious, which can also bring up barriers in good communication between different cultures.

Felix Kjellberg, known as one of the most popular influencers on YouTube, once surpassed YouTube’s official channel and had over 76M followers. In 2018 December, PewDiePie recommended a channel that contains inappropriate content. In a video published Sunday, Kjellberg recommends several YouTube channels that he enjoys watching, saving special praise for E;R, which often includes anti-Semitic, sexist, homophobic and cruel language in his videos [9]. E;R gained 15,000 subscribers in the wake of the PewDiePie shout-out, which linked to the channel, according to the Verge. The person who runs the channel has uploaded anti-Semitic content. On the right-wing social media platform, Gab has openly discussed the "Jewish Question" conspiracy theory, according to Right Wing Watch [9]. "I said publicly a year and a half ago that I was going to distance myself from Nazi jokes and that kind of stuff, because I want nothing to do with it," PewDiePie explained. Generally, I've done that. I don't have a reason to dip into that again — it's just stupid [10].

PewDiePie lost a great number of followers and was banned from YouTube for doing such unreasonable things. Lacks values of racial equality and public relation skills can be considered as the main cause of the incident. In this, the "grass root" characteristic of Influencer has broken the hearts of Jewish and set up an invisible barrier during the intercultural communication.

4.2. For Those Influencers, Authenticity is Important

For ordinary people, influencers are more approachable than Influencers. People can't help but believe in who they are and how they behave, including the content of their work. However, if the Influencer himself is fake, he is just an actor hired by a big company, and a team writes all the designs and works about him. There is a potential hidden danger; once the team behind him is discovered, people will think that the Influencer has cheated on them, and he will instantly lose the trust of his fans, leading to serious consequences. (being banned)

Li Ziqi, an influencer on a Chinese Internet, her videos are all about making local food out of local materials in the countryside. While bringing some beautiful scenery of the countryside, in her cinematic-quality videos, she quietly paints a picture of her rural life that appears to be coming straight from a fairy-tale. She has more than 20 million followers on Weibo alone. On YouTube, she gained 7.6 million subscribers in just over two years. Some estimate that across all social network platforms, she has 60 million fans around the world [11].

But in fact, Li Ziqi does not exist at all, she is just a salaried actress, the company made up a fictional character, scene, and video content for profit, and has a special director to plan all this and win the attention of fans. She belongs to MCN Hangzhou micro read technology co., LTD (Micro read is a short video incubation KOL into IP and extended to consumer brands entertainment cross-consumer companies) Then after being exposed to have a team operation, Li Ziqi simply "banned" herself. On May 13, 2017, Li Ziqi posted a "negative energy burst" announcement to stop her microblog, saying that the news of the team's operation was an online rumor, and the ensuing personal attacks, rumors and deliberate smearing worried her. Li Ziqi lost her fans' trust and support for her, leading to a large number of fans rejected, and even a large number of black fans' malicious attacks on her and negative reports. Before this happened, she did not realize the importance of authenticity and did not realize the consequences of losing the trust of fans, which led to her failure and well proved the risk of Influencer.

4.3. Internet is Traceable, As are Mistakes

If an influencer has made a mistake, someone will 'dig a grave' to collect the mistakes he has made in the past, leading to a collapse and eventual failure. In 2018, a young Chinese girl called Wenwan, with beautiful appearance and a magic dance on the Internet quickly became popular
after she became famous, a large number of netizens flocked to her Wei Bo, and her real information gradually emerged. Wen wan, formerly known as Xu Jing wan, is 17 years old, born in Taurus, Henan province. She didn’t post much content on her Weibo, what really made her tick was a dance video in an underground garage. After she became so popular, many “neighbors” and “classmates” showed her another side beyond the short video, which are all kinds of black material about her. They first broke the news online that she had befriended many wealthy younger generations with her appearance and cheated them out of their money just to buy luxury goods. This aroused the interest of many netizens, who began to rip more black material from her and posted it anonymously.

Some of the negative information exposed includes:

1. Lie about age (She lied on social media that she was 17, but she wasn’t)
2. Started plastic surgery at the age of 13 or 14
3. Stole mobile phones when she was a network administrator in her early years.
4. Underage school dropout and high-profile bar entrance (This is illegal in China)
5. Her private life was a mess, and she was befriended by multiple rich second-generation boyfriends who bought luxury goods for their money [12].

Since the early morning of May 28, Wen awn’s Dou yin account has been blocked, and all videos have been taken off the shelves. Wen awn’s keywords have been searched on Wei Bo, and all messages have come out that she has been banned. Wen awn’s black material directly led to her being banned, because as an influencer, her every act will be amplified, rather than risk a child to learn her misconduct risk to let her continue, the platform is obviously more willing to ban her to kill these risks in the cradle, Her example is a good proof of the traceability of the Internet, an influencer can be hacked out as long as it makes a mistake and then amplified so that it can be banned.

4.4. High Social Media Visibility Triggers Risks of Influencers

High social media visibility is one of the biggest features of Influencer. With the increased use and popularity of social media over the years, social media visibility has become an important consideration for organizations. Since, most of the influencers tend to post their videos on social media such as twitter, YouTube or Weibo. Their detailed behaviors and insignificant elements in the video they made are exposed to thousands of viewers which can cause serious risks to influencers.

Real xinshidandan is a combination of two Frenchmen making humorous videos in Mandarin that are both popular in China, spreading Chinese culture to all parts of the world. Two of them claimed that they are in love with Chinese culture since long time ago. The combination is very popular in mainland China, on Weibo platform. But controversy arises since Xinshidandan posted a video that contained background music involving the character of Fumanchu. Fu Manchu, in full Dr. Fu Manchu, fictional character, a Chinese criminal genius who was the hero-villain of novels and short stories by Sax Rohmer (pseudonym of Arthur Sarsfield Ward). Appearing in silent and sound movies, the character represents the stereotype that westerners have for Asian population and the fear and hatred towards the expansion of Asian power and influence.

Although the BGM in a short video is only an insignificant element of the video and bloggers may use it just because the music sounds cool, it still ignited a firestorm. After the video was posted, the popularity of Xinshidandan went down. Followers in China choose to unfollow the combination. To retrieve their reputation in China, Xinshidandan then posted a video apologizing for their unintentional behavior before.
4.5. Tendentious Psychological of Followers Spark Conflicts

The followers of Influencers usually have the psychological that is tendentious. They will favor all the opinions and content of influencers without thinking. Even worse is that, they have conflicts with opinions that contradict Influencers. Especially in intercultural communication, such conflicts magnify the cultural differences. This is not the purpose and expectation of intercultural communication. So, we should be fully aware of this risk, especially for those new influencers who are lack of professional training and practical experience, this kind of risk exists especially.

5. Conclusion

Influencers have huge opportunities for the development of multiple cultures, intercultural communication in a diverse background, and corporate marketing in global markets. Seizing the characteristics of influencers and their advantages over traditional media are the key. At the same time, opportunities and risks always coexist. The characteristics of ordinary, traceability, high social media visibility, tendentious psychological of influencers mean that if they cannot be used properly, or lack the control of a professional team, any information dissemination through influencers may lead to negative results that the communicator does not want to see.

6. Recommendation

Many roles take part in this intercultural communication, including influencers, followers, companies which want to advertise, companies which develop social media, even countries which want to promote their culture.

(1) Equip influencers with a professional team, including public relation, intercultural communication skills, social sciences, etc. Influencers may speak that spark dispute inappropriately.

(2) Guide followers to interact rationally and not to fight with another group of followers. Because fans have a psychology of favoritism, they tend to be extreme to deteriorate the dispute.

(3) Use ambiguity to deal with certain problems during intercultural communication or public video posting instead of inauthentic content. Most of times, influencers have to deal with complex questions that are not appropriate to tell the truth directly, such as problems concerning personal income or made up part or setting in the video. Transmitting his or her fans ambiguous information can help the influencer effectively respond to the question as well as remain its integrity of not lying.

(4) Pay attention to important taboos while posting videos that can be seen internationally. During intercultural communication, ignoring cultural taboos could possibly drive the influencer to an accusation in an ethical dimension, meanwhile decrease the online popularity. So, Influencers need to focus on what should and should not say or do online from perspectives of other cultures.

(5) Keep real and don't lie to your followers. The followers accept and trust you because of your authenticity.

(6) Be friendly to your fans and give them an approachable image. Fans are more likely to support what they think is a friendly Influencer. If you make them think you are approachable and always think of your fans, they will be more likely to support you, and more and more people will support you.

(7) Reduce the commercial. Majority people dislike the content with too much commercial. Often posting commercial may makes the fans feel like they are the cash machines.
(8) Prefer the Influencer model on social media when we intend to conduct intercultural communication due to the traditional media is limited in a certain region or country, which reduced intercultural capabilities. Majority of people in the past decades may only have the access to the information through radio or television.

(9) Encourages influences to produce videos on interviewing culture or traditions from native people to reduce stereotypes as communicating with individuals through social media. People are more likely to trust what influencers say, so this is an excellent channel to communicate and promote one culture.

References


