"Influencer Marketing and its Effectiveness in the Lodging Sector"

An Honors Thesis

by

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Abstract

The rise of social media influencers as a vehicle to reach consumers is a developing addition to the marketing mix. The purpose of this honors thesis is to determine if boutique hotel brands can benefit from the use of micro-influencer marketing to reach more potential guests than through their own social media accounts. The research methodology to test the hypothesis is participant observation and content analysis within Instagram as the research environment. Three boutique hotels within Nashville, Tennessee were chosen to compare influencer effectiveness rates against to determine the validity of the hypothesis. The importance of this research is to understand the level of effectiveness associated with investing in social media influencer marketing for boutique hotels.

Keywords: Boutique Hotels, e-Word of Mouth, Influencer Marketing, Micro-Influencers, Brand

Introduction

Social media has introduced many new marketing strategies for an array of industries. Namely, and quickly gaining importance, is the use of influencer marketing. Influencer marketing has been a present piece of the marketing mix, but not how social media allows it to be. Social media encourages the common person to post their lives on the internet, which can become a source of revenue for the poster and authentic visibility for the business that works with them. The growth of this influencer marketing form is newly developing, as is the research that surrounds it, including which industries it would be most applicable.

One of the largest industries in the world is hospitality and tourism. There are over 185,000 hotel and resort properties (Statista, 2018). This statistic has not been updated in four years and does not include hotels with less than ten rooms, meaning the number is probably much larger. With this type of saturation, marketers need to be cognizant of new modes of communication to reach their target audience better. A type of lodging that many large brands are now including under their scope is boutique hotels. These small, unique properties attract a certain type of guest that influencers could persuade. Boutique hotel brands can benefit from micro-influencer marketing to reach more potential guests than through their social media accounts. The research unfolded in this project will be beneficial for marketing practitioners working with boutique hotels and for advancing research surrounding the topic.

Literature Review

This section will be used to uncover the terms needed for a foundational understanding of this topic and to discuss what research already exists. The key terms in

this research project are boutique hotels, E-word of mouth, influencer marketing in hospitality, and a brand.

Conceptual Framework

Boutique Hotels

Boutique hotels offer guests an alternative to traditional hotel stays. Garg and Kumar (2021) define boutique hotels as authentic, smaller hotel properties that are differentiated by uniqueness and personalized customer attention. Another source explains that they have "original interior and exterior design" that is sometimes inspired by the local culture (Malcheva, 2019). Boutique hotels are a great addition to tourists' lodging options as they are meant to add to the experience (Ahmad, Hemdi, & Othman, 2017). Additionally, boutique hotels are characterized by their small size; Olga (2009) states that boutique hotels are between three rooms and two-hundred rooms. The small size and the differentiated offerings allow those who choose boutique hotels to feel they are getting a unique, cultural experience.

E-Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Word of mouth marketing has been an important facet to reach consumers. With the introduction of the internet, word of mouth exchanges has developed from only face-to-face interactions to exchanges shared across screens (Zhang et al., 2010). These screen connections introduce social media and influencer marketing as eWOM allows users to share their reviews of products and services (Hsu &Yang, 2021). These exchanges are generally not compensated, postulating the difference between eWOM and influencer marketing.

Influencer Marketing in Hospitality

Influencer marketing is an addition to the marketing mixes of various industries. Duran provides evidence that influencer marketing has more than doubled in recent years

(2017). The sudden growth is indication of importance. According to Ye et al., an influencer is an ordinary person who shares their life via social media and has garnered a following (2021). Influencers can develop their fame outside of the social media platforms or within them (Haenlien et al., 2020). Generally, their content is for some type of exchange: free items, free services, or monetary payment (Farrell et al., 2022, p. 36). Many scholars have discussed the contrasting natures of traditional influencer marketing, which has usually meant celebrity spokespeople, to the nuanced definition of influencer marketing. One comment on the debate noted that celebrities create "exclusive" personas around the products or services they endorse, while nuanced influencers offer authentic and approachable qualities (Jerslev, 2016). The key to authentic and organic content from influencers for the respective brand is cultivating the relationship to encourage long-term agreements (Gretzel, 2018). Influencer marketing within hospitality and tourism, specifically, is discussed by Ong and Ito (2018), who found that influencer marketing is efficient in changing destination image attitudes and increasing travel intentions. Influencer marketing has developed to the accepted definition it is known as today, but as social media continues to be relied on, the definition and levels of influencers will continue to develop in research.

Micro-Influencers

Many influencer classifications separate influencers to attract different crowds and perceived trust levels. Farrell et al. (2022) described the influencer levels presented in the table below.

Influencer Classification	Number of Followers
Nano	1,000-10,000
Micro	10,000-50,000
Mid-Tier	50,000-500,000
Macro	500,000-1,000,000
Mega	1,000,000+

Table 1, Influencer classification by follower counts.

For this research, micro-influencers will be considered due to the high levels of trust associated with their following. Silalahi (2020) indicates that micro-influencers generate more engagement than any other influencer level. Knowing the effectiveness that micro-influencers provide in their endorsements will lend to the study of boutique hotels specifically.

Brand

The definition of a brand has been debated, and different meanings have been used in various literature about it. My (2009) presents research that showcases the various definitions and that researchers should declare what definition they are referring to in their works. Kuchibharla (2012) studied a thematic framework from de Chernatony and Riley that included twelve themes scholars used to define brand (1996). Through a synthesis of the themes, Kuchibharla presented two encompassing themes: Firm perspective and consumer perspective. The firm perspective includes definitions that differentiate brands from each other, such as the brand as a logo, legal instrument, and company. The consumer perspective is how the consumer sees the brand, as a risk reducer, as shorthand, or brand as an image. The firm perspective will be considered to this research, as in the company name and differentiating tangible qualities.

Current Research

The research surrounding influencer marketing is increasing as the buzz around it grows. While the research on influencer marketing is becoming abundant, the specific use of influencer marketing for boutique hotels is minimal. A collection of relevant studies is compiled here to develop an understanding of the status of literature on the topic. Li et al. (2021) conducted a similar study on restaurants to find if social media influencers would be more efficient in generating marketing effectiveness than the restaurants themselves. It was found that the authenticity that influencers conveyed successfully generated more post-interaction. Dutta, Sharma, and Goyal (2021) wanted to discover if customers consult social media influence before making a purchase decision and to what level of influence they refer to. They discovered micro-influencer blogs scored higher in trust/site visits than any other size influencer blog.

Influencer marketing cannot be used the same for each business and brand. Research on the effectiveness of influencer marketing, in general, was conducted by Kim and Kim (2020); noting that influencer marketing can be very effective, they added that companies should not just choose the influencer with the highest follower count. Instead, companies need to choose influencers congruent to their brand, otherwise, they risk negative engagement. Glover (2009) provided an analysis that deduced influencer endorsements' effectiveness in their awareness and reputation for destinations. The collection of current research depicts the apparent importance and potential of influencer marketing.

Methodology

The methodology is meant to inform the readers about the research methods being used and the research that discusses if these methods are best for the current topic. The

two topics used to answer the claims within the hypothesis are a literature review and content analysis/participant observation.

Literature Review

To produce quality research, the researcher must first have a solid foundation. The first of the methods used is a literature review to incorporate fundamentals and a solid understanding. Winchester and Salji (2016) describe a literature review as identifying gaps in research to develop a hypothesis and gain a conceptual understanding of what is already known about a subject. There are three types of literature review: simple, applied, and academic (Kara, 2021). Simple includes popular sources that are easily accessible and is usually brief or exploratory. Applied is used in professional environments that seek to find facts and figures. Finally, academic uses scholarly sources that require accuracy and includes a conceptual framework. There can be a level of bias in completing a literature review, so the researcher must be aware and work to avoid partiality (Winchester & Salji, 2016). A literature review is often the first step chosen to process the research objective.

In this research, a literature review was used to better understand the chosen industry and to conceptualize what was being discussed. The literature review was inclusive/evaluative and exploratory because it offered conversation beyond what was included in the sources (Veal, 2011). Sources were chosen based on relevance to the study and availability. Additionally, it is important to add that the sources were scholarly, as this was an academic literature review. The concepts chosen were representative of the hypothesis.

Participant Observation/Content Analysis

Participant observation is just one type of research method to answer a hypothesis. Many researchers say it leads qualitatively because it is only trying to "understand the nature of the phenomena and is not interested in assessing the magnitude and distribution of phenomena" (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). According to A.J. Veal, participant observation can be a qualitative approach that allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the study environment (2011). By integrating into the study setting, researchers can identify exactly what is happening for analysis. Within this same thought, content analysis allows the researcher to quantify what is happening. Other fields of study use observation techniques heavily, like anthropology, which is usually referred to as fieldwork (Musante & DeWalt, 2016). The application of participant observation and content analysis can be applied to many different disciplines.

Participant observation within hospitality and tourism can make its presence known in a few different ways. Veal provides the example of a researcher studying an amusement park. As a participant-observer, the researcher can attend the park, as the guests do, to gain access to observational data. Within marketing/business, researchers can analyze publicly open documents like annual reports of various companies. Rajagopal (2018) explains that participant observation in marketing can present itself as quantitative considering the figures being evaluated. The phenomena being evaluated in various participant observation examples differ as much as the disciplines that use the method.

The use of content analysis in this paper helps to quantify what is being observed. Content analysis is a type of observational research that allows the researcher to identify what is happening by looking at texts, pictures, or still data (Veal, 2011). Paker and Paker

(2022) conducted a marketing content analysis that analyzed different photographs of yachts. Their use of content analysis within tourism supports the utility of this research method.

There are various validity and bias issues that researchers need to consider with participant observation and content analysis. For example, as a surveyor needs to ensure that their sample is representative to obtain validity, as does an observer (Veal, 2011). Some people, files, posts, or whatever is being studied may be the most accessible, but it does not offer a realistic look at the population when choosing for accessibility. By choosing to observe phenomena associated with participants, it is likely to assume that conditions and figures may change frequently. This observation would make the research outdated before it is even used.

Research Setting

The content that will be analyzed will come from Instagram. Instagram is an app that began in 2010 to share photos (Herman, 2018). It has since evolved to include videos and stories with limited viewing time. While there are more users on Facebook, Instagram is more effective in generating revenue for users based on ads. Bellstrom (2018) estimates that revenue growth per Instagram ads would be 351.8% from 2018 to 2022, while Facebook is a low 62.7%. Instagram attracts all ages and all groups as the fourth most popular social media platform (Paker & Paker, 2018). The number of accounts created on Instagram has been 1.386 billion worldwide (Bellstrom, 2018). The use of the platform is undoubted, and its resourcefulness can be applied to many industries.

Instagram has become a tool for the hospitality and tourism industry as users are using the app to showcase their travels. A survey was administered to discover the

reasons that Instagram was useful in increasing travel intention. The results were that usefulness, enjoyment, and entertainment inspired people to engage with the posts, which increased travel intention to the various locations (Barbe, Neuburger, & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Those same researchers also noted that Instagram has become the destination for users to showcase their destinations. Users are average travelers, DMOs, and travel influencers (Barbe, Neuburger, & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Due to the number of users and the effectiveness in showcasing travel destinations, Instagram is the perfect research environment.

Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

Boutique Hotels

Three boutique hotels in Nashville, Tennessee, were chosen for this study. The research environment was set in Nashville, Tennessee, where there are plentiful post-worthy lodging options. To set a control, there will only be three properties used. The boutique hotels are Gallatin Hotel, Fairlane Hotel, and Thompson Nashville. Each has its own corresponding Instagram account. In table 2 below, their Instagram follower counts are listed, the number of rooms in their hotel and the average prices per night are recorded.

Boutique Hotel	# Of Followers	# Of Rooms	Average Price per night
Gallatin Hotel	4,607	25	$195
Fairlane Hotel	17,100	81	$515
Thompson Nashville	22,300	12	$612

Table 2, Figures derived from Instagram and their respective websites.

The hotels were chosen by random as the first results that were listed in the search for boutique hotels in Nashville and had an Instagram account. The Gallatin hotel is a colorful approach to a boutique hotel. It describes itself as "a feel-good stay in Nashville's most creative neighborhood. Every stay helps someone experiencing homelessness through our Rooms for Rooms program" (The Gallatin, n.d.). It is a Mission Hotel, a

hotel brand differentiating itself by giving its profits to the homeless (Mission Hotels, n.d.).

The Fairlane Hotel is a midcentury modern-inspired boutique hotel that showcases the character of Nashville with the service of a luxury hotel (Fairlane Hotel, n.d.). It is in a landmark building as it was the location of the Fidelity Federal Savings and Loan in Nashville starting in 1972. The Fairlane Hotel is part of the Oliver Hospitality Group, which specializes in restoring historic charm to old buildings as boutique hotels (Oliver Hospitality, n.d.). Their historically rebirthed properties attract many guests.

Thompson Nashville is a boutique hotel under Hyatt's brand umbrella. It is a luxury boutique hotel that features a destination roof-top bar, Nashville-inspired décor, and indulgent service (Thompson Nashville, n.d.). Many larger lodging brands are introducing boutique properties under their brand portfolio to appeal to other markets of travelers.

Influencers

The influencers that were chosen for this study were based on random selection, by locating the Instagram page of the boutique hotel, the tagged feature allowed for access to see who has been posting about the hotel. The selection was made by choosing the first poster who met the follower count as a micro-influencer. The corresponding photos posted by the brand were chosen for their similarity to the influencer's post. If the brand reposted the influencer's photo, it was used for accurate comparison.

Data Analysis

To test the hypothesis, a series of comparisons were analyzed. The findings compare key performance indicators to discover whether the boutique property's posts are

more effective than the influencers. The key performance indicator being used is marketing effectiveness. The values are obtained by taking the likes of posts in question, divided by their follower count. This provides an accurate post reach that lends itself to answering the hypothesis.

An additional series of comparisons was necessary to test the second part of the hypothesis. To discover if micro-influencers were the best influencer level for boutique hotels, the marketing effectiveness rate was computed for three influencers in the other categories if the information was available. To avoid bias, the first influencer from each level was chosen to compare the effectiveness rates against.

Findings

In this section, the results of the research methods will be displayed. This research was conducted to discover if micro-influencers would generate more social media engagement than the boutique hotel brands, themselves. Through this study, the various marketing effectiveness rates can be compared to discover if the hypothesis is true. For organization's sake, the hotels will be discussed separately.

Gallatin Hotel

The Gallatin Hotel had a choice selection of available influencers. Their feed is decorated with colorful images that attract those with similar aesthetics. The three micro-influencers that were used for this hotel are detailed in the table below.

Social Media Handle	Follower Count
@travelwithbreezy used as Example 1	14,600
@mallorykil used as Example 2	29,500
@hannahterrito used as Example 3	11,600

Table 3, Micro-influencers for Gallatin Hotel, figures accurate as of April 13, 2022

These were the first three that appeared on Instagram via the tagged function. As micro-influencers go, they have relatively low amounts of following. The compared micro-influencer engagement rates to the brand's own are included in the bar chart below.
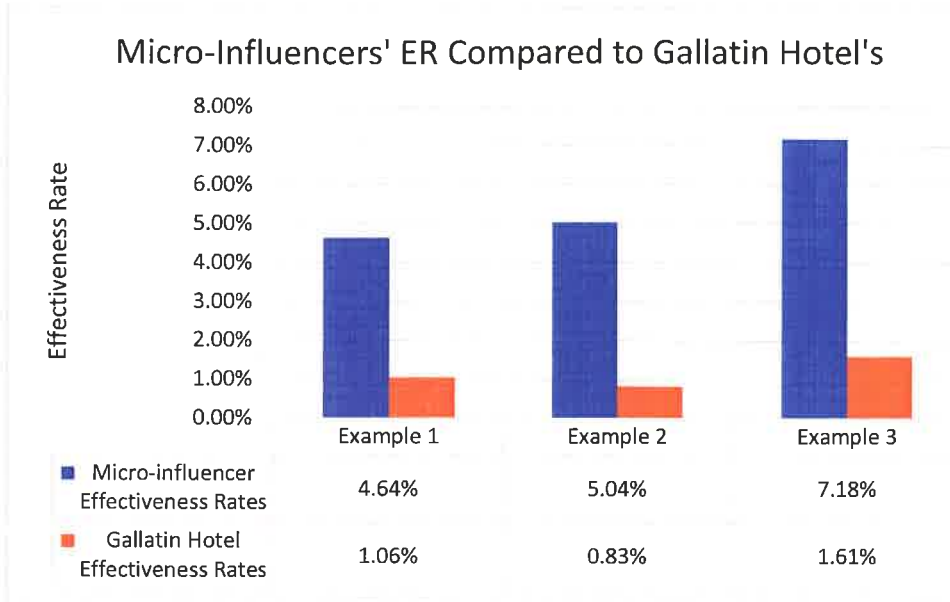

Micro-Influencers' ER Compared to Gallatin Hotel's

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
■ Micro-influencer Effectiveness Rates	4.64%	5.04%	7.18%
■ Gallatin Hotel Effectiveness Rates	1.06%	0.83%	1.61%

Figure 1, Micro-influencers' ER Compared to Gallatin Hotel's, Figures retrieved from Instagram on April 13, 2022.

Those figures are essential to the analysis of the first part of the hypothesis. The next will be helpful in answering if micro-influencers are the best influencer group to represent boutique hotels based on their ER. For simplicity, the averages of (at most) three examples are used and included in the chart below.
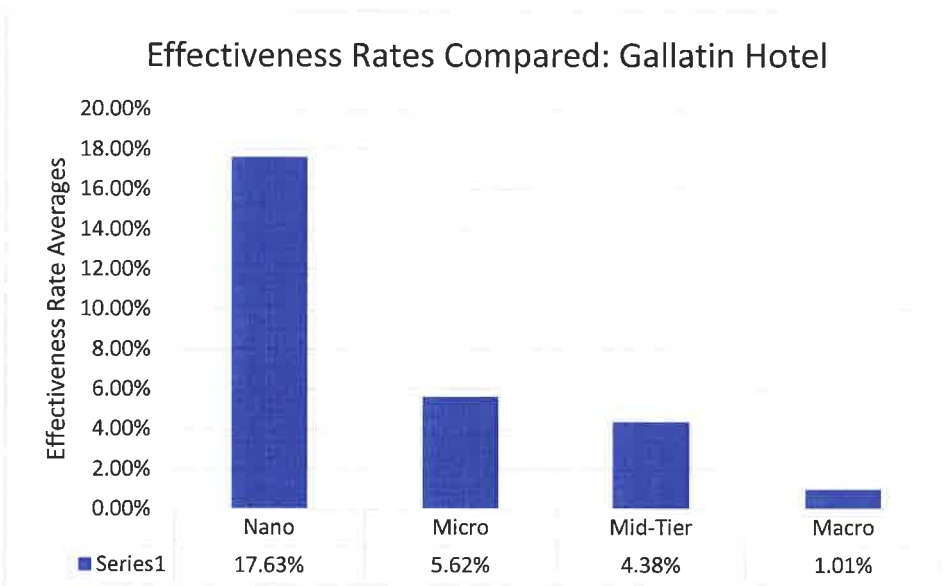

Effectiveness Rates Compared: Gallatin Hotel

	Nano	Micro	Mid-Tier	Macro
■ Series1	17.63%	5.62%	4.38%	1.01%

Figure 2, Effectiveness Rates Compared: Gallatin Hotel, Figures retrieved from Instagram on April 13, 2022.

For this hotel, only one macro-influencer posted anything with the hotel tagged in it and there were zero mega-influencers.

Fairlane Hotel

The Fairlane Hotel, like the Gallatin, had many influencers discussing their accommodations via their social media. The three influencers used in the micro-influencer category are included in Table 4 below.

Social Media Handle	Follower Count
@livviedix used as Example 1	23,200
@jazminscheitel used as Example 2	38,200
@natedanielward used Example 3	48,000

Table 4, Micro-Influencers for Fairlane Hotel, figures accurate as of April 13, 2022

Their posts were then reused on Fairlane's Instagram so an accurate comparison can be made on how effective they were in generating engagement through likes. The comparison is included in Figure 3.
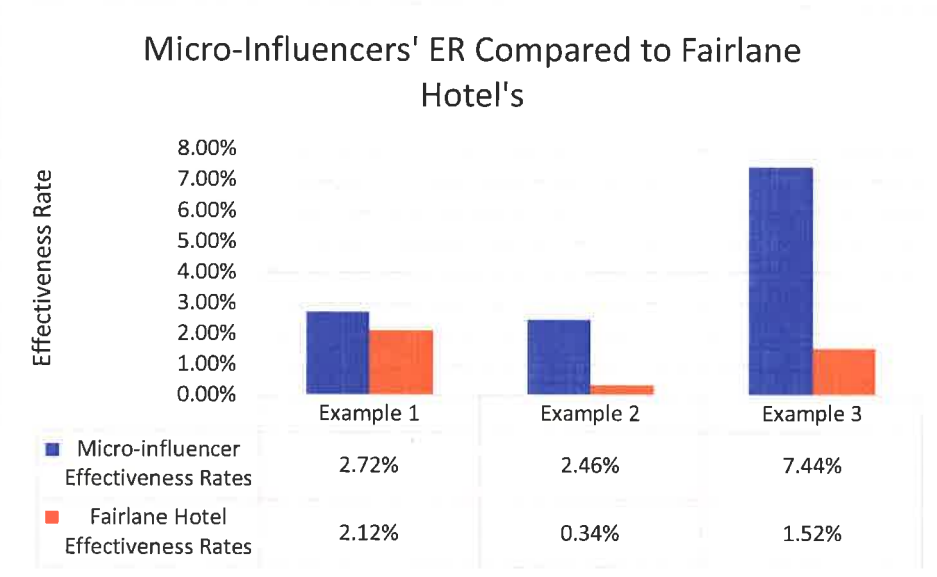
Figure 3, Micro-Influencers' ER Compared to Fairlane Hotel's, Figures retrieved from Instagram on April 13, 2022.

Micro-Influencers' ER Compared to Fairlane Hotel's

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Micro-influencer Effectiveness Rates	2.72%	2.46%	7.44%
Fairlane Hotel Effectiveness Rates	2.12%	0.34%	1.52%

Finally, the rest of the findings on Fairlane Hotel are the average effectiveness rates of each influencer level compared. These findings are included in Figure 4. Both macro and mega-influencers are not included as any made no postings of the Fairlane Hotel. There was only one mid-tier level influencer included in this assessment. It is interesting to note

that Fairlane's posting used in example one had a similar engagement rate to the
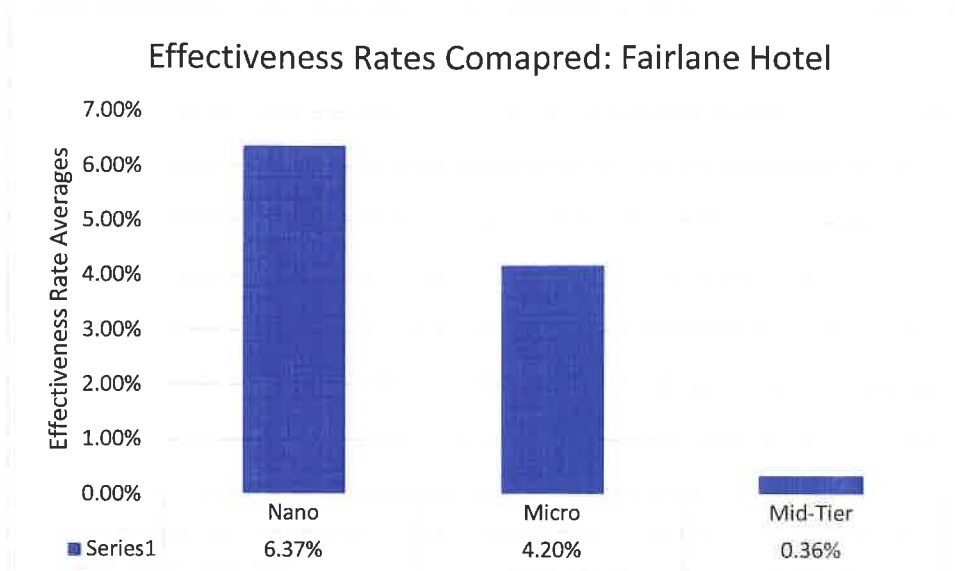
microinfluencer.

Effectiveness Rates Comapred: Fairlane Hotel

Figure 4, Effectiveness Rates Compared: Fairlane Hotel, Figures Retrieved from Instagram on April 13, 2022.

	Nano	Micro	Mid-Tier
■ Series1	6.37%	4.20%	0.36%

Thompson Nashville

The posts made by Thompson Nashville and the influencers generated similar

results to the other examples. The three influencers used for Thompson Nashville are

included in the table below.

Social Media Handle	Follower Count
@beccabogle used as Example 1	28,700
@eightyninthstreet used as Example 2	22,300
@nicksmithnews used Example 3	21,100

Table 5, Micro influencers for Thompson Nashville, Figures accurate as of April 13, 2022

These three examples were the most recent postings of the desired follower count;

however, their counts are relatively low for the micro-influencer spectrum of 10,000-

50,000.

Thompson Nashville's engagement rates compared to the micro influencers were

the lowest of the three examples. The comparison is displayed in the chart that follows.
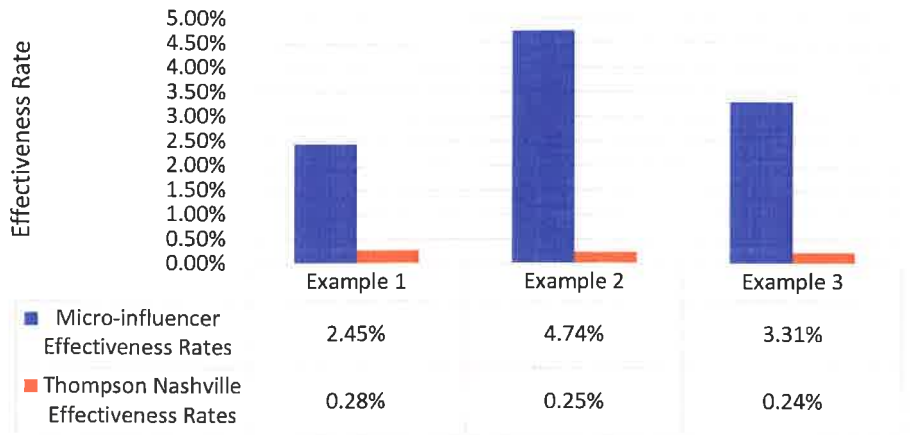
Micro-Influencers' ER Compared to Thompson Nashville's

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
■ Micro-influencer Effectiveness Rates	2.45%	4.74%	3.31%
■ Thompson Nashville Effectiveness Rates	0.28%	0.25%	0.24%

Figure 5, Micro-influencers' ER Compared to Thompson Nashville's, Figures accurate as of April 13, 2022.

Not only were the micro-influencers' engagement rates higher, Thompson Nashville did not even receive 1% of effective engagement on their posts. To conclude this hotel's findings, the final chart displays the effectiveness rates compared between the various influencer levels. Within the chart, like the other hotels, there were no macro or mega-influencer posts to include in the assessment.
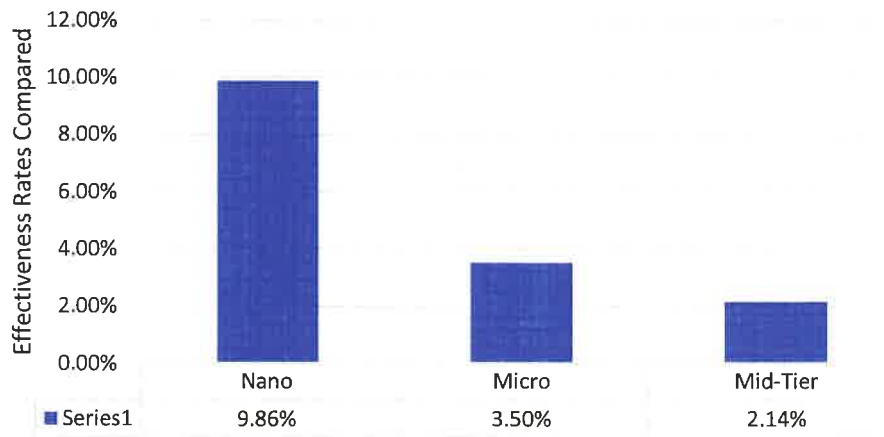
Effectiveness Rates Compared: Thompson Nashville

	Nano	Micro	Mid-Tier
■ Series1	9.86%	3.50%	2.14%

Figure 6, Effectiveness Rates Compared: Thompson Nashville, Figures accurate as of April 13, 2022.

Conclusions

The purpose of this section is to discuss the meaning of the findings because of the research methods and to present opportunities for further research. The hypothesis offered two claims to accept or reject. The hypothesis was that boutique hotels brands can

benefit from the use of micro-influencer marketing to reach more potential guests than through their own social media accounts. The claims that were presented are that micro-influencers would receive a higher effectiveness rate than the boutique hotel brands and that micro-influencers were the most useful influencer level to boutique hotels. The following paragraphs will explain how the claims were correct or incorrect.

Addressing the first claim, that boutique hotels would receive lower effectiveness rates than micro-influencers, it was found that this was supported by the findings. In each example micro-influencers had effectiveness rates that averaged between 1-5% higher. There were a few examples that offered similar effectiveness rates, but overall micro-influencers were more effective in generating a reaction via likes. The hotels had follower counts like those of the micro-influencers. All but the Gallatin, had the appropriate like count for this comparison. This observation helps to prove that micro-influencers are more effective in generating reactions because it cannot be said that one or the other has more followers and therefore more engagement. Unlike this claim, the next was not supported by the findings.

The second claim was searching for support that micro-influencers were the most effective at generating reactions for boutique hotels. Through the findings, in all three example hotels, Nano-influencers were entirely more effective. The data found that nano-influencers were between 2-12% more effective than the second-place influencer level. Micro-influencers were competitive with the nano-influencers, but mid-tier was not very effective on average.

The conclusions of the second claim led to an opportunity for further research. While nano-influencers had the highest effectiveness rates, they are the influencer level

with the lowest follower counts. The lower follower counts made it much easier to be more effective if they had a post with a significant number of likes. One post from a macro-influencer, however, may earn 30,000 likes, but have a low effectiveness rate. Further research is needed to determine if the number of people that like a post is most effective at increasing purchase intentions or if it is the trust associated with the lower influencer levels that ultimately lead someone to make a purchase decision.

Additionally, the absence of data is the indication of a finding in some cases. Within this research project, there were little-to-no macro or mega-influencers found to be posting about boutique hotels. Further research is needed to discover if people with high follower counts are not within boutique hotels target market or if there is another reason for fewer posts made by them for/about boutique hotels.

Through this research project, new details were discovered in the application of influencer marketing for boutique hotels. It was found that micro-influencers are more effective at generating interactions than boutique hotel brands per the first claim of the hypothesis. It was also determined that nano-influencers were able to garner the most engagement out of the influencer levels for boutique hotels. The opportunity for further research can allow this topic to grow and to offer more helpful advice within influencer marketing. This research can be used by marketing practitioners, specifically for boutique hotels, to be more effective at reaching potential guests and for the introduction of influencer marketing to their marketing mix. As social media influencer marketing continues to grow, brands are going to want to learn all they can to properly utilize this resource.

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