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Chapter

How Social Media Contributes to Place Branding

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Abstract

Place branding involves a range of initiatives intended to increase the attractiveness of a geographic area. One of the essential components of an effective place brand is a coordinated communication strategy that connects with a diverse range of stakeholders. As digital technology disrupts the ability to control communications, social media is playing a central role in the reach, influence, and engagement with all communications, including place branding. This chapter examines the role of social media in place brand communications by capturing a sample of Instagram posts relating to the place branding of Oman. These posts are analysed to understand how their content has the ability to appeal to an audience and generate substantial engagement. The findings suggest there are several strategies that are useful for considering when generating place brand content, which have implications for how place brand managers attempt to extend their influence on online communications and engage with their audiences.

Keywords: place branding, place marketing, nation branding, nation marketing, social media influencers

1. Introduction

Place branding is a general term that refers to the implementation of branding principles and strategies to raise the profile of a country, town, city, or district. Activities of place branding can include advertising campaigns, public relations initiatives, cultural and economic events, and infrastructure development, all designed to establish a positive and appealing image of the location in the minds of its target audience. One of the crucial components in the success of place branding is the controlled communication between the extensive range of stakeholders, to ensure that messages are in alignment with the core vision. With the rise of digital technology, especially social media, audiences have become more involved in shaping and consuming information, disrupting traditional communication channels. While this enables place brand managers to leverage social media platforms like Instagram to connect with stakeholders, share promotional campaigns, and build relationships, it also allows unofficial contributors to play a role in shaping the place brand message. This presents a challenge for place brand managers tasked with controlling the message.

This chapter examines the role social media plays in the strategic communication of place brands. Using a content analysis of 685 Instagram posts, this chapter explores the different types of content that are created and published in relation to the

promotion of place brands, and which type of content generates the most audience engagement. These findings suggest there are a range of strategies that place brand managers can employ to facilitate the promotion of place brand communication that significantly impacts audience interaction, engagement, and further dissemination.

2. Understanding place branding

Geographical regions of all sizes compete with other areas in a bid to enhance the social, cultural, and economic conditions within their area. Within this competitive landscape, regions are increasingly adopting the principles of strategic branding to showcase the unique qualities and benefits of a place. Such qualities may involve focusing on local culture, showcasing notable landmarks or landscapes, promoting a prosperous economy, or promoting the place as an area that offers an exceptional quality of life [1]. Effective place branding principles can improve the perception of a specific area among its residents, tourists, and potential residents, thereby increasing tourism revenue, attracting foreign direct investment, creating jobs, and promoting economic growth [2]. Thus, by building a positive place brand identity, a region is better placed to attract talent, visitors, and investment, all of which contribute to enhancing the quality of life in the region [1].

As with other forms of branding, one of the objectives of place branding is to make a place easily recognisable and different from other regions by showcasing the place's special qualities and crafting a captivating story [3]. An effective place brand, therefore, resides in its ability to integrate the different elements of the place, including the culture and values of the region, into a distinctly recognisable brand [2, 4]. It is this rich blend of associations that form an impression in the minds of its audiences that constitutes a place brand [5]. By strategically utilising the place's characteristics and attributes, a place brand aims to appeal to tourists, investors, businesses, and residents, to ultimately enhance the location's global reputation and competitiveness, further contributing to the long-term sustainability and prosperity of the place [6].

Given these diverse and extensive stakeholders, all having different needs, place branding is a significantly complex process [7, 8]. This range of stakeholders, each with different roles and objectives, requires place brand managers to have an excellent grasp of communication to be able to persuade their audiences, build success, and surmount inevitable challenges. Effective communication, therefore, plays a vital role in building connections among diverse stakeholders' groups, including locals, visitors, and tourists, through the exchange of compelling stories and appealing visuals [9]. Such communication might involve a mix of sounds and visuals to convey a place's history, culture, and stories, all of which can enhance a place's image across a wide range of audiences, merging the past with the present. The act of sharing diverse stories and interpretations through various forms of communication can support the feeling of belonging to a place, which further reinforces a place's brand.

3. Social media's disruption to everyday communication

Traditional broadcast media such as television, radio, and newspapers allow one-way communication, which enables place brand managers to distribute pre-determined messages through paid-for advertisements to a range of audiences. Such one-way channels restrict interaction between the senders and the receivers

of the communications, enabling place brand managers to control the messages being transmitted and consumed by their diverse audiences. However, as audience figures for traditional media continue to decline and an increasing proportion of the population receive their communications *via* new media, there are limitations on the ability of brand managers to control the place brand message. This rapid disruption to how we consume communications, particularly through social media platforms, has democratised the exchange of communications. Individuals now have access to a wide range of communication channels, both official and unofficial channels, that enable participation within platforms of exchange, rendering it difficult for place brand managers to author and control the messages relating to their place brand [10].

Although place brands continue use both traditional and digital communication channels for reaching and influencing their intended audiences, social media has become a crucial platform for distributing information and engaging users. In addition to the low cost of using social media, its immediacy and its unlimited reach, this technology greatly enhances communication by breaking down geographical barriers and promoting participation [11]. Furthermore, social media platforms allow for open discussions, giving users the freedom to express their thoughts and opinions and promoting a feeling of shared connection and collaboration [12]. For this reason, social media is essential for spreading positive information and experiences about a location [13] as it facilitates a smooth exchange of information and stories, and enables users to easily respond to comments and feedback [8].

4. Social media's contribution to place branding

Social media has enabled users to generate and publish their own content about places, culminating in the dissemination of a wide range of perspectives beyond the orchestrated narratives that can be found on official channels. This perceived independence of the contributors, with no explicit affiliation to any official channels, creates the impression of independence and authenticity [14]. Such inclusion of other perspectives can provide a more accurate and real reflection of a place, further enhancing the perception of trust, which can be instrumental in shaping how stakeholders perceive a place. Indeed, the advent of social media has enabled individuals from any part of society to have the means to express their thoughts and opinions, resulting in a multitude of diverse narratives about any place being shared at any time [15]. Within this context, managing a place brand's image in the digital age presents a challenge for the official place brand managers because of the difficulty in controlling the narrative in an open and shared space, such as on social media platforms [8]. Yet, for the official place brand managers, social media is an effective and essential tool for optimising and enhancing their communication strategies, ultimately enabling greater reach and participation in their communications, with greater immediacy than traditional channels.

Such platforms also allow brand managers to mine the overriding opinions of contributors in relation to the content of their posts on the official channels as well as the content created by independent influencers. Arguably, the most important aspect of place brand communication is the digital content that is posted on social media by independent creators [16]. While the content produced by official channels typically emphasises the positive aspects of the locations, user-generated content can offer a more revealing peak behind the official curtain, possessing a greater ability to influence potential tourists and shape their preferences [17].

Social media content creators have the freedom to determine the nature of their content, which has the potential to have a negative effect on the perception of a place and undermine the positive images created by a place's official channels. It is therefore crucial for the official place brand governors to establish a solid relationship with their stakeholders, particularly independent content creators, to reduce the likelihood of any adverse messages [6] and encourage a closer alignment between official and unofficial content [18]. Place brand officials must also monitor the engagement of influencers with substantial followers, to keep abreast of comments, likes, discussions, and the general mood of contributors, to enable them to address any emergent issues [19, 20].

Cooperation between official place brand managers and independent content creators can be aided by a better understanding of the motivations of social media influencers. Studies have revealed that social media influencers have various motivations for producing content for their respective place brands on social media [21]. These include a sense of social responsibility, the desire to stay connected, being inspired by others, seeking recognition, forming a personal connection with the place brand, and being influenced by opinion leaders and local online communities [21]. Savvy influencers recognise that by helping to promote democratic and social causes on public platforms can enhance their own kudos [22]. When such discourse relates to place-specific issues, sharing authentic, value-driven content that engages audiences with creativity can significantly impact the positivity associated with place brands [23].

Alongside the necessity of place brands having a presence on social media, not least with which to communicate with stakeholders and allow a public sharing of viewpoints and experiences, the bigger managerial challenge for place brands is concerned with managing unofficial channels on social media. Given the freedom of social media influencers, who have the autonomy to determine the publishable content for their channels, the issue facing brand managers is on how they might encourage influencers to post content that remains on-message with the place brand. To explore this issue, we use the following sections to discuss the findings of social media content relating to the place brand of Oman.

5. Collecting data: sampling Instagram posts

The aim of this research was to explore how the Oman place brand has been promoted through the use of social media. Instagram was the selected platform for data extraction due to its popularity and efficacy in capturing personal experiences and sharing photos and videos with social connections in real time [24]. The platform has amassed a substantial user base of over 2 billion individuals who regularly interact with the application monthly [25] and is reported [26] to have 500 million users upload an average of 95 million photographs daily. This platform provided a rich collection of textual, audio, and static and time-based visual media [27].

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to ensure that data was collected from the most suitable influencers to meet the objectives of the research. In drawing from the sampling principles of previous studies [28–30] the following criteria were used to inform the selection: (1) area of interest: The selected influencers should express a genuine interest in Oman brand, as otherwise their content would be irrelevant to the purpose of the research; (2) diverse content: The influencer should create content that is not limited to a single specialist topic, thereby avoiding channels that lack thematic variation; (3) impact level: The influencers should have more than

10,000 followers on their Instagram page; and (4) frequency: It was essential that influencers consistently published content, as this better facilitated examining the level of engagement of their followers in response to the posts.

A further consideration was that it was important to disregard any influencers that posted content about a range of countries, such as those influencers who travel regularly and share their experiences of other countries. Selecting influencers who post content restricted to one nation enabled the content to be compared in relation to the brand communications of one nation. Furthermore, the collected content excluded “Instagram stories” due to their restricted 24-hour availability. While such stories serve an additional communicative purpose, they do not provide comparable functionality for posts, such as the inability to provide captions, display comments, and express approvals in the form of “likes” [31].

Data were gathered from the most significant influencers, capturing all posts published between November 2022 and October 2023. A total of 685 posts were collected for analysis, consisting of 337 posts from official Oman Government channels directly connected to Oman’s tourism accounts and 348 posts from independent influencers’ accounts. The resulting data were subjected to a content analysis, whereby the aim was to (1) ascertain the presence and frequency of concepts [32] and (2) determine how the different types of content relate to levels of follower engagement.

The analysis identified the number of materials in each post, and the content of the posts was evaluated according to the type of data, in terms of whether the content consisted of a photograph, video, infographic, cartoon, or text. Further analysis of these materials sought to identify the primary subject of the postings, enabling the categorisation of content according to their principal topics, such as people, landscape, adventure, lifestyle, heritage, food, and dress. For postings that contained a person within a geographical setting, the analysis focused on determining the primary purpose of the post based on the support hashtag, text, and focal point of the photography. In most instances, because the posting was related to the specific region of Oman, the focal points of the imagery were typically based on the physical environment, the activity, or the interaction. Furthermore, the location of the content, particularly in relation to the environment of the setting, such as whether the imagery was situated indoors or outdoors, provided an added means of interpreting the key points in the posts. The level of engagement generated by each post was recorded in the database, through the registering of the number of followers, likes, shares, and qualitative expressions, in terms of use of emojis and positive and negative comments. Once the post characteristics were inputted into Microsoft Excel, a second coder from the research team checked the interpretation of the posts to ensure that the classification of data was consistent.

6. Findings: how Instagram is used to promote the Oman place brand

As a visually driven platform, the data extracted from Instagram were primarily photography and video content, as noted in **Figure 1**. Photographs were the most prevalent content type, accounting for 58%, closely followed by video with 38% of the content. Given the platform’s design, text played only a minor role, representing only 3% of the content and mostly fulfilling the role of subject framing, such as providing attitudinal statements. This largely image-driven format reflects the ease and immediacy enabled by everyday mobile devices, whereby creating a post through the uploading of photos takes less time and effort, even when adding multiple

Content type

■ Photos ■ Videos ■ Text

Figure 1.
Content types related to place brand's analysed posts.

pictures to one post. The minimal use of text-based material (3%) is both a reflection of the platform and the propensity for expediency and their impact upon audiences. Powerful visuals captured during people's travels can readily convey a captivating experience that connects with an audience on an emotional level that is not easily captured by text alone.

6.1 Oman topics displayed on Instagram

The subject matter of the posts revealed a preference for significant cultural experiences and notable settings. The most common theme was visual media relating to either specific or scenic landscape settings, with 155 posts highlighting Oman's natural beauty. Of these particular posts, 60% included a person or people within the image or video. The subject of adventure was the second most popular topic, with 119 posts that focused on themes of what could be considered as thrilling activities, such as rock climbing in dramatic settings or engaging in picturesque aquatic sports. The frequency of such posts demonstrates that influencers consider Oman a destination for adventure. Both lifestyle and seasonal subject representation, with 87 posts each, typically contained imagery involving people dining, posing in social settings, and people enjoying recreational shopping. The subjects of festivals and celebrations featured in 73 and 67 posts, respectively, where the content depicted a variety of cultural events and vibrant entertainment associated with Oman. As a cultural extension, the subject of architecture featured imagery of distinctive physical landmarks of Oman, where buildings, structures, and monuments appeared in 67 posts. In 49 posts, the focus was on depicting people generally enjoying life, often posing, but in non-descript settings. In such instances, people were the primary feature within the image, and there was less emphasis on the location or background depictions (e.g. no landscapes, buildings, or specific activities). There was less frequency in the postings of subjects that might be considered more directly linked to culture, such as heritage and food, with only 34 and 30 posts, respectively. Posts that showcased food were less distinctive in their depictions of a specific place, which could explain the limited representation of food. While many of the posts contain overlapping themes, the subject distinctions depicted in **Figure 2** indicate the focal point of the posts.

When examining the data from a more abstract perspective, it was noted that outdoor locations were prevalent, featuring in a total of 591 posts, while indoor locations appeared in only 71 posts (**Figure 3**). From a place branding perspective, the greater focus on outdoor imagery provided a more dramatic and unique sense of place, enabling viewers to see the different physical spaces that the place has to offer, such as cultural and historical points of interest as well as natural landscapes and adventure activities. This focus on outdoor subjects highlights Oman's unique natural beauty and opportunities for adventure, reinforcing its image as a destination for nature lovers and adventure seekers. This reoccurring focus on outdoor imagery corresponds with the official Oman place brand communications, where the emphasis typically centres

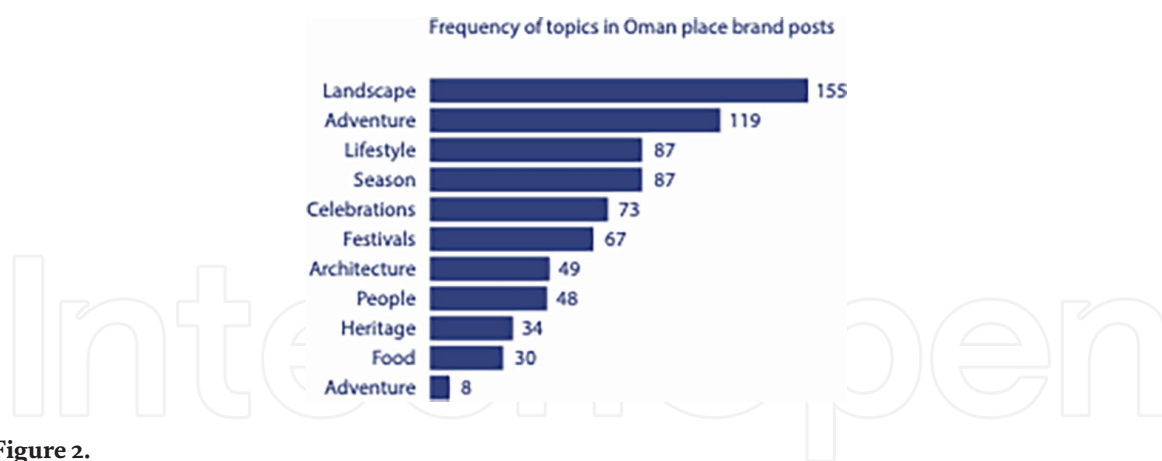


Figure 2.
 Frequency of topics in Oman place branding posts.

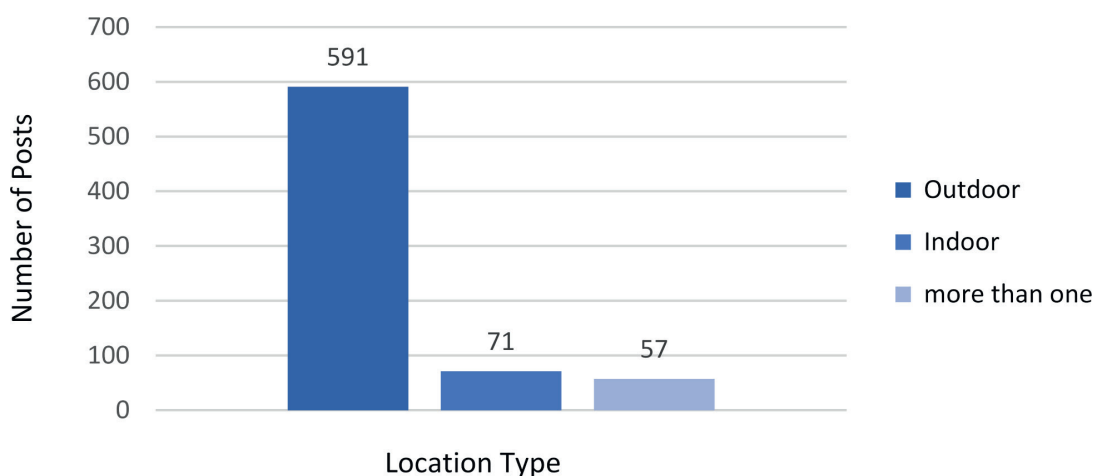


Figure 3.
 The location of subjects in place branding posts.

on depictions of landscapes and adventure activities as the most popular recreational pursuits in Oman.

While Instagram is primarily a platform for visual content, 89% of the collected posts made use of hashtags in their captions, and the use of hashtags on Instagram increases the reach and visibility of posts, which was particularly evident in place brand content, where there is a keen interest in attracting a target audience who are looking for specific places and activities. This type of labelling of social media content can help to generate a collective community of people interested in a specific topic connected to the place brand. Furthermore, the effective use of hashtags can enhance the authenticity of the content with a place brand by attracting additional related content posted by various visitors, tourists, or locals, thereby increasing independent contributions that showcase a place's characteristics (Figure 4).

6.2 Content that generates engagement

The collected content showed some commonalities between the posts that attracted the most engagement, as identified by the quantity of likes, comments, and shares. Examining the features of these posts can help determine what factors contribute to higher levels of engagement among followers. Of the three posts with the highest follower engagement, the common characteristics were: (1) the subject

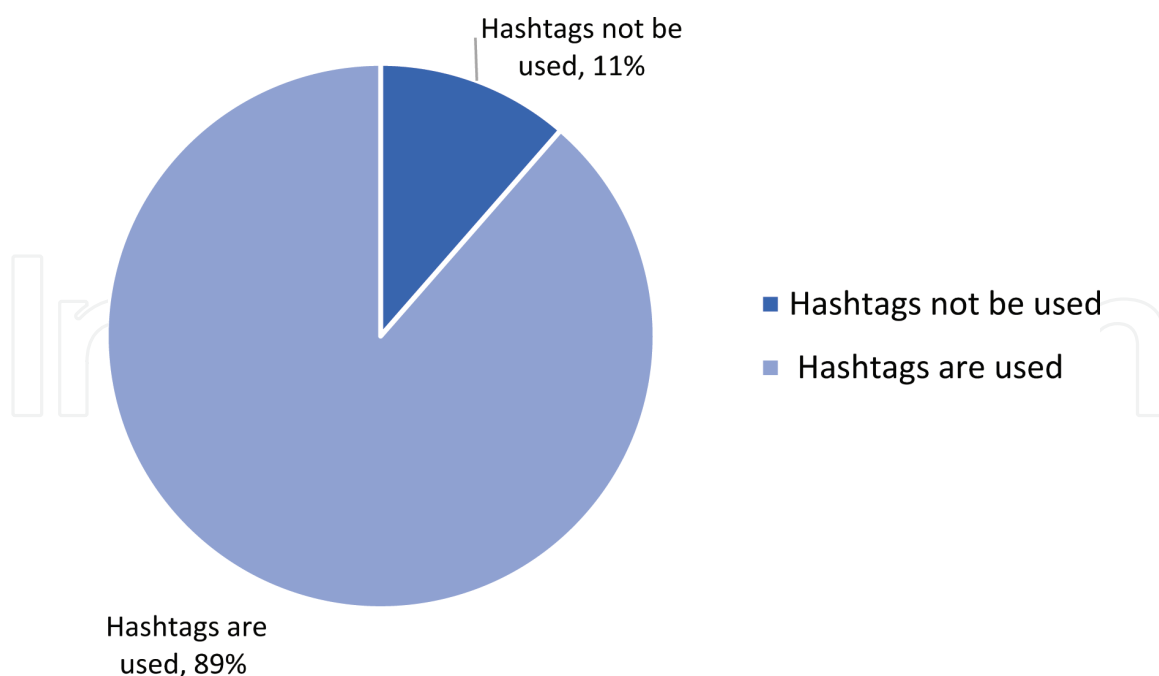


Figure 4.
Using hashtags in place branding posts.

of the post focused on unique aspects of the place brand; (2) there was a high-quality production of content, particularly apparent in time-based content; (3) relevant and indicative use of hashtags and descriptors; and (4) the content creator has high social status, more followers and thus greater influence.

The first prominent feature of the three posts with the most engagement, as measured through the number of likes, shares, and comments (**Table 1**), was the focus on subjects that are unique to the Oman place brand. Two of the three posts focused on subjects related to Oman's seasons, these being the rose season and the dates season. The third post focused on the construction of the region's largest wooden ship, showcasing the region's authentic craftsmanship skills. These subjects are considered unique to Oman and provide a source of pride that forms the basis for the distinct place-based subject matter.

The second feature of the top three posts was the high production quality of the posted material. These posts all featured high-quality resolution video, shot with aesthetically pleasing compositions, high-quality audio, mostly with original sound, and professional-level edits and transitions between scenes. Alongside this technical prowess, there was the use of brief captions to indicate the particular season or topic, which was displayed in both Arabic and English texts.

Related to this latter point, the third feature common to the most popular posts was that they all made effective use of indicative hashtags by using one or two words to

No.	Likes	Comments	Sharing	Views
1	253,832	1402	9562	5 million
2	133,607	676	12,100	5.4 million
3	121,302	1060	31,000	2.3 million

Table 1.
Posts with the highest engagement level.

capture the subject matter in a creative way that was relevant to either the country, the location, or the activity being displayed. This use of hashtags facilitated the sharing of such content to a broader audience, providing an opportunity for followers to redirect content in a way that, in some, reflected and reaffirmed their own feelings on a subject.

The fourth common feature between the posts that generated the most engagement was the level of influence of the individual creating the post. If the influencer had a large following, then the general level of engagement was much higher. Similarly, if the poster had an esteemed reputation due to receiving a royal ward from the Sultan of Oman, then the level of engagement was considerably higher. In these situations, there seemed to be perceived social cachet gained from being digitally connected with a highly esteemed individual, especially when this was readily achieved by sharing, liking, or commenting on their content. While the status of the content creator appeared to have an influence on the level of engagement that their responses generated, the individual creators were not personally present in either of the three most engaged-with posts.

In contrast, there were several commonalities among the posts that generated the least engagement. Low-quality content seemed to be one factor that inhibited engagement, with the least engaged posts all sharing the features of having low-resolution imagery in both video and photography, and was lacking in creative entertainment value or competence in the compositional imagery. Furthermore, these images contained fewer points of visual interest, thus having less ability to capture viewers' attention or pique their curiosity when compared with the posts that received higher engagement. This was most apparent in the minimal use of captions, with posts often having no captions or posts having captions that were highly descriptive and unimaginative. In all three of the ranked posts, measured by the least engagement, the creator's physical presence was evident in the posts. Typically, these posts featured the use of only one or two hashtags, which mostly served as a descriptive reference to the location of the content (**Table 2**).

The data also showed a greater pattern of engagement with positive content that related to distinctive Oman culture, such as seasonal activities and celebrations. More specifically, the posts that generated richer comments featured content that reflected a more emotional framing of the content. Examples include authentic storytelling that reflects a nostalgic aspect of cultural background, depictions of a perceived successful and attractive lifestyle, and postings that reflect an association with a higher moral attitude. By contrast, posts that featured unpopular commercial entities attracted a higher proportion of negative comments, the most notable being an unpopular telecommunications company in Oman. In such posts, the aesthetic appeal of the posted content appeared to have less impact on the comments, with the general sentiment being driven by prior experience with the organisation.

Generally, posts that were stylish, creative, or humorous were more readily shared by followers, enabling the sharers to express their affiliation with the culture by endorsing the posts. Such sharing and liking of posts provided followers with

No.	Likes	Comments	Sharing	Views
1	118	6	—	—
2	122	1	16	4176
3	155	11	3	2494

Table 2.
Posts with the lowest engagement level.

a convenient way for them to be active on social media without having to invest time in generating their own content. Endorsements of other creators' content also allowed followers to display part of their own online identity through the sharing and advocacy of certain topics in the social domain. Sharing content enabled followers to signal that they were informed about current issues, offer support on moral principles and outwardly display pride in their region's cultural heritage.

7. Discussion

Social media has become an essential tool for the communication of place brands. As platforms become increasingly visual, the utility of mobile devices facilitates the ease of creating and sharing content. This research examined how the Instagram platform had been used as a communication tool in the place branding of Oman. The findings revealed that when influencers use high-quality photos and captivating videos to promote various locations on Instagram, they attract greater engagement from individuals. The prevalent subjects of the posts primarily focused on features unique to Oman, such as the visual content of stunning landscapes, unique seasons, regional cuisine, and impressive architecture. In correspondence with related studies on social media efficacy, when content contained dynamic elements, it made the consumption more captivating and, based on the comments, was seen to enhance the viewer's overall experience [33, 34].

The findings revealed that independent creators and official Oman place brand channels both showed a clear preference for outdoor locations, which further reinforced the region's natural environment and expansive terrain. This focus on outdoor activities reflects the typical approach to place branding, where there is a preference for highlighting the unique and real things about the place [4]. While indoor locations were in the minority, such images commonly showcase the cultural and social richness of the place, such as museums, restaurants, and markets.

There was considerable similarity between the official and independent channels that promoted Oman. Although several of the independent channels lacked the level of professionalism as official posts, the subjects between the two shared great similarities. The effective use of hashtags increased the visibility and level of engagement with followers, generating more comments and overall impressions through the sharing of posts. This finding is in correspondence with earlier studies that found hashtags had a significant impact on social media marketing, and place branding on social media is no exception [35, 36]. The use of hashtags that related to the unique features of the place further stimulated content creation that reflected these themes (e.g., #Oman, #ExperienceOman, #Adventure, and #Beach). These latter examples exploit the tactic of using generic phrasing to extend the visibility of the posts to a broader audience that may be interested in travel-related content.

One of the challenges facing official place brand managers is the lack of control over the production of social media content. The practical implications of this research suggest there are three strategies available to official practitioners of place branding to influence independent content creators. One suggestion for steering the independent representations of the place brand is for official channels to generate creative hashtags, as this has been shown to influence the type of content created on independent channels. Second, as might be expected, influencers with a greater number of followers receive a higher level of engagement with their posts, implying that it

would be prudent for brand managers to prioritise the inclusion of these influencers as crucial stakeholders throughout the place branding process. Third, independent creators with higher social status cultivated greater engagement with their content, and this was particularly evident in individuals that had received a royal award from the Sultan of Oman. This suggests that there would be considerable merit in encouraging these influencers to create content that reflects higher status, which would likely result in greater engagement.

The findings from this research included 12 months of data (between November 2022 and October 2023) and therefore only include the posted place brand material between this period. As the nature of social media content can be influenced by broader, emergent national and international issues, there are likely to be trends and cycles of content that have emerged outside of the specific time period of data used in this study. Similarly, the singular focus on one social media platform has limitations on the generalisations; nonetheless, the Instagram platform provides a highly informative indication of the use of social media content in place branding. One final limitation to mention is that this case solely focused on Oman as a place brand, which has its own unique geographical and cultural features. The findings of this study therefore may only readily translate into insightful observations for other place brands that share a similar set of environmental and contextual conditions as those in the region of Oman.

8. Conclusion

This chapter highlights the significance of social media, specifically Instagram influencer content, in building greater visibility of place brand communications. The components that increased engagement included the use of high-quality, visually interesting content that focused on the most distinctive features of the region. The incorporation of specific and generic hashtags, especially ones that focused on a creative theme, stimulated a higher level of content creation and sharing. Posts that featured positive emotional content were shared more readily. This was particularly true for posts that reflected a strong moral message or displayed admirable values. Individuals who shared these types of posts were able to reflect their own online identity by endorsing such communications.

Although official place brand managers have limited control over independently published content, these findings suggest that content in alignment with the intended brand message can be cultivated through several strategic initiatives. These include the tactical use of hashtags to influence content creation around a theme, encouraging the production of themes that drive content that, when shared by individuals, endows the sharer with the values associated with a higher level of moral and social standing, and finally ensuring that content creators with higher levels of influence are included in the formative stages of place brand planning, in order to cultivate a partnering mindset in the individual content creators.

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