

**The Power of Social Media Influencers**

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**By**

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**Abstract**

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The David Owsley Museum of Art (DOMA) is located on Ball State University's campus. The museum boasts 11,000 works of art from all over the world and is named in honor of F.C. Ball's grandson, David Owsley, who has donated millions of dollars worth of art to the museum. In 2016, 26,000 guests visited DOMA, but there are challenges attracting student visitors. This project aimed to increase student attendance through a social media influencer campaign. Based on Patrick Jackson's communication behavioral theory, consumers respond and interact with a product or service when there is a triggering event. For this campaign, the museum hosted an influencer event, which served as the triggering event, and led to an increase in social media engagement and attendance. The research and explanation of the results are followed by a list of recommendations for the museum to use in future influencer marketing campaigns.

### **Acknowledgements**

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This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of Dean James Ruebel.

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**Process Analysis**

Social media has changed the way brands interact with their audiences. My thesis provides thorough research based on social media analytics and think-tanks that will help the David Owsley Museum of Art interact with one of their main audiences: Ball State students. Engagement refers to how many users interact with a brand on social media. To calculate engagement:  $\text{likes} + \text{comments} / \text{number of followers} \times 100$ . Engagement rates vary based on the type of brand, but for this thesis I based my analysis off of a top cultural institution: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City as a benchmark. Social media influencers refer to a group of online users who can represent the brand through reaching a targeted, desirable audience. I provide more details on engagement, influencers, and their power throughout the thesis.

Later in life, I hope to combine my talent for persuasive communication with my passion for art, museums, and history. Because of this, I'm confident this honors thesis project will enhance my appeal to employers post-grad because I will have real experience implementing an influencer campaign. I want to leave a legacy on the museum administration and show them the power of social media to help them gain their desired number of student visitors.

## Introduction

When people hear public relations, they think about traditional media (Deitrich, 2012). While this is a major function of public relations that is not the only function public relations professionals rely on to communicate authentic messages to their audience. Social media has changed the public relations game. Trust in media continues to decline, but trust in others, or “people like me” increases. Influence is defined as the capacity to impact the character, development, or behavior of someone or something, or the effect itself (Linton, 2017). Companies and organizations of all sizes are turning to influencer engagement, which refers to gathering targeted personalities on social media who influence a target audience (LePage, 2017) to purchase a product or service. According to studies by TapInfluence, social media influencer marketing is 11 times more effective than traditional advertising (Saiidi, 2016). Nearly half (49 percent) of consumers make a purchase based on marketing from social media influencers, and this affects 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions. This could be because of penetration of the desired target audience through social media channels and influencers. Nielsen’s survey found that 58 percent of global online consumers trust “owned media,” such as messages on company websites, and 50 percent found content in emails they consented to receive to be credible (Grimes, 2012).

I am the public relations assistant at the David Owsley Museum of Art on campus. According to the American Alliance of Museums, over 850 million people visit museums in America annually (2014). The annual amount of visitors is roughly 26,000 according to daily security reports. I reached out to Indiana University’s campus museum, which is of similar size and scope. Their education director mentioned in an email that there have been 20,000 visitors already this year (Aherne, 2017). With a city population of 70,000 over 20,000 students on Ball State’s campus, the number of annual visitors has lots of room to grow. The museum needs to focus on gaining student visitors and keeping them engaged. The university’s mission is to, “be the most student-centered and community-engaged of the 21st century public research

universities, transforming entrepreneurial learners into impactful leaders—committed to improving the quality of life for all,” (Ball State University, 2017). When students visit the museum and other cultural institutions, they are living out this mission.

Many students don't even know the museum exists, which is a large audience for a university museum. According to a [survey](#) released this week by online auction site [Invaluable](#), nearly 23 percent of Americans find artwork that appeals to them on social media channels such as Instagram or Pinterest. By contrast, 20 percent discover artwork by going to museums and nearly 16 percent by visiting brick-and-mortar galleries. (Klara, 2016). This needs to change so the museum experience can become dynamic rather than static, and the arts, history, and culture of people are continuously celebrated throughout the future of humanity. Essentially, millennials value art and technology, but they aren't necessarily combining the two by attending a museum and sharing their experience online.

Museum-goers are generally perceived as older people. The American Alliance of Museums surveyed the general public about their sentiment toward museums, and their research revealed, “There was widespread acceptance that museums will have to continue to modernise and evolve, particularly in terms of accessibility, sustainability and the incorporation of technology,” (2014). This perception affects how students view museums and whether or not they decide to visit one. The David Owsley Museum of Art can attempt to change this perception through influencer marketing.

New students are bombarded with messages as they enter campus. There is no original, intentional point of contact for new students to experience the museum. The museum hosts event during welcome week for new students, but if they don't even know the museum exists in the first place, they aren't going to be aware of the events going on. The museum is not introduced to students during campus tours, and only some orientation leaders take their students to the museum. Orientations leaders, resident assistants, and campus organization leaders could serve as initial influencers for new students at Ball State.

The student population receives weekly emails from the museum, but this is the only pushed contact to students. Students can delete these emails without opening them or opt out of the emails. Additionally, social media is the most effective way to reach a millennial audience (Jade, 2016). Knowing that millennials value art and are known to be content creators online, how can the museum spread awareness to new students so they are persuaded to attend?

For this project, my goal was to create a real student ambassadors/influencer campaign at the museum to engage more with students, the desired target audience. In comparison to other age groups, millennials are more influenced by their friends, family, and opinion leaders rather than experts on a topic (Jade, 2016). Because of this, influencer marketing is an effective way to gain the trust of the target audience. I researched effective ways to create this campaign, implemented the campaign, and then evaluated the campaign. I aimed to prove the value in influencer engagement and create a mutually beneficial relationship for the students involved in the campaign and the museum. I created a strategic list of social media influencers on campus and invited them to the museum. Lastly, I evaluated the effectiveness of this through social media analytics and monthly security reports and provided recommendations based on the evaluation.

For this event, I targeted micro-influencers, which means a targeted, concentrated group of individuals who are probably already familiar with the museum (Barker, 2016). Targeting micro-influencers is beneficial because the interaction seems more natural and authentic: It will take less convincing to ask them to interact with the brand. (Barker, 2016). Micro Influencers have anywhere between 1,000 and 100,00 followers (Linton, 2017), and because of this have genuine sway over their communities and act out of passion rather than social status. "Advocates are not usually interested in receiving 'stuff,'" Christopher Carfi, social business director at PricewaterhouseCoopers, says. "What they tend to consider valuable is recognition or special treatment, such as advance access to upcoming releases, an opportunity to meet with the company's leaders at a VIP dinner, for example, or the chance to give input on new products,"



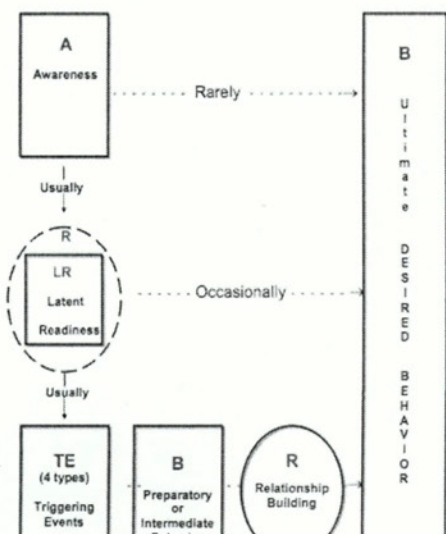
(Aquino, 2013). This is why I planned to provide the chosen social media influencers with a unique tour experience and object study so they felt like their interaction with the museum is genuine and catered specifically toward them. While many perceive visiting a museum as a passive activity, I aimed to make it active through social media and an experience with influencers.

**Influencer Theory and Methodology**

Since influencers aim to change the behavior of their networks, the most applicable theory that focused on awareness, an action, such as an event, and behavioral change is Patrick Jackson’s behavioral communication model (1998). Jackson suggested that public relations efforts should focus on behavioral change for target audiences and develop a behavioral communication model: awareness, latent readiness, triggering event, and behavior. (Ewing, Engler, Modarelli-Frank, 2015). Latent readiness is defined as an individual’s attitudes or predispositions about the product, service or idea and if the influencer is prepared to pay attention to the message. Then, the triggering event provides the desired audience with an experience with the idea, product or service. I measured the latent readiness of the desired target audience through foot traffic and event reports, which shows that not even one-third of visitors at the museum are students. After the triggering event, the target audience is more likely to change their behavior and influence the behavior of others. The tour and object study served as the triggering event. Jackson asserted there are five types of influentials, one of

which being a role model. Jackson claimed a role model acts out the desired behavior and shows others how to behave and the effect on others involves emulation and admiration, which leads to behavior change. In regard to this thesis, student influencers fall under the role model category.

Behavioral Public Relations Model



**A behind-the-scenes look: The event logistics**

Based on the research above, I implemented a campaign to test out a social media influencers event. On Monday, Feb. 27, I sent a personal invitation to 16 targeted student social media influencers. The 16 student influencers were chosen based on the research of Jackson's public relations theory, influencer research, and micro-targeting of students who engage with other students. Nine students agreed to attend the event. Six of the nine have visited the museum before and believe their friends have visited the museum before. One reason they were chosen was because they enjoyed visiting museums and other cultural institutions. I chose these influencers based on what organizations and major they represented and how many followers they had on Instagram and Twitter. These influencers are actively involved on campus and represent a larger body of students than just themselves. These students were asked to document their visit to at least their Instagram page and encouraged to post on other social platforms in exchange for a personal tour and object study with the director of the museum, Bob La France. This provided student influencers were given a unique perspective on a behind-the-scenes work of art.

Name	Handle	Twitter	Instagram	Organization	Email	RSVP
Maren Orchard	maren_mariee	385	566	Honors College	mmorchard@bsu.edu	YES
Bre Daugherty	bre_daugherty	839	946	Student Media - DN	bldaugherty2@bsu.edu	YES
Trevor Holland	trevdogg	1,957	1,888	Greek Life	tjholland@bsu.edu	YES
Sami Johnson	samijohnson_		2,072	Miss Ball State	sljohnson4@bsu.edu	YES
Jenna Liston	jennaliston	678	1,240	Student Media - Newslink	jrliston@bsu.edu	YES
Imani Woodson	mani.nicole	1,571	4,923	Black Student Association	inwoodson@bsu.edu	MAYBE
Justin Toliver	i:justin_universe, t	758	1,787	Asian American Student Assoc	jatoliver2@bsu.edu	
Victoria Voelkel	victoriavoelkel		1,068	Latino Student Union	vavoelkel@bsu.edu	YES
Katy Volikas	i:katyvolikas, t:Kat	998	2,137	Student Government Associa	kavolikas@gmail.com	YES
Jacob Logeman	jacoblogeman	545	1,076	Dance Marathon	jplogeman@bsu.edu	YES
Chloe Kirchner	i:chloekirchner, t:c	588	1,360	Cru	cekirchner@bsu.edu	
Trey Moses	treymoses41		6,701	Ball State Athletics	tamoses@bsu.edu	YES
Michael DePrez	michael_deprez	315	575	Architecture	mrdeprez@bsu.edu	YES
Kellyn McMullan	@kellyn_mcmullan		2,273	Fashion	kbmcmullan@bsu.edu	NO
Kayla Stanley	kaylastanley_		1,098	Art Education	kastanley@bsu.edu	
Destiny Yarbrough	destinytaylorxoxo			Theater	destinytaylorxoxo@gma	NO
<b>Backups</b>						
Janie Fulling	lovecommajanie		547	Visual Storytelling		
Jillian Wilschke	RUNS BSU SNAPCHAT					NO

The student influencers event at the museum took place from 3-5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 15. A docent, or volunteer museum guide, led the students through the museum highlighting significant pieces of interest and the variety of the collection. The docent stopped in almost every exhibition to allow the influencers to take pictures. A reception was held for the student influencers after the tour and object study. La France brought out two pieces of art that were still packaged because they were just bought and shipped to the museum. Since they weren't even on display yet, the influencers felt like they had a more exclusive look at the behind-the-scenes artwork at the museum.

### How effective was the student influencer event?

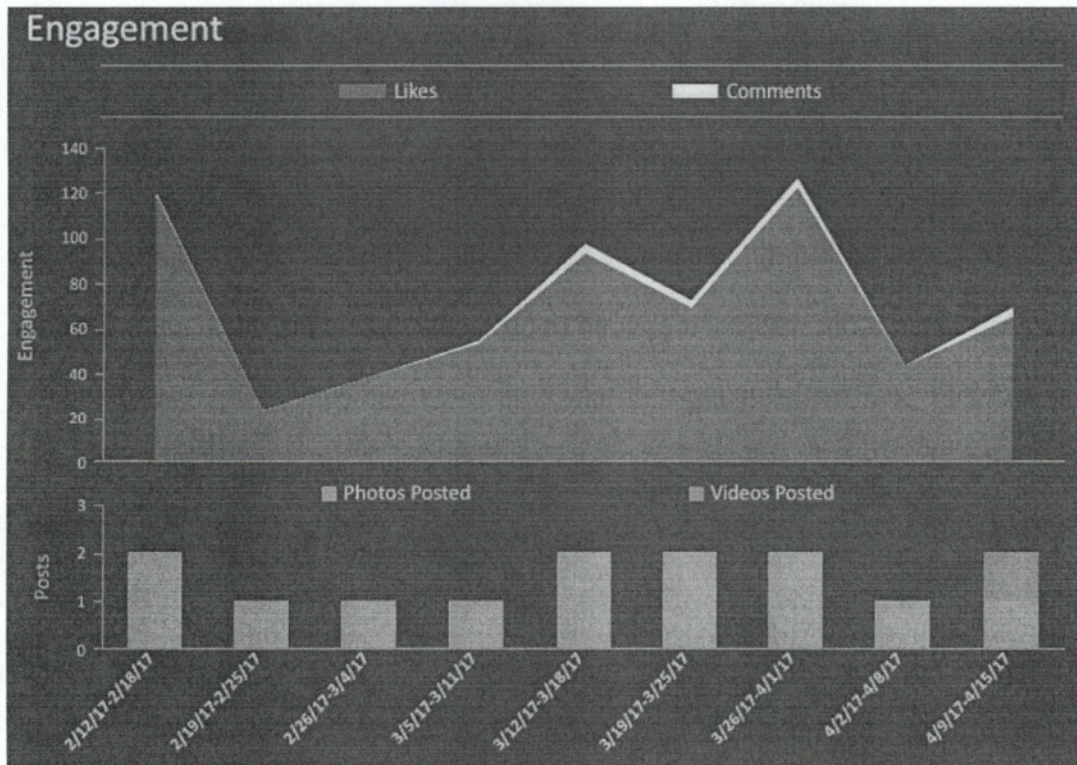
I analyzed the effectiveness of this event in two ways: a foot traffic report and museum event report following the influencer event and through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). According to Mediakix, the KPIs for influencer marketing revolve around the engagement rate, which is number of likes + comments / total number of followers (2016). Other KPIs I analyzed were overall influencer reach. I analyzed both the museum's engagement rate through free analytics tools and the influencers' engagement rates through mathematical calculations.

Through Instagram and Twitter, the overall reach for this campaign was 19,303 users.

Instagram	Sami Johnson	Miss Ball State	Trevor Holland	Katy Volikas	Katy Volikas Art	Michael DePrez	Maren Orchard	Victoria Voelkel	Jenna Liston	Bre Daugherty	Jacob Logeman
Followers	2,104	241	1916	2,666	2,879	593	578	1,089	1,276	1,013	
# of posts	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
# of likes& comments	117	67	239	213	37	63	71	98	152	87	
Engagement rate	0.018	0.28	0.12	0.13	0.012	0.11	0.12	0.09	0.12	0.09	
<b>Total Reach</b>	14,850										
<b>Average Engagement Rate</b>	0.11										

While overall reach typically boasts the highest numbers, the most effective way to measure social media success is through engagement. Sprout Social defines engagement as the long-term relationship created with a user through open, two-way communication (York 2017). Ways to engage on Twitter involve favorites, retweets, mentions, hashtags, and direct

messages, and ways to engage on Instagram involve likes, mentions, comments and hashtags. The most successful brands engage with



their audience by starting the conversation, generating user content and encouraging brand enthusiasts, and intertwine current events with social.



The engagement rate on Twitter was even higher, with some influencers engaging over seven percent and the average reaching 3.4 percent. Most national brands with millions of followers have an engagement rate of about .7 percent on Twitter (Hingley, 2015). The

Engagement rate  
0.9%



museum’s engagement rate throughout the month of February was .8 percent, and in March was .9 percent, which is above the average. This goes to show why micro-targeting influencers is so beneficial to smaller brands. These brand ambassadors with a few thousand followers earn a higher engagement rate because they genuinely connect with their audience. According to Twitter analytics, page visits to the David Owsley Museum of Art increased by over 300 from February to March. Heading into the April, the engagement stayed consistent with March.

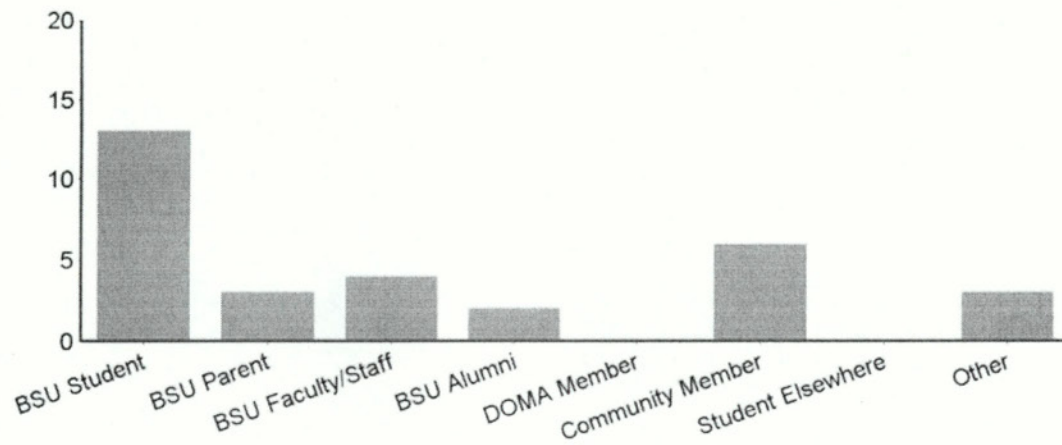
ENGAGEMENT		Current Period
Metric	2/12/2017 - 4/15/2017	
Total Engagement	641	
Likes	624	
Comments	17	
Engagement Per Post	46	

I gathered foot traffic reports from the staff. Museum guards track every single person that walks into the museum during visiting hours. Monthly traffic into the museum in February before the event was 1,222. Traffic into the museum during the event month, March, was at 2,124. From July 2016 to March 2017, March was one of the highest attendance months. This continuous increase could be a direct correlation to the social media influencers event.

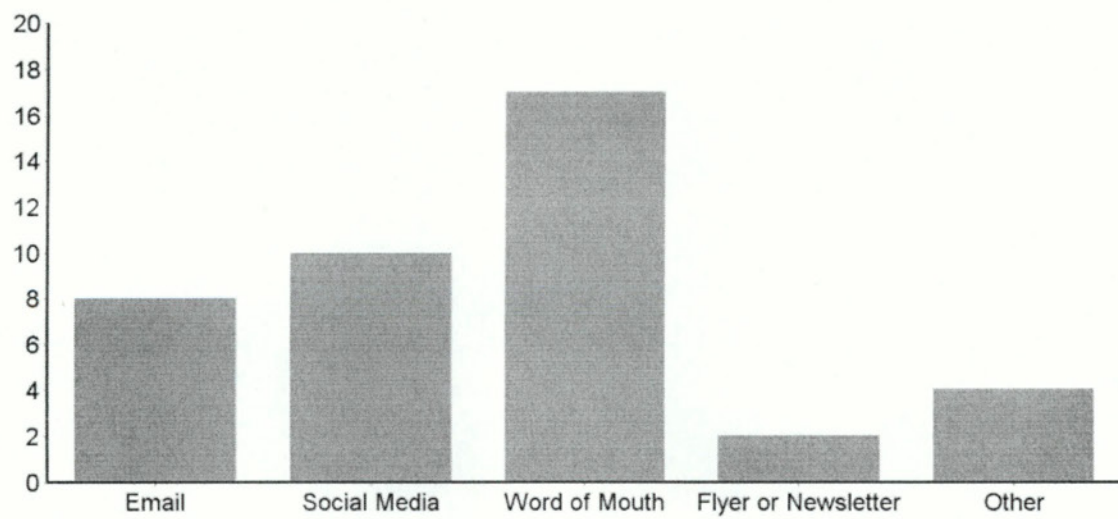
The museum hosts Final Friday’s twice a semester. Community members, students, and faculty are welcomed to this event. The education director at the museum, Tania Said, collects data to see who attends these events. The museum hosted a Final Friday one week after the

social media influencers event, and one-third of the attendees at Final Friday were students. According to Said's reports, more students attended this Final Friday than any other this year (Said, 2017).

**What is your affiliation with DOMA? (Check all that apply)**



**How did you find out about Final Friday: Identity? (Check all that apply)**



Ultimately, the effects of the influencer event support Jackson's behavioral communication model. After the triggering event, the target audience is more likely to change their behavior. Most of the attendees heard about this event through social media or word-of-

mouth, which are the two largest ways for influencers to effects their audiences. Since more students attended the first event after the influencers shared their museum experience, this could be in direct correlation to their influence.

### **Recommendations for future student influencer engagement**

There are several ways to continue this influencers program at the museum and make it even more effective for the museum to increase student attendance. I recommend creating an ongoing relationship with the influencers over the course of the semester or year rather than hosting one tour and asking them to post one time on social media. Messages are most effective in threes (Clark, 2015), so it would be beneficial for the influencers to spread continuous messages to their followers. To identify influencers, first create a list of major student organizations and majors. From there, research who their president is and identify their scope of reach. If the president does not have a lot of engagement, then go through the followers of the president to search for more engaged members. This is the most tedious part of selecting the micro-influencers, but it is also the most beneficial way to find the right influencers.

I reached out to influencers who were influential through social media, but contacting bloggers and reporters could help spread awareness among students, too. A member of the Daily News came to the student influencer event, but she didn't write a story about her visit. With public relations campaigns like this, it is difficult to secure coverage or positive sentiment because the influencers aren't paid to provide either of those outcomes. The museum could also write a blog post about the influencers experience and encourage the influencers to share. Through Wordpress analytics, the museum could then measure the success of the blog.

To continue the concept of a consistent conversation with the influencers, I suggest developing and using a specific hashtag for the influencers to use and encourage their networks to use. This is one of the best ways to track audience engagement. For example, to make the museum seem like an active place to learn, experience, and have fun, #DOMADoes could serve as the hashtag. It shows that DOMA is a dynamic place to experience. Does DOMA offer tours?



#DOMADoes. Does DOMA serve as a great place for a first date? #DOMADoes. Does DOMA offer a large collect? #DOMADoes, and DOMA does provide so many opportunities for students.

There are several free social media analytics tools that I used in this campaign. However, I would encourage the museum to spend a little money on analytics tools that will provide in-depth analysis of the influencers' engagement. Simply Measured provides free reports like the one I used, but for a fee they can provide a more in-depth report. Sprout Social provides reports on top engaging posts and how the audience is engaging with posts.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, social media influencer marketing helps museums of all sizes target, interact, and attract audiences to the institution. The social media influencer event I hosted at the museum in March was successful based on an increased engagement rate on Twitter and Instagram, and increased attendance at the museum in the month of the event. This campaign had the potential to reach over 19,000 users, which is 35 times higher than the individual reach of the museum. The museum should continue to utilize influencer marketing to increase their interaction and engagement with students so they can learn the fundamental and intrinsic value of museums to enhance their education and personal development.

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