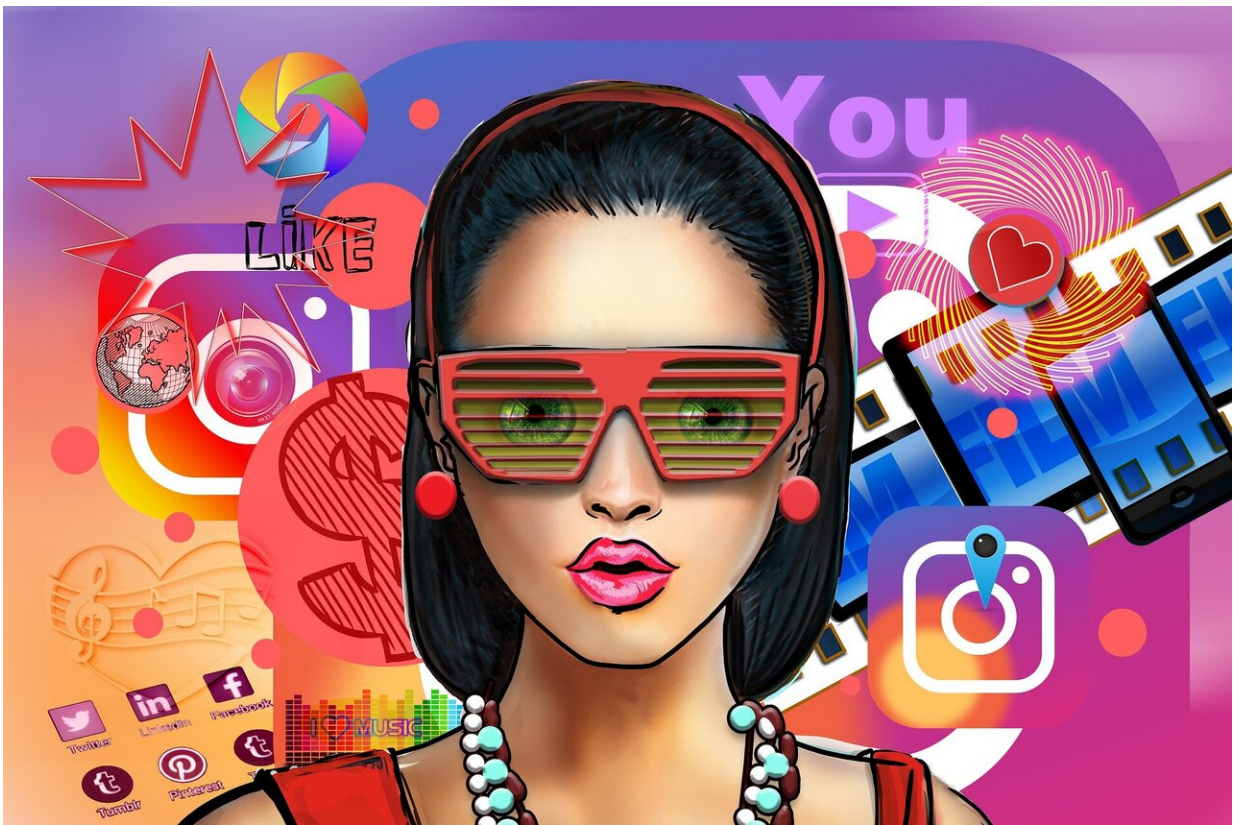


How can social media and influencers contribute toward societal good?

April 13 2021, by Hamish Armstrong



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New research co-authored by the Business School (formerly Cass) has demonstrated the role of social media and influential personalities in alleviating customer uncertainty and promoting the adoption of a new

eco-friendly technology in emerging markets.

"Social-Media, Influencers, and Adoption of an Eco-Friendly Product: Field Experiment Evidence from Rural China," by Dr. Wanqing Zhang, Lecturer in Marketing at the Business School investigated the impact of social media in the trial and adoption of a new environmentally-friendly pesticide among farmers in rural China. Specifically, the study explored effects that influential personalities could have when placed in a community on WeChat—a Chinese social media platform.

The researchers supplied 643 agricultural farmers across 34 similar villages in China's Hubai province with a pesticide containing new nanotechnology, which is less harmful to human health and more environmentally friendly.

To quantify effects of different marketing interventions on the diffusion process of a new technology, farmers were designated to one of four groups with different levels of support in a randomized control field experiment: basic instructions for use without extra marketing interventions; a dedicated one-to-one marketing service and support phone line; a WeChat group where they could interact with fellow farmers; or a WeChat group containing an influential villager who was not necessarily an expert in pesticides—as selected by farmers themselves.

The effects of each group were tested at different stages of the purchase funnel to determine the variation in trial and adoption rates and the importance of influencer advocacy. Key findings from the study included:

- WeChat groups with a social media influencer yielded higher adoption rates than those without.
- This level of adoption can be attributed to significantly higher

trial uptake, helped by the presence of a trusted voice to drive discussion and focus conversation on knowledge-sharing.

- Social media groups without a central influential figurehead produced fewer serious discussions about the product, more uncertainty and greater skepticism than with an influencer.
- Although traditional one-to-one phone line support generated similar consumer trial uptake to a WeChat group led by an influencer, it yields up to 35 percent lower return on investment (ROI) due to high labor costs and low economies of scale.

The results also show that influencers can play a significant role in the initial stage of product diffusion through building up authenticity of the new product and supplier credibility, and are excellent messengers of information even if they do not possess product-specific expertise.

Dr. Zhang said the study had multiple implications for business and society:

"Social media is a low-cost way for organizations to reach out to new customers, but it can also be an important port of information.

"In an era of fake news and mixed messaging spread by social platforms, it is important for organizations to provide authentication and advocacy to the information they are providing.

"Our research suggests that the input of influential and respected figures, such as eminent personalities in a village network recruited for our study, can have a big impact on the trust and adoption of a new product or technology—even if they themselves lack specific knowledge about it.

"The findings of our study also show how organizations like governments can structure campaigns, such as dispelling reports of

inefficacy and dangers around coronavirus vaccinations and [adoption](#) of other medications.

"Finally, the research shows that social media and online influencers can come together to help fight societal ills such as poverty, disease, and pollution."

"Social-Media, Influencers, and Adoption of an Eco-Friendly Product: Field Experiment Evidence from Rural China," by Dr. Wanqing Zhang, Professor Pradeep K. Chintagunta, Chicago Booth School of Business and Professor Manohar Kalwani, Krannert School of Management, Purdue University, is published in the *Journal of Marketing*.

More information: Wanqing Zhang et al. EXPRESS: Social-Media, Influencers, and Adoption of an Eco-Friendly Product: Field Experiment Evidence from Rural China, *Journal of Marketing* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920985784](#)

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