

# Follow for follow: marketing of a start-up company on Instagram

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the deliberate social media marketing practices of a start-up company. The study aims to measure the effects of these practices (i.e. following potential customers and liking and commenting on their posts on Instagram) on creating and increasing awareness of the company's business and gaining followers for the company's Instagram account.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research is exploratory in nature and adopts an approach similar to that of action research. The research was enabled and facilitated by collaboration between the researchers and a company representative. The company offers an application for young mothers.

**Findings** – The model developed in this study identifies the effects of the practice of endorsing and interacting with customers for marketing purposes. It points out following as a first-order practice that small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can employ to gain followers instantly on Instagram.

**Research limitations/implications** – The method used limits the generalisability of the findings. However, the findings offer preliminary insights for future studies on Instagram marketing in SMEs.

**Practical implications** – Companies can attain success in social media marketing by actively engaging with customers and potential customers on various social media platforms.

**Originality/value** – There is a paucity of research focussing on Instagram marketing in SMEs. The model in this study contributes to theory on Instagram marketing and offers a framework that can help managers plan Instagram marketing strategies.

**Keywords** Marketing, Social media, SMEs, Start-ups, Instagram, Pre-launch phase

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The number of social media users worldwide is growing each year. Aside from the sheer volume of users, the breadth of different types of social media platforms is increasing as well (Hoffman and Novak, 2012). Social media are becoming an integral part of everyday life for communicating and sharing information and have transformed consumer behaviour, which is a development that companies must respond to (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Consumers are adopting increasingly active roles in co-creating marketing content with companies and their brands (Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Parent *et al.*, 2011). The strategies and tools for companies to interact with their customers and facilitate co-creation have changed dramatically with the emergence of social media. Different social media platforms have become a natural part of companies' marketing strategies (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011), particularly in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Jones *et al.*, 2015; McCann and Barlow, 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Mangold and Faulds (2009) label social media platforms as new hybrid elements of the promotion mix. With more and more people using mobile devices, numerous social media applications have gone mobile, and new entrants are appearing (Hoffman and Novak, 2012; Kaplan, 2012).

Previous research on social media marketing and SMEs has primarily focussed on social media adoption and performance, as well as the key drivers, barriers and enablers for these processes, both in a business-to-consumer (Dutot and Bergeron, 2016; Jones *et al.*, 2015; McCann and Barlow, 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015) and a business-to-business context (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). The findings show a resistance to adopting social media in SMEs. The lack of knowledge, time and vision of how to integrate social media into the marketing strategy have been identified as barriers to adoption, which is also conditioned



by the products and services offered by the SMEs. Some products and services are simply better communicated through social media (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015).

There is also evidence that the adoption of social media in SMEs is not always driven by a purposeful agenda through which value could be added to the customer experience (Durkin *et al.*, 2013). In addition to that, McCann and Barlow (2015) elaborated on the problems and absence of follow-up measurements in social media marketing efforts in SMEs. A few studies have been conducted on SMEs' use and perception of specific social media platforms such as Facebook (Wong, 2012) and Twitter (Bulearca and Bulearca, 2010; Geho *et al.*, 2010). Research has also discussed which SMEs are suited to using blogs in marketing (Chua *et al.*, 2009).

Using social media and especially Instagram from an SME perspective is a recent phenomenon. Instagram has only been available to companies for a few years; therefore, limited academic research exists on the topic. Most of the information regarding Instagram as a marketing tool has been based on best practices and trial and error (e.g. Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013). Through Instagram, companies are able to interact with their customers by endorsing them (i.e. following them and liking and commenting on their posts) and getting a response in the form of receiving endorsements in return (Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013). When a company is unknown to customers, endorsing potential customers on Instagram may be one of many marketing tools for creating and increasing awareness of the company and its business and gaining engaged followers.

Previous research on endorsing behaviour has focussed on companies' social media post content (e.g. type, richness and orientation) and consumers' responses (e.g. likes and comments), predominantly on Facebook (e.g. Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013; De Vries *et al.*, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Sabate *et al.*, 2014) but also partly on Instagram (Coelho *et al.*, 2016). In those studies, the consumers' responses were measured in relation to content, not in relation to the companies' endorsing behaviour. Although the literature on Instagram best practices mention the endorsing practices, it generally discusses them as ways to interact with customers (e.g. Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013). To our knowledge, the literature does not address the question of how the companies' endorsing behaviour is linked to potential customers' responses.

Schultz and Peltier (2013) see considerable room for research that outlines key strategies and practices in social media marketing. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to analyse the deliberate social media marketing practices of a start-up company. This study aims to measure the effects of these practices (i.e. following potential customers and liking and commenting on their posts on Instagram) on creating and increasing awareness of the company's business and gaining followers on the company's Instagram account in a pre-launch phase. The research is situated in a business-to-consumer context. The content of the company's Instagram feed (pictures, picture captions and hashtags) is not covered in this study.

Given the importance of using social media marketing, SMEs should also adopt this practice if they want to stay competitive (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). Jones *et al.* (2015) argue that social media marketing is more important to SMEs than to larger companies due to the SMEs' lack of resources for marketing their products and services, especially on a global scale. Social media is a cost-effective marketing channel for SMEs (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015).

This paper is structured as follows: in the next section, the research context is laid out by presenting the theoretical framework and empirical context. The literature review is neither extensive nor exhaustive, but is presented to give an overview of what social media marketing is and how Instagram can be used as a marketing platform. The methodology is then explained, followed by a presentation of the empirical findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and the study's limitations are discussed. Taking into account the scarcity of empirical studies focussing on action-reaction patterns in social media marketing,

particularly on Instagram, this study is exploratory. Despite its flaws, it aims to stimulate further research and discussions about social media marketing practices in general and in SMEs in particular.

## 2. Social media marketing

Social media – including collaborative projects, blogs/micro-blogs, content communities, social networking sites and virtual worlds – employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which users share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). In mobile social media, interaction is conducted through a ubiquitous network to which users are constantly connected using a personal mobile device such as a smartphone or tablet (Kaplan, 2012). Marketing is defined by the American Marketing Association (2016) as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”. Thus, in this study, social media marketing is defined as the use of social media platforms for marketing purposes.

Social media platforms extend the spheres of marketing influence and reach (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Sharing represents the extent to which users exchange, distribute and receive content. For companies, it is useful to find out what the users have in common and to identify the type of social media marketing content that appeals to the users’ common interests for sharing and endorsing (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Beyond the effect on reach, another positive effect of sharing and endorsing is that brand-related messages shared peer to peer are perceived as more authentic compared with corporate content transmitted via traditional media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011).

The growth of social media has profoundly affected many aspects of consumer behaviour and purchase decisions (Jones *et al.*, 2015; Labrecque *et al.*, 2013; Mangold and Faulds, 2009), with a strong bearing on social media marketing. Social media answer consumers’ demand for immediate access to information and influences consumers’ attitudes. Consumers turn more frequently to various social media platforms to search for peer-to-peer information to enhance their purchase decisions. Social media also enable post-purchase expressions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for companies to follow (Bacile *et al.*, 2014; Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014).

Before the social media era, companies had more control over their brand messages (Henning-Thurau *et al.*, 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Another downside to social media marketing is that marketers are sometimes confronted with the realisation that they are not always welcome on social media. Their marketing activities may be experienced as inauthentic, intrusive and out of place (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Companies hope for a viral spread of their brand, but there are many cases where this has actually been used against them. Consumers leverage brands online for their own purposes and ends, criticising them and turning them into parodies (Parent *et al.*, 2011). A dissatisfied customer has the tools to tell millions of people about their negative experience with a brand, if the story goes viral. On the other hand, a satisfied customer has the same opportunity to spread positive word-of-mouth. According to Kimmel and Kitchen (2014), positive word-of-mouth online is more common and has a greater impact than negative word-of-mouth. Gensler *et al.* (2013) conclude that companies need to pay attention to consumer-generated brand stories by promoting positive stories and responding to negative ones (see also Bacile *et al.*, 2014).

### 2.1 Marketing on Instagram

As another social media platform for marketing, Instagram entered the scene in 2010 as a free mobile application that allows users to edit and share pictures and videos from their

mobile devices. At the time of writing, Instagram reported having 600 million active monthly users, the majority of whom use it on a daily basis (Instagram, 2017). This number is rapidly growing, and the most likely users of Instagram are young women aged 18-29 years (Duggan, 2015; Statistic Brain, 2016).

Instagram has also become a popular marketing platform among companies not only because of its growing number of users, but also because of its characteristics, underscoring the trend of visual content in social media marketing (Neher, 2013; Stelzner, 2016). Instagram enhances companies' visual storytelling rather than just presenting textual information. It is based on the idea of sharing to prompt action (Miles, 2014). For instance, a company shares something, and other users react quickly by endorsing the content (i.e. liking it and/or commenting on it) or the company (i.e. starting to follow the company). Miles (2014) recommends that companies should, as soon as possible, increase their number of Instagram followers to a level that could be considered credible (in relation to the company size). For a small business to be recognised as credible on Instagram, 1,000 followers are argued to be the minimum (Miles, 2014). People will follow popular companies and brands more eagerly than unpopular ones.

### 2.2 *The visually dominated Instagram*

A trend in social media marketing is the people's increasing preference for images and visual content online, since our brains can consume, process and understand more information faster through images than through text (Neher, 2013). Images and visual content are a way to break through the clutter (Miles, 2014). According to Neher (2013), images and visual content can be effective in building awareness, increasing traffic, conversation, shares and spread; and generating interest in a highly visual offering. Companies must acknowledge and incorporate this trend into their social media marketing strategies if the aim is for their message to gain a viral spread.

Based on the findings of Krallman *et al.* (2016), investment in Instagram may be appropriate if the marketing goals are to co-create with consumers and to increase their brand involvement. In terms of marketing, Instagram has a higher level of usage for interaction, co-creation and engagement compared with other platforms (Coelho *et al.*, 2016; Krallman *et al.*, 2016; Miles, 2014). Marketers seem to have taken note of this, since the use of Instagram as a social media marketing tool is increasing (Stelzner, 2016). Phua *et al.*'s (2017) study of consumers' usage of social media platforms found that Instagram was the most frequently used platform to follow brands.

On the other hand, companies should abandon the "one-size-fits-all" approach when deciding which social media marketing platform to use (Coelho *et al.*, 2016; Krallman *et al.*, 2016; Miles, 2014; Phua *et al.*, 2017; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011; Zhu and Chen, 2015). The visually dominant Instagram is suitable for hedonic-related posts, whereas platforms that allow for more text-based messages, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, may be appropriate for utilitarian posts containing more information.

### 2.3 *Instagram activity and metrics*

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) advise companies to take the lead and be active in order to create and increase awareness of their product or service. Doing so means being social – not only by filling the company's social media sites with content but also by actively engaging in (potential) customers' feeds on different platforms (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Miles, 2014). The idea is to find out what the customers would like to see and hear and what they might find interesting, enjoyable and valuable (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Bernritter *et al.* (2016) state that perceptions of a brand's warmth, not its competence, reduce the effort that a company needs to exert to obtain consumers' endorsements.

Social media marketing is particularly powerful in supporting new product launches (Kaplan, 2012). Unless users are made aware of the presence of a company on social media, they are unlikely to discover it by chance (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Besides uploading interesting pictures and tagging them, a company is noticed on Instagram by deliberately following users and liking and commenting on their posts (Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013). In the pre-launch phase, this activity is directed at potential customers. In a later stage, the same strategies may be employed to strengthen the company's relationships with existing customers and followers. Miles (2014) considers following and liking as the primary social behaviour on Instagram, and leaving a comment as the secondary social behaviour. In other words, on Instagram, users are prompt to react to other users' posts by following and liking, whereas commenting happens less often.

A question is why and how consumers react to endorsements from a company. The company may be unfamiliar to the consumers, yet the consumers may be willing to form parasocial relationships with the company. Some of the motives for using Instagram are to get updates, to browse pictures related to their interests and to connect with other users who share similar interests (Lee *et al.*, 2015). According to Sheldon and Bryant (2016), surveillance is linked to endorsing other users' posts, which explains why people also endorse unfamiliar companies on Instagram. Self-promotion and being noticed by others is also reflected in endorsing behaviour (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Users' self-esteem is positively affected by receiving endorsements, which leads to a reciprocal reaction. Giving endorsements is also a way to leverage the audience for self-promotion, especially on Instagram, where all users can check out who has liked a company's post. Escapism, entertainment and relatedness may also have a role in endorsing companies.

On Instagram, the target population for following, liking and commenting is primarily the existing customers, with the purpose of converting them into followers. A secondary target group are those following the followers, who are easily identifiable on Instagram. Social media is about leveraging reach (Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2015; McCann and Barlow, 2015). In the pre-launch phase, when there are no existing customers, interesting prospects are identified by searching according to industry-specific or interest-specific hashtags, since these hashtags are used by specific groups of people.

The objectives of social media marketing efforts can vary from case to case. The metrics to follow up the marketing efforts depend on the objectives. According to McCann and Barlow (2015), the number of likes, comments and followers are examples of metrics that can be used when the objective is to create and increase brand awareness (see also Murdough, 2009). The authors recommend avoiding "analysis paralysis". In other words, the companies should focus on a few metrics to keep the evaluation of the objectives as simple as possible. On Instagram, the number of followers is a sign of approval of the brand and the company (Miles, 2014). The number of followers is not only a metric of awareness and reach, but also a metric of engagement. Followers can be identified as highly involved brand ambassadors or opinion leaders who spread the message in a community (Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011).

To avoid the perception of being a nuisance, the company should maintain a balance as to when and how often it can naturally engage in users' social media feeds (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). A company following several users on Instagram may run the risk of being perceived as a spammer. Miles (2014) recommends that a company strike a balance between those they follow and those following them. A way to manage this is to unfollow users who do not follow the company back. Liking and commenting on pictures is not perceived as spamming. Still, careful consideration is needed. For companies, the praxis when liking and commenting is to be more neutral and not too personal (Miles, 2014).

### 3. Method

The case company enabled collaboration between the researchers and the facilitator of the actions in practice, as well as gave access and permission to use its data (see also Weller, 2015). The study used an exploratory approach that resembles an action research approach, which, according to Denscombe (2014), is involved with practical issues – the kind of issues and problems, concerns and needs that arise as part of the “real world” (see also Orlikowski, 2010). Practitioners and their active participation are crucial in the action research process.

Action research has been used to study social media adoption in SMEs (Durkin *et al.*, 2013) and identified as a suitable method for marketing research (Ballantyne, 2004; Kates and Robertson, 2004). Perry and Gummesson (2004) argue for action research to be used in complex, real marketing problems for an improved understanding of practice. In action research in marketing, greater emphasis is placed on the external world of the marketplace, in contrast to traditional action research focussing on the internal, subjective world within an organisation (Perry and Gummesson, 2004).

A criticism against action research is the inability to generalise the results beyond the specific “case” (Denscombe, 2014). However, generalisation is not always necessary or even desirable. Non-generalisable results may be interesting when the objective is to understand a specific phenomenon in its context. Due to the exploratory character of this study, the aim is not to generalise the results in relation to a population. Instead, the aim is to generalise the phenomenon in focus to a theoretical framework (Perry and Gummesson, 2004). Denscombe (2014) argues that action research, while practice driven and small scale, should be judged by its rigour and not its size. Action research can draw on existing theories, apply relevant research propositions, use suitable methods and offer some evaluation of existing knowledge without making grandiose claims.

The case company can be interpreted as a representative case (Yin, 2014). The case captures a typical situation of a start-up company that faces a marketing problem in creating and increasing awareness of its business among potential customers worldwide before its actual launch. In this case, Instagram is used as the marketing tool, which is an appropriate choice for other start-up companies in the same situation. Multiple sets of data were collected and recorded; these include numerical data, data from Iconosquare, notes from the study protocol and the memos, and information from the company’s internal discussion.

#### 3.1 Case company

The case company in this study is a start-up company located in Switzerland. Their business idea is to offer a mobile device application that shares information about different aspects of young children’s health and development and parenting-related issues, including features such as a breastfeeding timer, vaccine plans and World Health Organisation’s standard curves that show how babies grow and develop. The application also provides information about babies’ rhythmic patterns and helps users keep track of their babies’ sleeping and eating habits. The target population for the application is primarily young, first-time mothers.

Instagram was chosen as the first-order tool for the company’s social media marketing in the pre-launch phase for several reasons. First, the potential customers belong to the population of the most likely users of Instagram (i.e. women between 18 and 29 years old) (Duggan, 2015; Statistic Brain, 2016). Second, Instagram use is increasing, capturing the trend of rising demand for visual content accessed through a mobile device. The company’s business is highly expressible visually. Third, Instagram has proven to be a relevant choice for raising the customers’ level of engagement (Krallman *et al.*, 2016; Miles, 2014). Creating and increasing awareness of the upcoming application and obtaining engaged followers for a viral spread were the primary goals in the pre-launch phase. Having a baby and raising a child is a highly demanding matter, and the tool to mediate this engagement was chosen accordingly.

In total, 117 pictures with hashtags and picture captions in English were posted during the first 46 days of the pre-launch period. Most of the pictures were related to babies, small children, parenthood and pregnancy. The pictures were mostly free licence pictures, but the company’s own and user-generated pictures were also used. The average pace of uploading was three posts per day, even during weekends. The themes of the posts included the application, parenting, user-generated content, fun facts about babies and the mental development of babies and small children. Theme-related hashtags were added to the posts. They were not included in the picture caption; instead, they were posted as a separate comment to keep the text easy to read.

3.2 Research process

Action research, which focusses on understanding the world by trying to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions, can be framed as a process of four steps (Ballantyne, 2004) – to plan, act, observe and reflect – laid out as a cyclical practice (see also Denscombe, 2014; Perry and Gummesson, 2004). The action research process in this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Data were collected from 15 February to 31 March 2016. In addition to posting pictures, the person responsible for the company’s Instagram account also actively tried out the three mentioned Instagram practices as a participant observer and collected data on their effects. The practices were part of the daily routines of the case company.

The accounts of potential customers to follow, like and comment on were found through searching for hashtags and other Instagram accounts related to the company’s business,

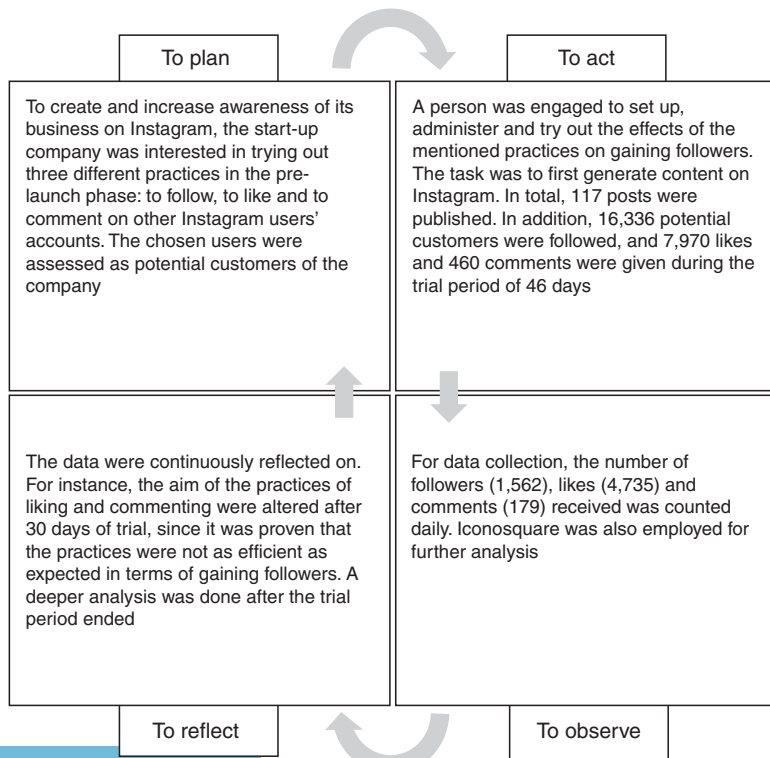


Figure 1. The action research process

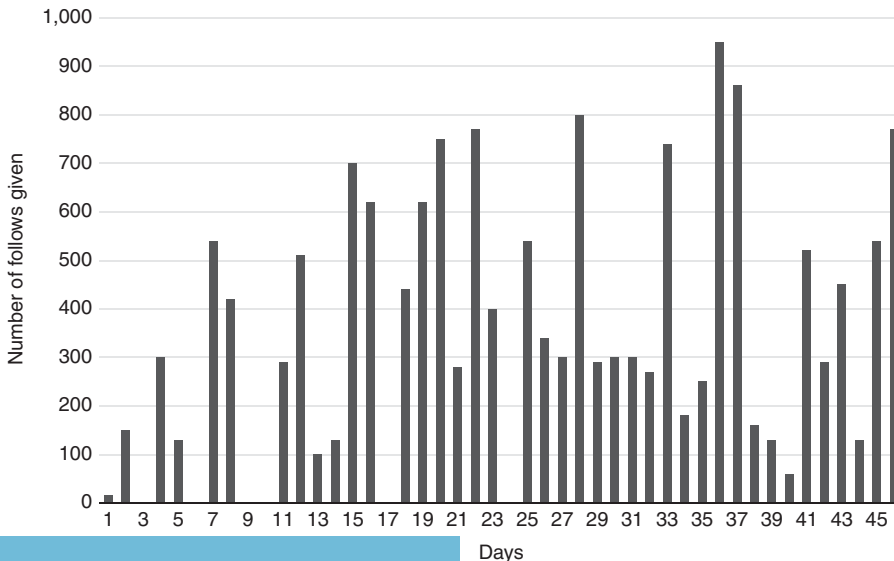
and then searching for users of those hashtags and followers of those accounts. The search for potential customers was done worldwide and not restricted to any country or market area. During the pre-launch phase, the practices were exercised much more aggressively compared with Miles' (2014) recommendations. For example, at most, 950 new potential customers were followed during one day, which is about 20 times more than the recommendations. The reason for this was to maximise impact during the short pre-launch phase. Since there was a risk of being perceived as a spammer, when following a large number of potential customers, the practice of unfollowing was exercised as well. Users who were followed by the company but did not follow it back were systematically unfollowed. What kind of pictures to like and what kind of comments to leave were also carefully considered, since the potential customers' feeds were related to parenting and children, which is a private matter.

Instagram is based on the idea of prompt action (Miles, 2014). The analysis in this study focusses on the immediate reaction to the practices employed. In the next section, descriptive statistics are first presented. Then, the relationships between the followers, likes and comments obtained and the follows, likes and comments given are analysed by means of correlation and regression analysis. Based on these analyses, and making note of the difficulties in finding casual relationships, a preliminary action-reaction model is presented as the first step towards a more thorough discussion about social media marketing strategies in practice.

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1 *The impact of following on gaining followers*

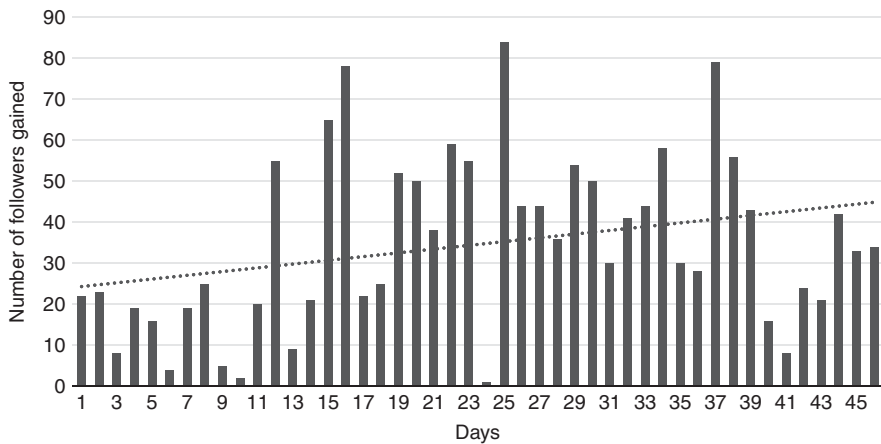
In their social media marketing, the focal company used the practice of following potential customers' Instagram accounts to gain followers. The action (to follow) and the reaction (followers gained) are described in Figures 2 and 3. As Figure 2 shows, the number of potential customers followed varied from day to day, from 0 to 950. On average, 355.1 ( $s = 269.84$ ) new potential customers were followed on a daily basis during the trial period of 46 days.



**Figure 2.**  
Number of unique  
potential customers  
followed



**Figure 3.**  
Number of followers  
on the company's  
Instagram account



The number of unique followers of the company's Instagram account also varied on a daily basis, from as low as 1 to as many as 83 (Figure 3). Visually, there seems to be a consistent pattern when comparing Figures 2 and 3. For example, on days 10 and 24, the company did not follow any new potential customers, and this is reflected in the number of new followers gained on the same days (two and one new followers, respectively). The average number of followers gained per day was 34.60 ( $s = 21.04$ ).

To find out the link between following and gaining followers, correlation and regression analyses were employed. The findings show a significant positive relationship ( $r = 0.551$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) between following and followers gained (Table I).

However, the regression analysis indicates that about 100 potential customers had to be followed to gain four unique followers (Table I). On an aggregate level, Figure 4 shows how the company's number of Instagram followers grew. In the figure, the number of followers gained is labelled using a ten-day interval for readability. On the tenth day, the company had 143 followers; on the 20th day, it had 510 followers, and so on.

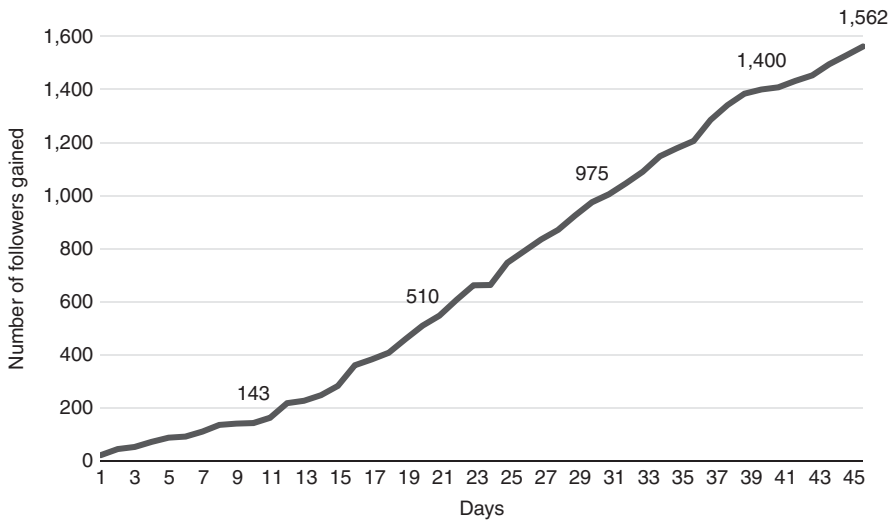
After 46 days, the start-up company had gained 1,562 unique followers. According to Iconosquare statistics, 376 unfollowed the account during the trial period; these users were not included in the statistical analysis. In an attempt to model the development, a linear regression model was tested. Based on the findings presented in Table II, it can be concluded that the growth of followers was linear, with an estimated increase of about 38 new followers per day.

#### 4.2 The impact of liking and commenting on gaining followers

The focal company also used the practices of liking and commenting on potential customers' posts to gain followers. The number of likes given by the company varied from none to 500,

**Table I.**  
Regression analysis  
of following on  
followers gained

Variables	Regression analysis			
	Dependent variable: followers gained			
	Parameter estimates	SE	t-value	Significance
Constant	19.354	4.359	4.441	0.000
Following	0.043	0.010	4.378	0.000
	$R^2$	0.303	Adjusted $R^2$	0.288



**Figure 4.** Accumulated number of followers on the company's Instagram account

Regression analysis				
Dependent variable: followers gained				
Variables	Parameter estimates	SE	t-value	Significance
Constant	-180.551	19.950	-9.050	0.000
Day	37.978	0.739	51.381	0.000
	$R^2$	0.984	Adjusted $R^2$	0.983

**Table II.** Modelling the growth of followers on the company's Instagram account

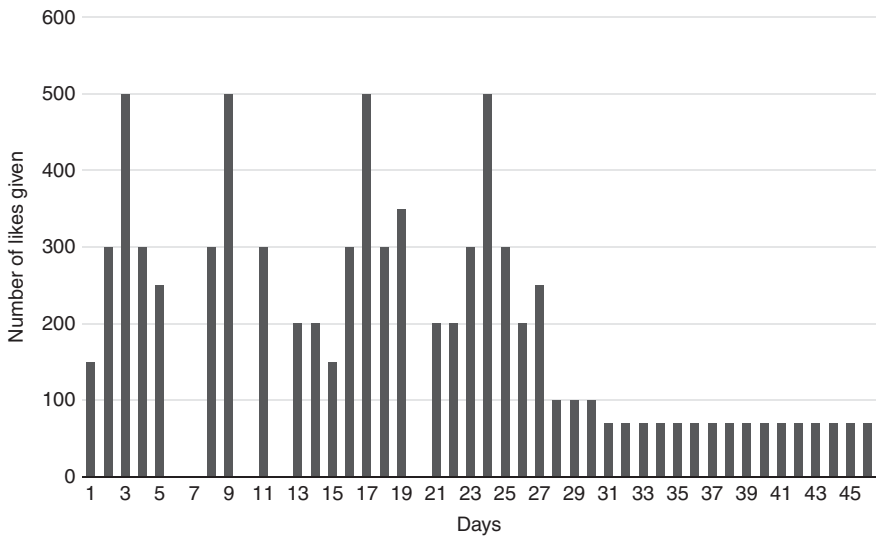
amounting to 7,970 during the trial period (Figure 5). On average, 173.3 ( $s = 144.53$ ) posts were liked on a daily basis.

In the first 30 days, when the practice of liking was used proactively to gain new followers, there was no significant link between giving and receiving likes ( $r = -0.162$ ,  $p = 0.392$ ) and between giving likes and gaining followers ( $r = -0.180$ ,  $p = 0.340$ ). From day 31 onwards, the practice of liking was used only to endorse existing followers in order to strengthen the company's relationship with them. The reason for this change was that liking as a practice was less effective in gaining followers compared with the practice of following. Thus, the latter became the focus towards the end of the trial period.

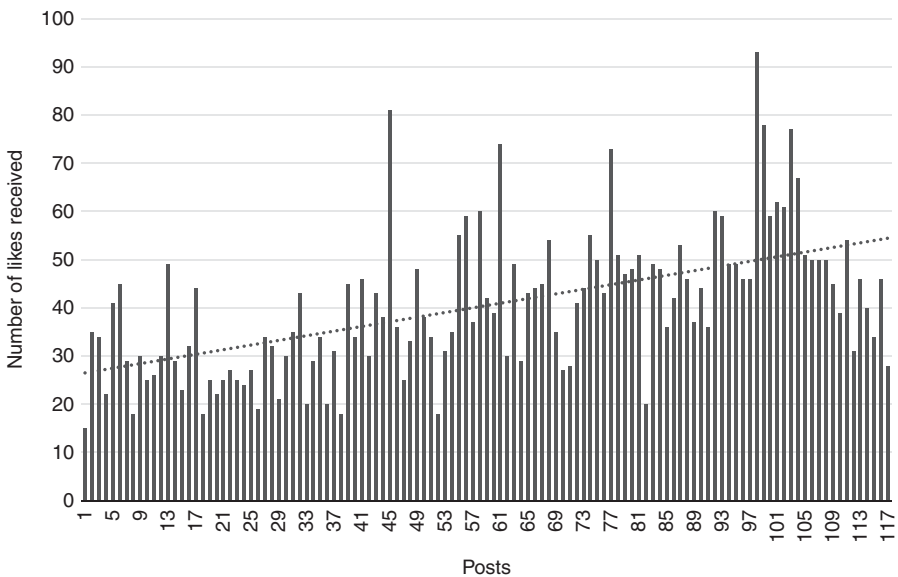
The company's number of comments on potential customers' posts peaked on days 6 and 10 and amounted to a maximum of 50 comments per day. On most days, five to ten comments were given. A further analysis of the link between comments given and comments received proves that the two were not significantly correlated ( $r = -0.209$ ,  $p = 0.269$ ). Likewise, there was no significant correlation between comments given and followers gained ( $r = -0.229$ ,  $p = 0.108$ ). The practice of commenting was less effective than the practice of following. Towards the end of the trial period, from day 31 onwards, the company only commented on existing followers' posts, since commenting was a time-consuming practice.

#### 4.3 The impact of following on receiving likes and comments

The pictures posted on the focal company's Instagram account (117 pictures) received likes and comments (Figure 6). All in all, 4,735 likes were received, for an average of 40.5 likes per picture. Of these, 4,148 likes were received instantly or on the same day that the pictures



**Figure 5.**  
Number of likes  
given on potential  
customers' posts



**Figure 6.**  
Number of likes  
received on 117  
Instagram posts

were posted (an average of 35.5 instant likes per picture). The most endorsed picture received 93 likes. There was no statistically significant difference in the number of likes received depending on the time (morning, noon or evening) and the day (weekday or weekend) that the pictures were posted.

There was a significant relationship between following and likes received ( $r = 0.421$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) but not between following and comments received ( $r = 0.169$ ,  $p = 0.262$ ). According to Iconosquare statistics, 32 per cent of the likes received were from existing followers of the company's account.

The number of comments received amounted to 179, with an average of 1.5 comments per post. Most pictures received one or two comments, with a maximum of five comments on two pictures. The majority of comments were compliments on the pictures, with a few exceptions of users commenting on the picture caption or the application. All the comments were positive.

There was a strong positive correlation between the numbers of likes and comments received ( $r = 0.415$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ). In other words, popular posts gathered more likes and more comments. This indicates on an aggregate level that those who liked the company's posts also commented on them.

#### 4.4 Integrated effects of following, liking and commenting

For a more extended analysis, a correlation analysis between all three outcome variables (likes, comments and followers obtained) was performed. Table III shows that the effects of these variables are interlinked.

These findings justify the need to further disentangle the effects of following, liking and commenting on the number of followers gained. Based on a set of linear regressions, following potential customers significantly influences the number of customers who become followers, an outcome that cannot be directly exceeded by being more active in liking or commenting on their posts (Table IV).

The findings indicate that the most efficient practice in generating followers for a company's Instagram account is following other users – in this case, potential customers. This action-reaction pattern can be called “follow for follow”, describing the practice of following to be followed back. However, this finding is based only on the practices of endorsing other users; it does not take into account the effects of the content of the posts. Furthermore, a positive relationship between following and receiving likes was found, which provided a reason for further analysis of the effects of likes received on comments and followers obtained. The analysis suggests that likes generate comments and followers on an aggregate level, as Figure 7 implies. No significant correlation between liking and commenting and a specific instant reactive behaviour was discovered in the data. However, liking and commenting have been identified as ways of interacting with customers – in this

**Table III.**  
Correlation between  
likes received,  
comments received  
and followers gained

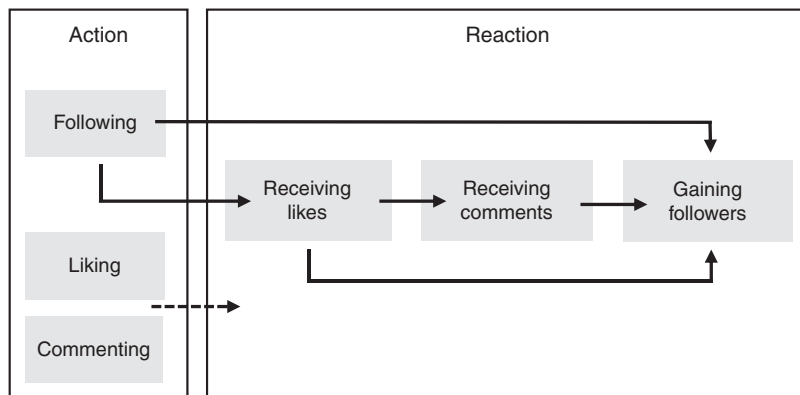
Variables	Followers gained	Likes received	Comments received
Followers gained	1		
Likes received	0.421**	1	
Comments received	0.322*	0.415**	1

**Notes:** \*\* $p < 0.01$  level; \* $p < 0.05$  level

**Table IV.**  
The effects of  
following, liking and  
commenting on  
followers gained

Variables	Regression analysis			
	Dependent variable: followers gained			
	Parameter estimates	SE	t-value	Significance
Constant	24.486	7.897	3.101	0.003
Following	0.039	0.011	3.552	0.001
Liking	-0.006	0.020	-0.286	0.776
Commenting	-0.277	0.274	-1.014	0.317
	$R^2$	0.303	Adjusted $R^2$	0.288

**Figure 7.**  
The “follow for follow” model on Instagram



case, with potential customers on Instagram (Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013). Keeping in mind the number of likes and comments received, one can assume that the start-up company’s practice of liking and commenting did not go unnoticed.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper contributes to the research on Instagram marketing by shedding light on how a company’s endorsements affect consumers’ responses and how they are interlinked, as described in the “follow for follow” model in Figure 7. Previous research on Instagram marketing points out the practices of interacting with customers by following them and by liking and commenting on their posts (Miles, 2014; Neher, 2013). In addition to that, the model proposed in this study examines the effects of those practices by determining the reaction pattern to the actions employed. The findings identify following as a first-order marketing practice for companies to employ to obtain followers on Instagram. These findings are applicable in the companies’ daily routines. The model draws on existing theories and can be used to plan actions in future similar situations.

On a more general level, the findings imply that marketing managers have to carefully consider which metrics they should monitor in social media marketing, taking into account the differences between platforms. The endorsing behaviour varies across platforms because of the differences in user interfaces and the differences in the kind of social behaviour that is the primary behaviour. The findings show that the practice of following is the most effective when the purpose is to gain followers on Instagram. The practices of liking and commenting are less effective; the study did not find a significant relationship between the number of followers gained and the company’s efforts of liking and commenting on potential customers’ posts. Thus, the practices of liking and commenting on customers’ posts may be more relevant for other purposes, such as interacting with existing customers and strengthening the company’s relationships with them. In addition, commenting is time consuming, which calls for the reconsideration of its use as a marketing practice.

There are at least two possible explanations as to why following seems to be the most effective practice to instantly gain followers. First, Instagram’s user interface allows users to easily notice who their (new) followers are and enables users to easily react to that endorsement by following back. Second, to be noticed by others is a motivational factor on social media, particularly on Instagram (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). The findings suggest that following other users creates a more engaging reaction than liking and commenting on their posts.

This study is not without flaws. A more rigorous test of the developed model is required to strengthen the preliminary results. Studies confirming the effects of companies’

endorsements (practices) on Instagram are needed to determine the extent and strength of these effects on potential and existing customers' reactions. In the model, following, liking and commenting are measured as sole reactive behaviours, but other reactive behaviours such as word-of-mouth behaviour should also be considered. There is likely a correlation between purchasing behaviour and following a company, but this is not accounted for in the model. Moreover, potential customers' reactions are not dependent on companies' endorsing practices alone; the quality of social media marketing content, which was not covered in this study, is also important. Another limitation is that the analysis was done on an aggregate level, which means the interlinkages between following, liking and commenting were not tracked on an individual level. These limitations could be addressed in further research.

The results of this study show that the success of social media marketing is dependent on actively engaging with customers. Start-up companies or SMEs that adopt the idea of being active will reap a first-mover advantage beyond reliance on potential customers stumbling across the companies' marketing merely because it is present on social media. In this study, the focal start-up company succeeded in the pre-launch phase in building a worldwide community of 1,562 followers, who have the potential to become actual customers at a later stage. The company can be considered credible on Instagram based on the number of followers gained during this short period (Miles, 2014). Beyond its followers, the company also expanded its reach on Instagram. For instance, of the 4,735 likes received by the company on its posts, about two-thirds came from users not following the company.

One question is why the focal company, which was unfamiliar to potential customers, gained a fair number of followers during the relatively short trial period. One explanation is that the company, in the pre-launch stage, did not push any commercialised messages, which might provoke a negative psychological reaction (see also Bernritter *et al.*, 2016). The company did not receive any negative feedback on its posts. Another explanation is that the company identified the right target population and chose the right content and message, channelling a shared interest of the target population (Lee *et al.*, 2015).

The focal company's business addresses matters that are important in the potential customers' day-to-day lives; according to previous research, this increases the number of endorsements received (Coelho *et al.*, 2016). The total number of endorsements that a company receives probably differs depending on the products or services offered by the company within the business-to-consumer sector. Nevertheless, the action-reaction pattern described in the "follow for follow" model ought to be similar. However, the data were collected during a specific period using a single social media platform, which limits the generalisability of the study findings to other social media platforms. It would be interesting to replicate this research for other social media platforms to see whether similar patterns emerge.

This study has useful practical implications for marketers in SMEs who want to tap into the huge potential of Instagram as a marketing tool for creating and increasing global awareness of a new business. It offers insight into the active role of social media marketing in today's marketplace. Marketers should not be strangers to the opportunities or practices of being active on Instagram and should understand the effects of these practices in action.

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