

NON-COMMERCIAL CROSS-CULTURAL SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: TELLING CHINA’S STORY – A CASE STUDY OF A CHINESE INFLUENCER IN PERSIAN CULTURE

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Atif	Parmizad, Q. H. (2024). Non-Commercial Cross-Cultural Social Media Influencers: Telling China’s Story – A Case Study of A Chinese Influencer In Persian Culture, <i>Yeni Medya Elektronik Dergisi</i> , 8 (2), 325-359.
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ABSTRACT

This study used the perspective of social media communication strategies to explore the non-commercial social media influencers in the context of cross-cultural communication. Social media influencers, having enormous followers and high marketing potential, have been the subject of studies in recent years. Given that the literature in this field only concentrated on commercial social media influencers, this study took a different approach to explore the non-commercial cross-cultural social media influencers’ roles beyond their native cultures. Employing the quantitative content analysis method, this study examined the @anahitachin Facebook page run by a Chinese journalist and social media influencer in Persian culture. Running a series of multiple regression analyses (MRA), this research found that personalized communication and cultural dialogue strategies positively influence public engagement in the context of non-commercial social media influencers on social media. However, information provision strategies did not influence public engagement in this study, and the effect of interactive communication was also limited. Besides, the findings of this research show that the content type and media type on Facebook are predictors of public engagement. Religious content, altruistic messages, and the Chinese language are the types of content that were positively associated with

high public engagement. Similarly, combining photo and video with text positively influences public engagement compared to plaintext alone. The theoretical and practical implications of this research are also discussed.

Keywords: *China's Story, Cross-Cultural Social Media Influencers, Non-Commercial Social Media Influencers, Social Media Communication Strategies, Social Media Influencers.*

TİCARİ OLMAYAN KÜLTÜRLERARASI SOSYAL MEDYA ETKİLEYİCİLERİ: ÇİN'İN HİKAYESİNİ ANLATMAK – İRAN KÜLTÜRÜNDE ÇİNLİ BİR INFLUENCER'IN VAKA ÇALIŞMASI

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, kültürlerarası iletişim bağlamında ticari olmayan sosyal medya fenomenlerini araştırmak için sosyal medya iletişim stratejileri perspektifini kullanmıştır. Çok sayıda takipçiye ve yüksek pazarlama potansiyeline sahip olan sosyal medya fenomenleri son yıllarda araştırmalara konu olmuştur. Bu alandaki literatürün yalnızca ticari sosyal medya fenomenlerine odaklandığı göz önüne alındığında, bu çalışma ticari olmayan kültürler arası sosyal medya fenomenlerinin kendi kültürlerinin ötesindeki rollerini keşfetmek için farklı bir yaklaşım benimsemiştir. Nicel içerik analizi yöntemini kullanan bu çalışma, Çinli bir gazeteci ve Fars kültüründe sosyal medya fenomeni tarafından yönetilen @anahitachin Facebook sayfasını incelemiştir. Bir dizi çoklu regresyon analizi (MRA) gerçekleştiren bu araştırma, kişiselleştirilmiş iletişim ve kültürel diyalog stratejilerinin, sosyal medyada ticari olmayan sosyal medya fenomenleri bağlamında halkın katılımını olumlu yönde etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur. Bununla birlikte, bilgi sağlama stratejileri bu çalışmada halkın katılımını etkilememiş ve etkileşimli iletişimin etkisi de sınırlı kalmıştır. Ayrıca, bu araştırmanın bulguları Facebook'taki içerik türü ve medya türünün kamu katılımının belirleyicileri olduğunu göstermektedir. Dini içerik, özgecil mesajlar ve Çince dili, yüksek kamu katılımı ile pozitif ilişkili olan içerik türleridir. Benzer şekilde, fotoğraf ve videonun metinle birleştirilmesi, tek başına düz metne kıyasla halkın katılımını olumlu yönde etkilemektedir. Bu araştırmanın teorik ve pratik çıkarımları da tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Çin'in Hikayesi, Kültürlerarası Sosyal Medya Etkileyicileri, Ticari Olmayan Sosyal Medya Etkileyicileri, Sosyal Medya İletişim Stratejileri, Sosyal Medya Etkileyicileri.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed communication from a timely and geographically bordered and limited form to two-way, borderless, timeless, and limitless interactive communication, enabling the message's receiver to exert influence and have their voice (Mas Manchón et al., 2018). In the age of social media, in which the power of traditional media has been handed to individuals, and everybody owns a tribune to get their message across, these tools have been used for multiple purposes to achieve different objectives. As a result, like any other aspect of life influenced by the massive growth of social media, marketing, and advertising also experienced unprecedented shifts (Knuth, 2020). Today, companies allocate more and more of their budgets to social media advertising rather than spending on traditional media, and social media influencers have attracted enormous attention as an area of research interest. Nowadays, employing social media influencers (SMI) to spread "electronic word of mouth" about the brands' products is one of the grand advertising strategies applied by 75% of marketers online (Hughes et al., 2019). Influencer marketing, which employs the owner of massive social media followers to connect through personal relationships with customers, has also skyrocketed in recent years. According to Forbes, "*The voice of the customer has always been one of the most powerful concepts in marketing, and today's social media platforms act as one giant megaphone for that voice*" (Knuth, 2020, p. 2); therefore, more and more marketers want the SMIs to endorse their brand products (Wang, 2022).

As powerful online networking tools, social media use is as wide as real-life professions and dimensions. People use social media for professional purposes or personal needs satisfaction, from political leaders who practice the new form of social media diplomacy to the common people who share their daily lives to seek pleasure and enlarge their circle of friends (Zhu & Chen, 2015). As such, social media influencers are also not limited to commercial influencers but include anybody who can exert social influence in any domain and platform. However, except for social media influencer marketing, which concentrates on the value of SMIs in the commercial setting, other social media influencers, particularly the cross-cultural social media influencers -who cultivate knowledge, advocate coexistence, and inform- have not been paid much attention to and explored. Politicians, academics, and Journalists as opinion leaders are some of the most famous non-commercial social media influencers (not necessarily all) whose posts inform people, and their content inspires followers (Geysler, 2023), often without any deal of commercialized profit in between.

Nevertheless, this group of social media influencers -who practice cultural

diplomacy on behalf of nations within other cultures- has yet to receive any attention due to the dominance of commercialist tendencies in the current research of social media influencers. Therefore, this study aims to address this research void by exploring the role of social media influencers beyond the commercialized world and into the cultural exchange context. Addressing this gap, this article explores the concept of social media cross-cultural influencers by analyzing the Facebook posts of a Chinese journalist and influencer, *Anahita*, who tells China's story in the Persian language within Persian culture. The rest of this article has been organized as follows: In the coming section, the relevant literature will be reviewed, and the conceptual framework of the research will be introduced. In the following section, the research procedure and methodology will be explained. In the last part, the findings, discussion, and conclusion will be shared; practical and theoretical implications of the research, along with its limitations and future research directions, will also be discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

Social media influencers are individuals who have built a massive community of online followers by creating content and sharing events that impact people's lives, decision-making, and purchase behaviors (McCorquodale, 2019; Wang, 2022). Or, "*Social media influencers are a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online followers, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors*" (Duffy, 2020, p. 1). Being a social media influencer is not as simple as having a social presence online; social media influencers must provide recommendations or advice and create content that meets followers' needs, answers their questions, and helps them with decision-making. Hence, a social media influencer must creatively produce content that fits followers' interests. In addition, a social media influencer in a non-commercial setting must comprehensively understand the topic they want to share to act as a social model for their followers. Besides, being a social media influencer is more about having a unique and consistent persona, and their power lies in their communication method, which is based on "sincerity, authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness" (Duffy, 2020; Chee et al., 2023; Wasike, 2023). From a marketing point of view, social media influencers can reach unreachable niches of customers and entice their interests rather than traditional marketing strategies that target mass audiences (Knuth, 2020).

SMIs can be classified in various ways based on their relationships with the brands, the number of followers they have, the type of platform they use, and the

niches they concentrate on. Because social media influencers have been extensively studied in the marketing literature -regarding their relationships with brands- it is essential to differentiate commercial and non-commercial influencers in the beginning. First, commercial social media influencers are those who are connected to the brands and do social media influencer marketing. This group of social media influencers has been the center of attention from academia and businesses. The second group of social media influencers is non-commercial social media influencers who tend to exert their influence by having massive followers online. Their goal is to be a social model, opinion leader, or cultural ambassador and provide information in the area of their expertise (Wasike, 2023).

At the same time, influencers are classified based on the size of their network and the number of their followers. Influencers with over one million followers are considered mega-influencers; those with between 100,000 and one million followers are known as macro-influencers. Similarly, those with over ten thousand followers are regarded as micro-influencers, and those beneath ten thousand and beyond one thousand followers are considered nano-influencers (Geysler, 2023; Wasike, 2023). The size of the network of social media influencers predicts their position in the commercial setting and is regarded as one of the criteria based on which SMI marketing works (Zhou, 2021). Undoubtedly, having a massive number of followers is also a valuable asset for non-commercial influencers, as it helps them with ample information campaigns, effective advocacy, and activism. Furthermore, social media influencers can be classified by the platform they are active on, such as YouTubers, Tiktokers, and Instagrammers (Geysler, 2023), or across the niche they operate, such as travel influencers, lifestyle influencers, beauty influencers, family influencers among others (Zhao et al., 2023).

Commercial Social Media Influencers

Commercial social media influencers are individuals who produce and distribute electronic word of mouth (eWOM) about products to influence consumers' purchase behaviors (Zhou, 2021). This group of social media influencers includes those who enjoy a massive number of followers on social media and do social media influencer marketing as their profession (Knuth, 2020).

Commercial SMIs, by sharing emotions, giving recommendations and advice, and disclosing their personal information to followers, enjoy a special, trustful, and intimate relationship with them (Wasike, 2023). From the social learning theory point of view, where learning happens through social models of certain behavior (Knuth, 2020), commercial SMIs, as the social model for their followers, shape their interests and purchase behaviors. Since commercial social media

influencers endorse the products in a natural and daily life setting, their authentic real-life persona contributes to customer trust and transfers that trust to the brand (Knuth, 2020). This natural placement of products in SMI marketing persuades the followers indirectly and seems more neutral, “authentic,” and “organic” than traditional advertising. Due to this enormous marketing potential, they have been the center of marketers’ attention. At the same time, commercial SMIs are aligned across the gender line, where female influencers are more into beauty and fashion, and men are more into comedy, technology, and gaming (Duffy, 2020, p.3), which provides customized gender-specific content and product recommendations.

Previous studies show different factors driving people to follow social media influencers. In the commercial setting, scholars have found that the influencer’s physical attractiveness has been a factor in driving people to follow the SMIs. Similarly, the quality, originality, and credibility of the content have been the drivers of people following the SMIs (Farivar et al., 2021; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolov & Kefi, 2020; Taillon et al., 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Additionally, research suggests that trust is one of the most important factors in commercial influencers’ marketing because of the influencer’s centrality in this process (Knuth, 2020). Moreover, beyond business, commercial SMIs have also positively contributed to environmentally friendly living (Zhao, 2023) and helped followers with the needed information (Chee et al., 2023).

Non-commercial Social Media Influencers

This group of influencers are digital opinion leaders who share information in the area of their expertise to attract the audience’s attention and shape and drive their opinions. It is worth noting that non-commercial social media influencers can help with social knowledge, civic engagement, and social self-efficacy (Wasike, 2023). Unlike commercial SMIs, being a social media influencer is not this group’s profession but an extension of their real-life fame and prestige. Politicians, academics, journalists, and commentators who are not involved in social media influencer marketing but have many online followers are among these non-commercial social media influencers, “Key opinion leaders” (Geysler, 2023). These key opinion leaders are active social media users who provide information to others, and their ability to shape opinions is positively associated with the size of their networks. A journalist, academic person, expert, or politician, simultaneously an opinion leader and non-commercial SMI, contributes effectively to disseminating accurate information. Generally, due to opinion leaders' expertise and real-life social positions, the information they provide is perceived to be authentic and valuable and can be readily accepted (Chan & Misra, 1990).

Social media have been used to create an online social presence and build a reputation (Grover et al., 2022), and for non-commercial social media influencers, this journey might have started with a social presence on these platforms. The person's well-known character and expertise in real life might have contributed to attracting massive followers, bringing them to the surface of social media as a social media influencer and digital opinion leader. Social media influencers are tentatively classified into commercial and non-commercial because a non-commercial influencer, such as a journalist or academic person, is also likely to post something for a commercial interest, receiving grants or other incentives (Worb, 2023). Nevertheless, it is also important to distinguish between them and independently address their contributions to society, business, and industry. The blurred line between commercial and non-commercial social media influencers can be demarcated through SMI marketing. This study defines *non-commercial social media influencers* as those massive followers' owners not involved in SMI marketing.

Cross-cultural Social Media Influencers

Cross-cultural social media influencers are individuals who have the cultural knowledge and related skills, such as language, to interact with people from other cultures on social media. This group of influencers enjoys massive followers on social media and operates beyond their native cultures (Di Yuna et al., 2022). They can be commercial -involved in SMI marketing- and non-commercial- not involved in marketing and product endorsement; the latter is the subject of this study. Cross-cultural social media influencers (CCSMI) simultaneously have challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, besides shared characteristics such as genuine personality, they also require knowledge and skills that might not be necessary or be irrelevant to other influencers. The first and most crucial aspect of CCSMI is cultural knowledge and understanding. As Clifford Geertz (1973) defined, culture is “*a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life*” (Geertz, 1973, p.89). Learning an overarching, pervasive, and symbolic concept, such as culture, is difficult, and cross-cultural influencers are expected to understand the nuance of the culture they want to influence. They need to adapt to the new cultural values and produce content that meets the follower's expectations in that culture (Ramachandran, 2021). Although learning a language and having the experience of living in a culture for a short time might not be enough to make sense of cultural intricacies (Kim, 2020), it might be the only way forward to understand another culture.

On the other hand, the novelty of doing a CCSMI appeals to the host culture as a

sign of attention, respect, and identity inclusion, making the cross-cultural influencers more likely to be welcomed. This argument is aligned with the social identity theory perspective, in which in-groups are accepted and preferred over out-groups (Hitlin, 2021; Hogg M., 2018); doing CCSMI is a form of cultural inclusion whereby the influencer is regarded as an in-group. This social identification -similarity to host culture- shapes the attitude and behavior of the followers toward the influencer (Wang, 2022). However, taking the cultural nuance and intricacies into account, doing SMI in a culture beyond one's native culture is still daunting; thus, it is worth knowing how to be a successful cross-cultural social media influencer.

RESEARCH CONCEPTUALIZATION

Social Media Engagement and Influencers' Appealingness

Social media engagement is a relatively new phenomenon that arose with the advent of online media interactivity, a feature that was quite impossible with traditional media (Wasike, 2023). Social media interactivity enables SMIs to reach potential followers, and it is a reciprocal process of sending and receiving information mediated by social media technology as a two-way interaction and engagement. Like, comment, share, upvote, downvote, recommend, hashtag, mention, and pin are some of the powerful interactive features of social media platforms whereby social engagement is practiced online (Wasike, 2023).

The concept of social media engagement has received different definitions from individual scholars and has heavily been influenced by the dominant commercialized propensity in social media research. For instance, Dolan (2015) defined *"a customer's behavioral manifestations that have a social media focus beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers"* (Dolan et al., 2015, p. 5). Dessart (2017) has discussed the three dimensions of social media engagement: cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement. Cognitive engagement includes the attention and absorption of a social media user toward content; affective engagement is the level of enjoyment and enthusiasm of social media users. Behavioral engagement involves the active manifestation of the user's acts, such as commenting, liking, and sharing the content of an individual on social media platforms (Dessart, 2017).

Concerning the appealingness of SMIs, scholars have mentioned that the influencers' personal characteristics, the type of content they share, and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the followers are influential elements (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, studies suggest that trust (Zhou, 2021), content quality,

language type, subjective or playful, and a friendly, consistent, and genuine personality (Knuth, 2020) positively appeal to followers' engagement with the social media influencers' posts. Similarly, studies confirm that based on selective exposure theory (Humanes, 2019), audiences regularly pay attention to the type of information that endorses their presumption and presupposition, further suggesting that influencers must deeply know their followers' needs and expectations. In light of the given explanation where the behavioral aspect of social media engagement, such as likes, comments, and shares, are the measurable elements of public engagement on social media, this study wants to find the answer to the following question.

Rq1. Based on the behavioral dimension of social media engagement, to what extent are the posts on the @anahitachin page on Facebook engaging and appealing?

Social Media Communication Strategies (SMCS) and Engagement

Social media communication strategies are approaches social media users can employ to get their messages across effectively, maximize the reach and view of their content, and enhance public engagement online. Similarly, these strategies are used by scholars to gauge the effectiveness and approval rate of social media campaigns and content among netizens. Scholars have developed various strategies applicable to different situations (e.g., see Floredu & Cabiddu, 2016). Among them, Strauß and others (2015), in a study of the communication strategies of Western embassies on Twitter in Gulf Countries, suggested six strategies: interactive communication, personalized communication, use of sentiments, relevance, transparency, and networking. To conform with the context of this study, the last two strategies in Strauß et al.'s (2015) approach were modified into *cultural dialogue* and *information provision* strategies and adopted as the theoretical framework in this research.

Interactive communication strategy is the process of the sender and receiver collaborating to make sense of the message. This strategy affords mutual engagement between the influencers and the followers. In this strategy, the receiver is not a passive communicator but an active contributor who can comment, give feedback, and co-create. Previous studies found that politicians applying interactive strategies were positively evaluated (Kelm, 2020). Similarly, studies also show that interactivity in social media has increased political involvement (Kruikemeier et al., 2014) and direct conversation with election candidates (Lee & Shin, 2012). *Personalized communication* strategy is how the influencers communicate with their followers in a personalized tone and manner online or share their private life information with them. Previous research

indicated that there is an association between personalized communication and political participation (Kruikemeier et al., 2014). Similarly, it was found that this strategy contributes to trust between the sender and receiver of the message by creating a trustful space (Strauß, 2015), also leading to a trustful relationship between the influencer and the followers (Wang, 2022; Knuth, 2020).

The use of sentiment is another communication strategy in which the message's source uses emotional words to persuade, convince, or shape a narrative. Previous studies show that there is an association between the type of sentiment in the posts and the level of engagement (Hagemann & Abramova, 2023). Furthermore, *content relevance* refers to the type of content shared with the followers. Given that any influencer has their area of interest and expertise, they are expected to share information relevant to the interest of their followers. *Cultural dialogue* – a concept already used in cross-cultural communication (Prosser, 1978)- is the *cross-cultural social media communication strategy* posited in this research. *Cultural dialogue* strategy emphasizes the dominance of culture as the central theme of the cross-cultural social media influencer. This study argues that due to the uncontentious nature of culture, it can be one of the most important elements of cross-cultural social media influencer success. Finally, the *information provision* strategy is proposed based on the informer functionality of the social media influencers adhering to authenticity (Zhao et al., 2023), who share information that fits the followers' interests. With this background, given that the functionality of SMCS and their impact on social media influencers has not been explored, this study wants to find answers to the following questions:

Rq2. Which social media communication strategies and themes dominate the @anahitachin posts on Facebook as part of telling China's story?

Rq3. Which content categories are more likely to be welcomed in the CCSMI, and is there any significant difference between the type of media (plain text, photo + text, video + text) and the level of engagement in the @anahitachin posts on Facebook?

Rq4. Do social media communication strategies, particularly cultural dialogue, content type, and media types (plain text, photo + text, video + text) influence the level of engagement on the @anahitachin posts?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Case Selection and Sampling

The case of this study is @anahitachin's *Facebook page*, which belongs to a Chinese citizen, journalist, and a Persian language and literature graduate from Peking University. Her Chinese name is Lin Simiao (蔭思淼), but she is known as *Ms. Anahita*, with her Persian name among her followers. Additionally, she has lived for a few months in Qazvin, a city in Iran, where she became interested in Persian civilization's history and culture (Anahita, 2023). After its creation on May 1st, 2020, this page has attracted over one million (1,015,101) followers within Persian-speaking countries up to the time of this study. Since then, because of her venture, she has been invited for interviews by the radio Nawroz and Afghanistan Women News Agency (ANWA). It should be noted that *Facebook* has labeled the @anahitachin page as China state-controlled media, while it rarely posts topics related to politics or the Chinese government, and the page is under the *personal blog* category of Facebook pages' categorization. However, the owner of the page has mentioned in her interviews and YouTube channel that she works as an interpreter with China Radio International (CRI Persian) and wants to introduce China's history and culture to her followers.

Using the Apify free accessed data scraping tool "Facebook Pages Scraper," 1183 Facebook posts of @anahitachin from 5/1/ 2020 to 11/18/ 2023 were extracted. Applying the random function in MS Excel, 300 posts from the corpus were randomly chosen as the sample of this research. Moreover, to analyze the interactivity of the page owner with her followers, twenty posts were randomly chosen from the (N = 300) sample. For each post, the ten most relevant comments, which are classified by the Facebook system, were manually derived for the purpose of sentiment analysis following a lexicon-based method (Husiat, 2019; Taboada, 2011; Verma, 2018). Thus, the sample of this study includes 300 Facebook posts and 200 comments on the 20 posts from @anahitachin's Facebook page, and IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 software was employed for data analysis.

Coding Scheme, Variables Operationalization, and Intercoder Reliability

The social media communication strategies, namely interactive communication, personalized communication, use of sentiment, and content relevance, were adopted from Strauß et al. (2015) as independent variables. The last two categories of transparent communication and networking in Strauß et al. (2015) were modified for the purpose of this study to *information provision and cultural*

dialogue strategies. For public engagement as dependent variables, this study adopted (Dessart, 2017) the behavioral dimension of the social media engagement framework, in which the behavioral manifestations of users, such as likes, comments, and shares, are considered measurable indicators of public engagement.

Table 1

Coding Manual of Social Media Communication Strategies

Dimensions	Definitions	Kappa value	Source
Use of sentiment	Posts containing positive emotional words such as hope, enthusiasm, excitement, joy, approval, and pride were coded (positive = 0); if contained negative emotions such as shame, anger, disgust, outrage, rejection, or denial, were coded (negative = 1) and if a post did not contain these two conditions without clear emotional indication was coded (neutral = 3).	.86	Strauß et al., 2015
Interactive communication	Posts containing #tags and @mentions were coded (interactive = 1,) if not (not interactive = 0).	1.000	Strauß et al., 2015
Personalized communication	Posts containing personal information of the influencer, events that the influencer was part of, or used the “I, me” linguistic indicators were coded (personalized = 1) if not (not personalized = 0).	.88	Strauß et al., 2015
Information provision	If a post informed about something or was a piece of news, it was coded (informative = 1), and if not, it was coded (not informative = 0).	.95	Self-modified
Cultural dialogue	Post giving information about culture was coded (cultural information = 0); if it was comparing the host and native cultures, it was coded (cultural comparison = 1). If	.93	Prosser, 1978; dimensions were modified

the influencer was adopting the host culture elements to look more local or in-group, it was coded (practicing host culture = 2), and if a post did not contain the cultural dialogue strategy, it was coded (neither = 3).

Note: Given the content dynamics on social media, for content relevance strategy (content categorization) following (Kuckartz, 2019; Strauß et al., 2015), an open coding approach was applied.

The coding book was designed, and an undergraduate student native to the Persian language was trained to do the initial coding to ensure intercoder reliability. First, the researcher and the assistant independently coded 5% of the sample (15 posts) to test intercoder reliability. Cohen's Kappa test of intercoder reliability -which measures the level of agreement between the raters and is known to be a suitable measure for nominal data (Rau & Shih, 2021), was conducted. The result of the Kappa test, as shown in [Table 1](#), was between .85 and 1.000, which is within the acceptable and satisfactory level of agreement between the coders (McHugh, 2012; Rau & Shih, 2021). For measuring public engagement, the likes, comments, and shares were computed into a single variable -and, because of positive skewness, were log-transformed to achieve normal distribution (Huang, 2023)- to analyze the overall public engagement rate of the @anahitachin posts on Facebook. The intercoder reliability of the open-coded categories was also within the acceptable range of Kappa value, and the inconsistencies were discussed and resolved prior to data analysis.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

Considering the level of engagement of @anahitachin, it was found that each post, on average, got 3761 likes, 311.8 comments, and 34.8 shares.

Table 2

Public Engagement Rate Descriptive Statistics

Engagement elements	N	M	SD	MIN	MAX
Likes	300	3761.7	5768.12	26	56121

<i>Comments</i>	300	311.8	405.53	1	2849
<i>Shares</i>	300	34.8	99.98	1	968

Additionally, to answer [Rq1](#) using the Hootsuite social media engagement rate calculator $\left\{\frac{\text{likes}+\text{comments}+\text{shares}}{NP}\right\}/TF*100$, which gets the sum of the public engagement elements divided by the number of posts (NP) and then divided by the total number of followers (TF), multiplied by 100, it was found that the public engagement rate of this page is 0.404%. Based on the Hootsuite engagement guideline, if this page is put into the entertainment category -which the average engagement rate is 1.08%- based on the total number of followers, the page's engagement rate is very low (Mikolajczyk, 2023). Considering another research showing that the average engagement rate of Facebook pages is 0.06%, the engagement rate of this page would be far ahead of the general average (Oberlo, 2023).

In response to [Rq2](#), it was found that the @anahitachin page has employed all of the social media communication strategies at proportionate levels. A proportionate amount of the posts on this page have been interactive, in which the page manager has used the mention and tags features of the platform or included questions or suggestions in the post, which appeals to the followers to interact with the page. Similarly, 62 % of the posts on this page included personalized content and the manager's daily life.

Table 3

Descriptive Analysis of Employing Social Media Communication Strategies in the CCSMI Context

<i>Social media communication strategies</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Interactivity	300		
- Interactive		135	45%
- Not interactive		165	55%
Personalization	300		
- Personalized		186	62%
- Not personalized		114	38%
Use of sentiment	300		
- Positive		169	56%
- Negative		14	4.7%
- Neutral		117	39%

Cultural dialogue	300		
- Cultural information		94	31.3%
- Cultural comparison		23	7.7%
- Practicing host culture		24	8%
- Neither		159	53%
Information provision	300		
- Informative		235	78.3%
- Not informative		65	21.7%

Note: For the sake of brevity, the content relevance strategy was separated in the coming table, and strategies are not mutually exclusive.

As Table 3 shows, this page proportionately employed the sentiment strategy in its posts, with most posts being positive (56%), neutral (39%), and only a few negative. The *cultural dialogue strategy* proposed in this research has been proportionately employed in the posts on this page. Almost half (47%) of the posts on this page contain the cultural dialogue strategy. A proportionate number (31.3%) of posts provide information about Chinese culture and history to the Persian followers. In 7.7% of the posts on this page, cultural comparison -in which the cultural events or customs between host and native cultures were compared- has been used. Similarly, in 8% of the posts on this page, the practicing host culture dimensions of the *culture dialogue strategy* -in which the influencer has adopted the host culture to make a close in-group relationship with the followers- have been employed. Furthermore, 78.3% of the posts on the page have been informative, and only 21.7% did not contain informative content.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of Content Categories (Content relevance)

<i>Content categories</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Std.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Culture	100	1229.7	1094.79	33.3%
Chinese Cities	34	1201.8	1234.57	11.3%
Daily Life	29	1884.2	3519.77	9.7%
Sport	22	1820.9	4036.51	7.3%
Personal information	14	1462.2	1406.04	4.7%
Chinese Language	13	1761.6	2167.56	4.3%
Entertainment	13	647.1	420.79	4.3%
News	13	922.6	834.67	4.3%
Technology	13	1048.7	1456.98	4.3%
Religion	9	2845.8	3233.59	3.0%

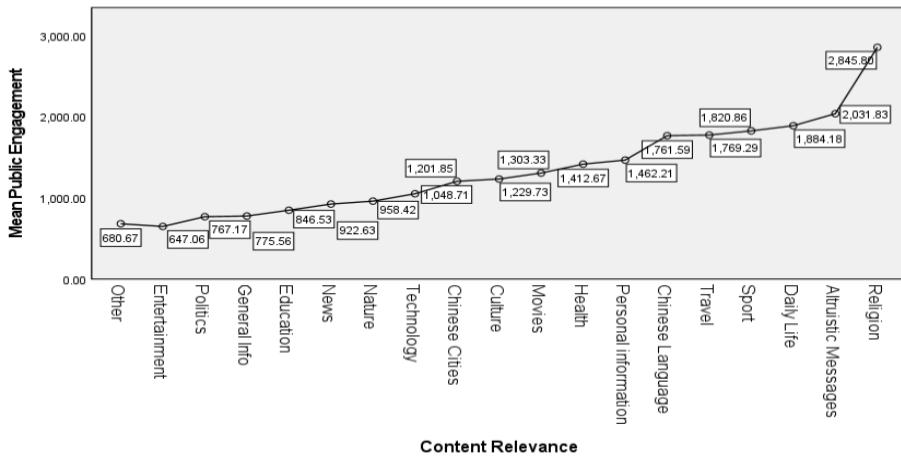
Travel	8	1769.3	2925.47	2.7%
Altruistic Messages	6	2031.8	2209.69	2.0%
General Info	6	775.6	559.06	2.0%
Education	5	846.5	693.43	1.7%
Health	4	1412.7	319.15	1.3%
Nature	4	958.4	733.05	1.3%
Movies	3	1303.3	1935.94	1.0%
Politics	2	767.2	1009.04	0.7%
Other	2	680.7	917.35	0.7%
Total	300			100%

In terms of content relevance strategy, as [Table 4](#) shows, based on frequency, most of the content posted on this page is related to culture. With Chinese language and religion categories -classified separately from the culture category here to measure the level of engagement independently, assuming they are two major sub-categories - over 40% of the content posted on this page is about culture. Chinese cities 11.3%, daily life 9.7%, sports 7.3%, personal information 4.7 %, Chinese language, technology, news, and entertainment, each with 4.3%, are the other major content categories that dominate this page. On the contrary, politics, with only 0.7 %, is the least covered theme on this page based on the sample of this study.

In response to the [Rq3](#), which content categories stand first regarding public engagement? As [Figure 1](#) shows, based on the mean, posts related to religion received the highest overall engagement, which matches the reality of the Afghanistan and Iran societies. Similarly, the altruistic messages of the admin about the events that affected the followers in some way, for instance, an explosion in a mosque or an earthquake in Afghanistan in which the admin has shown sympathy, is the second highest content category in terms of overall level of engagement. Daily life, sport, travel, Chinese language, and personal information are other well-received content categories in terms of overall public engagement. On the contrary, entertainment, and politics are this page's two least welcomed content types.

Figure 1

The Level of Public Engagement by the Content Categories



For the second part of the Rq3, whether there is any significant difference between the type of media (plain text, photo + text, and video + text) and the level of engagement, a One-Way ANOVA test was conducted ($f(2) = 85.402, p < 0.001$). The result shows a significant difference between the media types and the engagement level; therefore, Turkey’s HSD post hoc test was performed to explore the differences between groups. Plain text ($N = 10, M = 2.31, SD = .666$), photo + text ($N = 178, M = 2.98, SD = .487$), and Video + text ($N = 112, M = 3.82, SD = .706$), based on means, the multiple comparisons and post hoc test shows that plain text with the lowest mean ($M = 2.31, SD = .666$), have received the lowest level of engagement and video + text ($M = 3.82, SD = .706$), with highest mean have received the highest level of engagement from followers -significantly different from other groups. Similarly, photo + text received more engagement than plain text, and video + text received more engagement from both photo and text groups.

To answer the Rq4, whether the media type (plain text, photo + text, Video + text), content types Table 4, and social media communication strategies, particularly cultural dialogue, influence the level of engagement in the context of cross-culture social media influencers, a series of multiple linear regression analyses Table 5 were conducted. In the first model, overall engagement as the dependent variable and content type, media type, SMCS, and date as predictors were entered.

($f(29, 270) = 7.403, p < 0.001$), $R^2 = .44$ and adjusted $R^2 = .38$ show the significant model fit, explaining 44% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Table 5

The Impact of Social Media Communication Strategies and Media Type on the Level of Engagement

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Overall engagement (Logged)</i>	<i>Likes (Logged)</i>	<i>Comments (Logged)</i>	<i>Shares (Logged)</i>
Intercept	37.72 (18.7)	27.5	37.57	66.72
Use of sentiment (ref. neutral)		(15.9)	(15.39)	(17.3)
- Positive	-.01 (.08)	-.07 (.07)	-.09 (.07)	-.07 (.07)
- Negative	-.04 (.22)	-.14 (.18)	-.10 (.18)	-.08 (20)
Interactivity (ref. vs)	-.04 (.08)	-.02 (.07)	.02 (.06)	-.14* (.07)
Personalization (ref. vs)	.16* (.08)	.15* (.07)	.12 (.06)	-.01 (.07)
Information Provision (ref. vs)	-.10 (.10)	-.07 (.09)	-.14 (.08)	-.07(.10)
Cultural Dialogue (ref. N/A)	.09(.13)	.12 (11)	.07 (.11)	.06 (.12)
- Cultural Information	.34* (.17)	.29* (14)	.30* (.14)	.33* (.16)
- Cultural Comparison				(.16)
- Practicing Host Culture	.06 (.18)	.14 (.15)	.10 (.15)	.11(.16)
Content relevance (ref. sport)				
- Chinese Language	-.09 (.24)	.17 (.21)	.46* (.20)	.44+ (.23)
- Culture	-.16 (.19)	-.07 (.16)	-.03 (.15)	.14 (.17)
- Technology	-.34 (.21)	-.27 (.18)	-.26 (17)	.29 (.19)
- Chinese Cities	-.10 (.16)	-.08 (14)	.06(.13)	.15 (.15)
- Travel	-.13 (.25)	-.03 (21)	-.08 (20)	.13 (.23)
- General Info	.32 (.27)	.01(.23)	-.18 (.23)	.37(.25)
- Nature	-.16 (.32)	-.01(27)	.02(.26)	.02 (.29)
- Daily Life	-.16 (.17)	-.01 (.14)	.10 (.14)	.12 (15)
- News	-.27 (.23)	-.02 (.19)	.00 (19)	.14 (.21)
- Religion	.14 (.26)	.20 (22)	.18 (.22)	.73*** (24)

- Personal information	.00 (.21)	.10 (.18)	.34* (.17)	.07 (.19)
- Education	-.03 (.29)	.00 (.25)	-.16 (.24)	.55* (.27)
- Altruistic Messages	1.14** (.38)	.64* (.31)	.40 (.30)	1.16** (.34)
- Movies	-.36 (.36)	-.03 (.31)	-.04 (.30)	-.14 (.33)
- Health	-.08 (.32)	.16 (.27)	.20 (.26)	.26 (.29)
- Politics	-.27 (.46)	-.06 (.39)	-.12 (.37)	.52 (.42)
- Entertainment	-.24 (.21)	-.12 (.18)	-.18 (.17)	.07 (.19)
- Other	-.80 (.44)	-.85* (.38)	.11 (.36)	-.02 (.41)
Date (timestamp)	-2.57E-9	-1.68E-9	-2.61E-9	-4.78E-9
Media type (ref. plain text)	.95*** (.20)	1.03 *** (.18)	.98*** (.17)	.50* (.19)
- Photo + Text				
- Video + Text	1.81*** (.26)	.82*** (.18)	.90*** (.17)	.87*** (.19)
R²		(.18)	(.18)	(.20)
N	.44	.21	.24	.30
	300	300	300	300

*All entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors written within the parenthesis. The reference is written before the category's name for dummy variables, and vs. stands for versus in dichotomous variables. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$*

Table 5 shows that the use of sentiment and information provision social media communication strategies did not significantly impact the overall engagement level and engagement in the form of likes, comments, and shares. The impacts of other strategies and factors, as shown above, are discussed below:

Overall engagement: The result of multiple linear regression analysis shows that Photo + Text $b = .95$, 95% $CI [.544, 1.361]$, $p = 0.000$, and Video + Text $b = 1.81$, 95% $CI [1.384, 2.228]$, $p = .000$ significantly and positively predict the overall engagement. It means posts containing videos and photos with text receive more engagement, which confirms the result of the One-Way ANOVA above. Similarly, personalized content $b = .16$, 95% $CI [.007, .319]$, $p = 0.041$ category of personalization strategy, cultural comparison $b = .34$, 95% $CI [.006, .672]$, $p = 0.044$ categories of *cultural dialogue strategy*, and altruistic messages $b = 1.114$, 95% $CI [.416, 1.871]$, $p = 0.002$ category of content relevance strategy positively and significantly influences the overall engagement level. Personalized content demonstrates the personal involvement of the influencer in the post, which can be the personal information or events of which the influencer has been part.

Cultural comparison indicates the posts in which the influencer compares the host and native cultural elements together, and altruistic messages are the type of content that contains sympathetic messages, including expressing condolence in the advent of a natural disaster -as the case of this study.

Likes: ($f(29, 270) = 2.494, p < 0.001$), $R^2 = .21$, shows model significance explaining 21% of the variance in Likes as the dependent variable. Similar to overall engagement the type of media, Photo + Text $b = 1.03, 95\%CI [.682, 1.375], p = .000$, Video + Text $b = .82, 95\% CI [.465, 1.181], p = 0.000$, personalized content $b = .15, 95\%CI [.021, .285], p = 0.023$, altruistic messages $b = .64, 95\% CI [.024, .125], p = 0.042$ and culture comparison categories $b = .30, 95\% CI [.013, .578], p = 0.040$ positively and significantly influence the level of public engagement in the form of likes, which means except for the media type, the personalized content, altruistic messages and cultural comparison content are more likely to attract engagement in the form of likes than other types of contents. However, the “Other” category of content $b = -.85, 95\% CI [-1.589, -.112], p = 0.024$, which could not be classified in any of the content relevance categories above, significantly and negatively influences the level of engagement in the form of likes -this type of content can be signaled out as irrelevant that does not fit followers’ interests.

Comments: ($f(29, 270) = 2.943, p < 0.001$), $R^2 = .24$, shows the model significance explaining 24% of the variance in Comments as the dependent variable. As shown in Table 5, the findings demonstrate that posts related to the Chinese language $b = .46, 95\%CI [.067, .857], p = 0.022$, cultural comparison $b = .30, 95\% CI [.023, .569], p = 0.034$, and personal information $b = .34, 95\% CI [.002, .678], p = 0.049$ significantly influence the level of engagement in the form of comments. These categories of content generate more discussion compared to the others. Similar to overall engagement and likes, the media type Photo + Text $b = .98, 95\%CI [.649, 1.320], p = 0.000$, Video + Text $b = .90, 95\%CI [.553, 1.246], p = 0.001$ significantly increases the number of comments in a post.

Shares: ($f(29, 270) = 4.022, p < 0.001$), $R^2 = .30$, indicates the model significance and explains 30% of the variance in the Shares as the dependent variable. As Table 5 shows, among the different types of engagement, more categories are influential in sharing posts. Except for cultural comparison $b = .33, 95\%CI [.024, .638], p = 0.035$ and altruistic messages $b = 1.16, 95\%CI [.489, 1.831], p = 0.001$ which were influential in other forms of engagements explained above, posts containing religious issues $b = .73, 95\%CI [.249, 1.211], p = 0.003$, have a bigger chance of being shared than other types of content. It confirms that people in religious societies such as Afghanistan are more willing to share religious

content that a foreigner shares than others. Also, posts about the Chinese language $b = .44$, 95% $CI [-.005, .884]$, $p = 0.053$, -which is marginally significant- have a higher chance of being shared. Similarly, posts that contain Video + Text $b = .87$, 95% $CI [.478, 1.257]$, $p = 0.000$, Photo + Text $b = .50$, 95% $CI [.119, .873]$, $p = 0.010$ are more likely to be shared than other type of media. On the contrary, interactivity $b = -.14$, 95% $CI [-.282, -.002]$, $p = 0.047$, in which the influencer asked for feedback, asked a question, or used a tag significantly decreased the level of engagement in the form of shares.

DISCUSSION

Social media influencers (SMI), due to the growth of social media influencer marketing, have been the center of attention by businesses and academics. Social media influencers with massive numbers of followers have contributed to the growth of businesses and brands in recent years. Nevertheless, non-commercial social media influencers, who are at least not involved in SMI marketing, have been surprisingly marginalized in the literature. This study tried to come from another angle to explore how non-commercial influencers operate beyond their native cultures. Previous studies marginally addressed such groups of influencers as digital opinion leaders (Wang, 2022), but still, there is not a well-established research framework and enough literature in this regard. This study argues that due to overwhelming commercialized tendencies in social media utilization, the other aspects of these potent tools, particularly their cross-culture exchange potential, have not been discovered or neglected. Hence, this research underscores the paucity of established research in this field, which needs adequate attention.

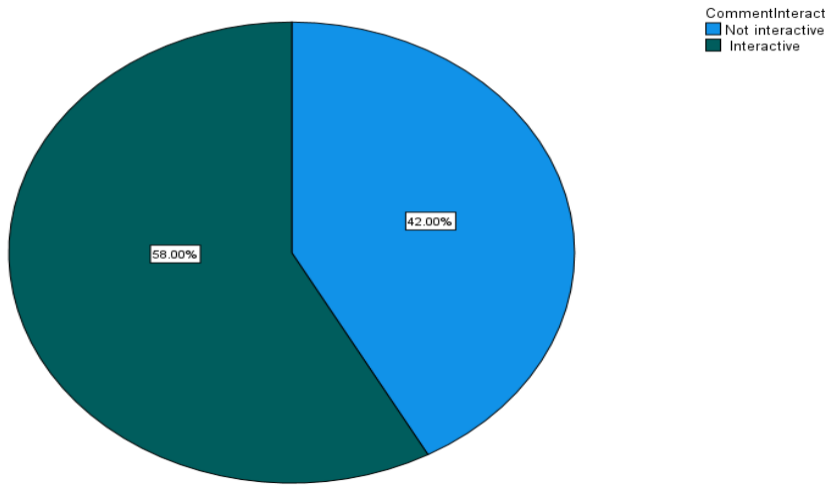
Social Media Communication Strategies (SMCS)

Using the lens of social media communication strategies, this study explored to what extent applying these strategies in a cross-cultural context will increase public engagement. This study found that all SMCS can be used in the context of cross-cultural social media influencers. Interactivity, one of the influential factors of political involvement on social media (Kruikemeier et al., 2014), has been proportionately employed in the posts on this page. Except for negatively affecting the number of shares interactive Shares $b = -.14$, 95% $CI [-.282, -.002]$, $p = 0.047$, which confirms previous findings (O'Hara, 2020), noted that the overuse of hashtags decreases engagement on Facebook- on the other form of engagement; however, its influence was insignificant. The analysis of the comment's interactivity based on whether they received feedback from the page manager, as shown in [Figure 2](#), indicates that the page manager highly valued the followers'

comments and proportionately replied to them.

Figure 2

The Proportion of the Page Owner's Feedback to the Followers' Comments



Similarly, besides daily life and events that the page manager has shared in a personalized tone, a large amount of personal and family information of the page manager, including her birthday, marital status, educational background, graduation ceremony, thesis defense, friends' wedding, family members interest have been shared with the followers. This shows that the owner of this page highly applied the personalization strategy in her posts, which is associated with trust in literature (Wang, 2022; Wasike, 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). Besides, this study empirically found that personalized content $Likes\ b = .15, 95\%CI [.021, .285], p = 0.023$, is more likely to be "liked" than non-personalized content. This finding confirms the previous research, which showed that personalized content is more likely to grab customers' attention (Dolan et al., 2019).

Similarly, conducting a sentiment analysis of the comments based on the lexicon-based method found that 82.5% of comments were positive and mainly complimented the page owner; only 9% were negative, and 8.5% were neutral. It demonstrates that the influencer has tremendously influenced the follower's attitude and has created a deep, trusted, and intimate relationship with them. This can be regarded as a genuine, transparent, sincere, and authentic self-presentation (Knuth, 2020). In terms of affecting public engagement, however, it was found that the use of sentiment was not a predictor of public engagement in this study. Furthermore, the *cultural dialogue strategy* has been widely used and

significantly predicts the level of engagement in the context of CCSMI. The cultural comparison overall engagement $b=34$, 95% CI [.09, .672], $p = 0.044$, cultural comparison likes $b =.30$, 95% CI [.013, .578], $p = 0.040$, cultural comparison comments $b =.30$, 95% CI [.023, .569], $p = 0.034$, and cultural comparison shares $b =.33$, 95%CI [.024, .638], $p = 0.035$. This is because, through cultural comparison, making sense of non-native cultures becomes easy, and the similarities between the two cultures seem more interesting to the followers. Therefore, this finding is a novel theoretical contribution that can be used and tested in the context of cross-cultural social media influencers in future research.

Besides, the type of content that is posted is a predictor of engagement in CCSMI. For instance, in this study, the Chinese language comments $b = .46$, 95%CI [.067, .857], $p = 0.022$, significantly predicts the level of comments a post receives, and Chinese language Shares $b =.46$, 95% CI [-.005, .884], $p = 0.053$, marginally predicts the level of shares in a post. Regarding the Chinese language as a predictor of engagement in this study, two explanations can be proposed: First, owing to Chinese society's modernization, the country has become a desirable destination for business people, tourists, and students; consequently, more and more people are interested in learning Chinese. Second, due to the difficulty of the Chinese language for foreigners, a post related to this language may have received enormous comments in the form of questions. Similarly, posts containing religious issues Share $b = .73$, 95%CI [.249, 1.211], $p = 0.003$ significantly predicts engagement in the form of shares. In this particular research, the page owner has tried to familiarize her followers with the Chinese Muslim community by introducing their famous mosques, special foods, and cultural events; therefore, for a foreign Muslim who has been exposed to negative Western media reports regarding Chinese Muslims, this provides a valuable and first-hand insight -as part of China's story- which is worth sharing. Lastly, altruistic messages Overall engagement $b = 1.17$, 95% CI [.449, 1.898], $p = 0.002$, altruistic messages Likes $b =.64$, 95% CI [.024, 1.25], $p = 0.042$ and altruistic messages Shares $b = 1.16$, 95%CI [.489, 1.831], $p = 0.001$ which included expressing condolence in the advent of an explosion in Afghanistan or a natural disaster such as an earthquake in this study, significantly predicts the overall engagement, likes and sharing. This is due to the fact that people expect each other to be nice and have empathy and understanding. Posts containing such content significantly predicted overall engagement and shares, which can signify attention and appreciation. Lastly, this research found that posts combining photos and videos with text are more likely to attract the follower's attention than plain text, which lacks graphical elements. This finding confirms previous studies' findings, which showed that posts containing pictures are more likely to

attract engagement than simple text (Li & Xie, 2020).

Public Engagement in the CCSMI Context

This research found that content types such as religion, altruistic messages, Chinese language, and cultural comparison can significantly influence the level of engagement in different forms. However, it should be noted that given the nuance of the cultural context, the same content might not generate public engagement on social media in other cultures. Also, the findings of this study show that this page, by employing social media communication strategies, particularly personalized communication, made an intimate relationship with followers. Employing a cultural dialogue strategy told China's story in a non-contentious and appealing way using a cultural comparison approach. Moreover, by posting altruistic messages related to the issues that affected the followers negatively, the page increased the follower's trust in itself and multiplied the level of engagement.

At the same time, this research found that *the @anahitachin* page mainly posted issues related to culture, daily life, personal information, technology, sport, and travel, which are non-political. This political avoidance can be a success factor for cross-cultural social media influencers because previous studies (Sun et al., 2021; Tarrow, 2021) noted that political issues are controversial and divisive on social media. Even though other types of content, including topics related to gay rights, abortion (Sumner, 2020), rituals, and religion, might also be contentious to some extent, generally speaking, political issues are more controversial. Similarly, it was noted that the handler of the page, in order to get closer to the followers, used host culture practices as an approach, such as poem recitation in the host language and extending wishes on the special occasion of the host culture. This cultural adoption is not only helpful to influencers to make sense of the host culture but also contributes to the acceptance of them as an in-group, consequently facilitating their narrative and shaping the attitude of followers towards them (Wang, 2022).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributed to the literature on social media influencer SMI studies, communication strategies, and engagement. Moreover, concentrating on the non-commercial social media influencers in the cross-cultural context, this study theoretically contributed to the literature on cross-cultural social media influencers, which has yet to receive attention. This study proposes that the non-commercial potential of social media influencers in providing information, cultural dialogue, global peace, and coexistence is precious and must be explored,

acknowledged, and appreciated. From a practical point of view, this study explored the content categories that attract more engagement in cross-cultural settings. This study empirically found that cultural dialogue can be used as a social media communication strategy in the CCSMI context. As explained in the paper, a culture-centered, non-political, and non-contentious content relevance strategy that fits the followers' interests contributes to the success of a social media cross-culture campaign and telling China's story. Besides, the media type as one of the main influencing factors of public engagement must be seriously considered. A long plain text with no audio-visual attachment seems boring for the reader and followers; a balanced post decorated with graphical elements, however, can highly influence the number of engagements a post gets. Social media practitioners, particularly newcomers interested in being cross-cultural social media influencers, can use these points.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

Besides its merits, this study has some shortcomings that need to be acknowledged. First, this study tried to tentatively classify influencers into commercial and non-commercial, with a blurred border. Defining non-commercial social media influencers based on not being involved in SMI marketing may not fully capture the difference between these two SMI groups. Future research can address this issue's ambiguity and comprehensively demarcate the frontiers between commercial and non-commercial social media influencers. Second, as the topic addresses a specific cultural context, the findings might not be generalizable to other contexts, platforms, and cultures. Future studies can explore the non-commercial cross-culture influencers' endeavors in the context of different cultures and on different platforms. Furthermore, social media engagement has more dimensions, such as cognitive, affective, normative, and spatiotemporal, but this study only concentrated on the behavioral dimension following previous research. Future research can apply additional engagement dimensions to address public engagement comprehensively.

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