

# THE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THEIR FOLLOERS ON INSTAGRAM: A CASE STUDY OF #STOPASIANHATE

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# Abstract

With the ongoing growth of social media, social media influencers are gradually playing a critical role in the marketing plan of organisations. While most companies are keen to employ influencers to generate profits and gain market share, only a few studies have discussed how social media influencers can contribute to non-profits or social activities, which inspires the present study to explore the mechanism of online influencers endorsing social problem campaigns. Based on that, this research has two main objectives: 1) to examine what impression management tactics have been utilised by social media influencers; and 2) to identify consumers' responses to those tactics. This research chose qualitative case study approach which uses the Asian hate as the case. Content analysis was adopted to analyse Instagram posts of eight social media influencers and the comments of their followers in relation to those posts. I have found two dominant tactics, which are *Solution* and *Campaign-promotion*, and two supplement tactics, including *Supplication* and *Association*. In accordance with these tactics, the audience revealed five themes of responses: *Educated*, *Feelings*, *Support*, *Resonance* and *Seeking reasons*. The analysis revealed *Solution* as one of the leading tactics that will trigger people to feel educated and be supportive of the campaign posts, while *Campaign-promotion* will provoke *Resonance*, *Reasons seeking* and feeling *Educated*. The findings of this dissertation enrich the knowledge of impression management theory and tactics. It also encourages policy makers and social marketers to formulate appropriate policies to deal with social problems and adopt influencers as a tool to promote social cause.

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# Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a University or other institution of higher learning.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.0 Preface

This chapter aims to describe the context of social media influencers promoting a social problem campaign (#StopAsianHate) on Instagram through the application of impression management. To be specific, the background of this campaign is explored from two perspectives: the occurrence of Asian racial discrimination and the voice of social media influencers. After briefly touching on the origins of this campaign, this chapter describes and discusses a problem statement which is followed by the posing of several research questions. Following these, the significance of the study is briefly described to explain why this topic is worthy of being researched. Finally, this chapter concludes with an outline of the remainder of this dissertation.

## 1.1 Background

*“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”*

—Nelson Mandela (1994)

Official preliminary police data collected by California State University in 2021 reported that anti-Asian hate crimes have increased by 145% in 16 of America’s largest cities (Lyu, Fan, Xiong, Komisarchik, & Luo, 2021). Asian racial discrimination is a phenomenon that has existed for a long time but which has been little discussed in public. The mystery of anti-Asian hate crimes has been further facilitated by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which requires recognition and consideration from the public. As Mandela (1994) observed,



individuals will acquire a new concepts through learning, which implies that their perceptions and beliefs are able to be influenced and even manipulated by appropriate approaches. The present researcher considers that impression management theory can be the communication bridge connecting social media influencers and their followers, so that to disseminate the idea of accepting others and stopping Asian hate.

### **1.1.1 The case of Asian racial discrimination**

The world started to pay close attention to Wuhan, a city in Hubei province of China, because of the increasing number of pneumonia cases without an explained origin at the end of 2019 (Wang, Horby, Hayden, & Gao, 2020). The experts soon found that the pneumonia patients were infected by a new type of coronavirus which was able to cause an illness called COVID-19 (2019 coronavirus disease) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in China proposed that the virus was coming from Hunan Seafood Wholesale Market where customers purchase raw meat and seafood, and some of these animals were considered to be the host of the virus. The coronavirus rapidly spread to the whole of Asia and then all over the world within half a month (Schumaker, 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic, the American government has formulated a set of rules to protect individuals , including stay-at-home orders, social distancing requirements and face-covering rules, which provoked anxiety and tension among the American people (Gover, Harper, & Langton, 2020). Asian Americans were accused of being responsible for the pandemic by other Americans, which continues to make Asians living in America suffer from being attacked both verbally and physically.

On March 16, 2021, three massage parlors experienced a shooting spree in Atlanta, Georgia, United States, which caused eight women to be killed and one man to be injured (Fan, Yu, & Gilliland, 2021). As six of the eight women murdered were Asian, a lot of people considered these shootings to be hate crimes related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gover, Harper, & Langton, 2020). According to the Hate Crime Statistic Act, hate crime refers to crimes derived from prejudice because of ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, gender identity, gender, or race. According to Burke (2021), the 21-year-old suspect first shot five people at an Asian massage spa in Cherokee County, and then shot three women at another massage parlor and one woman who was crossing the road at the third spa in Atlanta. The police mentioned that the suspect had intended to head south to carry out a similar assault in Florida. The suspect was eventually arrested about three and a half hours after committing these shootings. He claimed that the murder was triggered by a sexual addiction rather than by racial bias. In the end, he was sentenced to life without parole.

According to a Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Hate National Report, even before the cruel Atlanta spa shootings, Asian Americans had experienced roughly 4,000 bias-motivated crimes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Abram, 2021). Hate incidents including violent attacks, insults, verbal harassment, civil rights violations (such as refusal of service) and flu jokes (referring to the coronavirus as “Chinese virus”) were widely happening in public spaces such as companies, schools and supermarkets. These created great tension not only for the victims but also for the Asian American community and society as a whole (Abram, 2021). Research has shown that being racially targeted is very likely to cause sleep issues, depression symptoms, and anxiety, all of which can damage people’s overall mental health, wellbeing and future careers (Liu, 2021). It has been reported that 42% of Asian Americans who have experienced racism insist that their mental health has been severely damaged by the incidents (Liu, 2021). This

lasting impact receives attention and concerns from all walks of life, especially the digital world. Social media influencers are actively engaged through their social media accounts in trying to counter the effects of this pandemic-namely increased xenophobia and bigotry towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders .

### **1.1.2 The voice of social media influencers**

Constant crimes towards Asians have been occurring everywhere since the pandemic and the Atlanta spa shootings. Events such as an elderly Asian woman being slapped in the face and set on fire, a San Francisco Asian Uber driver being assaulted and an Asian man being punched in the head and back in the presence of his one-year-old child in the supermarket trolley have stimulated social media influencers from various industries to speak up through their online platforms to raise awareness of the increases in hate crimes towards Asian (Gonzales, 2021). The hashtag #StopAsianHate was created by social media influencers to share their own experiences of being racially discriminated against and to appeal to their followers to support their campaign by circulating this concept and asking their followers to stand up for those victims, especially the elderly, who are suffering from being racially bullied (Gonzales, 2021).

Many famous online influencers and celebrities have joined this campaign. Eva Chen, the director of fashion partnerships at Instagram, invited on 3<sup>rd</sup>, March 2021, three leaders including “Birds of Prey” director Cathy Yan, Allure editor-in-chief Michelle Lee and Rise founder Amanda Nguyen to join a discussion about the increasing number of anti-Asian hate crimes happening to Asian Americans (Liu, 2021). Each leader shared their own experiences of being discriminated against in both their personal and work life. They also discussed the urgency of stopping anti-Asian bias and hate crimes brought on by the epidemic sweeping the

world, which has resulted in heated discussions among Instagram users (Liu, 2021). Another influencer who has been actively participating in stopping Asian hate is Robyn Rihanna Fenty - the Barbadian singer, actress and fashion designer. She and her assistant attended an anti-Asian hate protest in New York with large dark sunglasses, a baseball hat and a black face mask in order to avoid being recognised (Burke, 2021). She also tweeted a series of videos and photos of that day's activities, which generated a high view volume and contributed to an increase in the awareness of #StopAsianHate (Ali, 2021). Furthermore, other online influencers and prominent figures such as Chriselle Lim, Tina Craig, Sharon Pak, Candice Kumai, Christine Chiu and Daniel Nguyen were also using online channels to post videos and share their personal experiences of being treated unfairly because of their race, using the hashtag #StopAsianHate in response to the wave of anti-Asian hate events taking place throughout America (Chung, 2021). The posts and tweets posted by social media influencers on their online platforms have produced rich debates among their audiences, which has made #StopAsianHate become a topical issue.

## 1.2 Problem statement

This dissertation aims to fill two knowledge gaps which are presented as follows.

As social media influencers are capable of attracting many people's attention and thus can be an important part of implementing effective marketing strategies, marketers have a tendency to adopt them as an influential endorsement method (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Booth & Matic, 2011). Therefore, it is obvious that social media influencers have played a critical role in boosting the profits of many companies (Lim, 2017), which makes businesses to pay a fortune to analyse the mechanism of social media influencers and how they play their role on the Internet in order to help organisations accomplish market competitiveness (Awang, Annuar, & Gisip, 2021). Nevertheless, only a few scholars such as Park and Cho (2015) and Annur et al. (2018) have touched the area of social media influencers applying non-profits marketing and have so far left very scarce information in this field, not to say the prospect of influencers promoting social issues, especially racial discrimination. Thus, it is hoped this current study will make a small contribution to increasing the knowledge and understanding in this field..

The second gap that this dissertation will fill is from the perspective of the application of impression management theory. This theory is well-known and widely used by both individuals and organisations to manage images of themselves in various settings (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004; Avery & McKey, 2006). Most scholars adopting impression management theories have focused on self-serving motives. However, the current research will focus on influencing and controlling people's impression specifically on a subject – a social campaign (#StopAsianHate), which breaks with tradition that impression management is self-centric and egocentric (Edgar, Beck, & Brennan, 2018).

## 1.3 Research questions

Based on the discussion above, this dissertation has two overarching research questions that need to be addressed:

- What impression management tactics have social media influencers used to promote #StopAsianHate and eradicate or minimise Asian hate crimes?
- What are the outcomes generated by social media influencers through interaction with their followers in relation to #StopAsianHate?

## 1.4 Significance of the study

This dissertation attempts to contribute to the existing stream of research that explores the interaction between social media influencers and their followers on social media platforms.

While the present study has both theoretical and social contributions, it will deliver different benefits to parties who have interests in this topic, as described below:

### **For academics:**

Given the dearth of research about non-profit campaigns endorsed by social media influencers, the expected academic contribution of the current research is likely to be further developing the understanding of how influencers devote time to solving social problems with their magnificent power of influence. Unlike past research emphasizing influencers' profitable purposes, I believe this dissertation could direct other researchers and scholars to follow its path and present more valuable work on mitigating social problems including but not limited to racism, bullying, malnutrition, unemployment and poverty. Furthermore, it is hoped this current study will extend the theoretical body of knowledge and offer new perspective regarding the impression management theory by

applying impression management tactics to a non-profit social campaign rather than to an individual or an organisation wanting to generate sales.

**For social marketers and policy makers:**

The expected contribution of the current study from the perspective of societal and policy development is of potential value to formulate policies aimed at stopping Asian hate crimes and other social problems. Social media influencers are considered to be an effective tool who can achieve these aims. This dissertation will examine how social media influencers control and influence their audiences through the application of impression management theory on social media platforms, which would allow social marketers and policy makers to use it as a reference and apply it to other social problems.

## **1.5 Organisation of the dissertation**

This dissertation is organised as follows. Chapter Two reviews the literature in terms of social media and social media marketing, influencer marketing, social issues, and impression management theory. Within the influencer marketing section, the definition of influencer marketing, various types of influencers and the importance of influencer marketing are discussed respectively. Following this, Chapter Three outlines the research methodology chosen for this current study together with the processes of collecting and analysing data. Specifically, I will explain why the eight social media influencers were selected for this dissertation. After this, Chapter Four presents the research findings which can be divided into two aspects – the four impression management tactics that have been and continue to be adopted by the selected social media influencers and the corresponding responses from each of their followers. Finally, Chapter Five emphasizes both the managerial and theoretical

implications of this work, as well as its limitations which are encouraged to be overcome by future scholars.



# **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

## **2.1 Introduction**

Drawing upon impression management theory, this study explores the role of social media influencers in coping with social problems. The purpose of this chapter is to provide further clarity and context to those key issues identified in Chapter One. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of social media and social media marketing. Following this, I outline the concept of influencer marketing from three perspectives: its definition, types of social media influencers and the importance of influencer marketing. This chapter subsequently transitions into a discussion on social problems. Lastly, I end the chapter by presenting an update on impression management theory.

## **2.2 Social media and social media marketing**

With the advancement of the Internet, the topic of social media has become popular in both academic and practical fields. It is believed that social media was invented in 1979 by two academic professionals in Duke University who established an information sharing site that allowed people to share ideas from all over the world (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010). In 1980, Bruce and Susan Abelson introduced “Open Diary” to online diary composers, which gathered those active users into a web community (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010). In the wake of high-speed Internet being developed, online dairies were gradually replaced by blogs, which started the era of MySpace and Facebook in 2003 and 2004, respectively and led to the popularity of user-generated content (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010). Haenlein and Kaplan (2010, p. 61) defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” This definition implies user-generated content allows

online users to utilise social media via social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. It is worth noting that user-generated content has a significant impact on consumer buying intentions because of its trustworthiness (Sharma & Verma, 2018). Meanwhile, the application of social media increases market diversity, leading to the shift of marketing focus from being business-centric or product-centric to being consumer-centric (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000). Therefore, academics and practitioners are required to recognise the existence of this new relationship-based marketing paradigm alongside the traditional marketing mix and allocate marketing budgets, specifically to social media marketing (Gorooos, 1997).

### **2.2.1 Past social media marketing research**

Nowadays, social media marketing has been broadly adopted by businesses for marketing purpose. Akar and Topcu (2011) proposed the definition of social media marketing as a method of advertising a business and its products through social media platforms, which is similar to the statement made by Drury (2008), referring social media marketing to utilisation of social media applications and word-of-mouth among customers for increasing brand recognition. While these two definitions focus on the perspective of brands' or products' promotion and ignore the non-profit aspects, the current study emphasizes that social media influencers and influencer marketing can also contribute to the achievement of social change. The notion of influencer marketing being a fundamental category of social media marketing (Chen, 2020) will be discussed in the following section.

## **2.3 Influencer marketing**

### **2.3.1 Definition**

Influencer marketing has become an important new tool in the marketing area over the last decade (Adler, 2021). The term “influence” is considered to be the capacity to affect someone or something (Brown & Hayes, 2008). There are a variety of academic definitions for influencer marketing. Carter (2016) claimed that influencer marketing is a form of marketing that makes use of social media users who have a great impact on other users to amplify a brand’s or product’s awareness. Influencemarketinghub.com (2017) referred to influencer marketing as the use of paid endorsements or unpaid word-of-mouth from social media influencers, and it highly depends on utilising the appropriate technology. While Carter (2016) and Influencemarketinghub.com (2017) focus on how businesses utilise influencers to reach marketing outcomes, Farivar, Wang & Yuan (2021) indicate that influencer marketing builds a mutual relationship between social media influencers and practitioners and benefits both parties. According to Krasniak (2016), Instagram is the most important and popular platform that has been used by 89% of marketers who are active in adopting influencer marketing, which is followed by Twitter and Facebook, both with 70% usage. YouTube, Blogs, and Snapchat are also prevalently employed by businesses with 59%, 48%, and 45% usage separately.

### **2.3.2 Types of social media influencers**

Social media influencers (SMIs), as the key component of influencer marketing, have been growing fast with the expansion of various social media platforms (Khamis et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018). According to Agrawal (2016) and Varsamis (2018), SMIs refer to a certain group of online users with massive numbers of followers who have great impacts on the behaviours and decisions of other online users. SMIs build close relationships with followers

to make them feel they belong to an intimate community that is created by SMIs (Khamis et al., 2017).

Not all influencers are the same. It is critical for marketers to choose whether traditional celebrities or micro-influencers are required to endorse their products or campaign. Based on the number of followings, there are five different levels of SMIs: celebrity (1m+ fans), mega-influencer (1m+ fans), macro-influencer (100k-1m fans), micro-influencer (10k-100k fans), nano-influencer (0-10 k fans) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Except for celebrities having an obvious feature of having been ‘in the public’s eye’ over a longer period, other types of influencers have only emerged in recent years and only differentiate themselves by the follower count ranges. Thus, the section below will demonstrate the main characteristics of traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities.

### **Traditional celebrities**

Celebrity endorsement has been a well-established practice in marketing activity (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). A wide range of research illustrates that a brand ambassador leads to a higher return on investment (Mathur et al., 1997). According to McCracken in his study in 1989, a celebrity is considered to be a person who is famous and makes use of his or her public acknowledgements in business advertisements. One of the reasons for marketers using celebrity endorsements is that this is an effective way to connect the brand with the celebrity as it makes potential buyers easily evoke the endorsed brand or product by the image of the liked and well-known celebrity (Keller, 2008). Meanwhile, fans tend to imitate celebrities' behaviors and appearances by consuming the same products or brands they use or endorse, which makes them perfect brand endorsers in the marketing world (Martin & Bush, 2000). Notably, the promotional channel of traditional celebrities promoting products is gradually

moving from traditional media to social media so that the advertisements are more accessible and are able to reach a greater audience.

### **Micro-celebrity**

The widespread availability of social media enables both traditional celebrities and unfamous online users to easily their share thoughts with online audiences worldwide, leading to the rise of the concept of micro-celebrities. Marwick (2015) suggested that the contents produced by unknown online users can also be viewed and liked by many people, which means they perform a role as a “public persona”. In other words, even though micro-celebrities usually don’t have as many fans as traditional celebrities, they still possess considerable power and influence. Clarewells (2014) defined micro-celebrities as online users who present as a designed character using audio, blogs, pictures, and videos to gain fame and boost their presence on social media. They are specialists in different industries ranging from activism, sports and technology to fashion, beauty, and food (Clarewells, 2014).

What are the differences between traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities? Except for the journey they have gone through to become well-known, the most obvious and important distinctness that attracts marketers to adopt them as brand ambassadors is the two-way relationship established by influencers with their fans. Senft (2013) indicated that social media influencers interact with followers and share their personal lives through social media, making the fans feel like the influencers are close friends to them rather than a character hiding behind a screen. Besides, the followers are recipients of posts shared by influencers, which gives those people an opportunity to be involved in a community that their idols are part of, in contrast to celebrities who generally have a one-way relationship and lack of any interaction and contact with their audience (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010). Moreover,

Newman (2015) noted that influencers promoting products they have tried and liked and by introducing their experiences of a brand led to their recommendations in the middle of electronic word of mouth and product endorsement and are considered to be authentic to some extent by followers, even though people are aware of the paid contents. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) have supported this statement and advised that micro-celebrities are currently more appealing than famous celebrities who built their influence via traditional channels.

As McCormick (2016) has proven traditional celebrities positively affect an audience's buying decisions, one further question needs to be answered – 'Are micro-influencers more effective in promoting products than traditional ones' Lisichkova and Othman (2017) claimed in their study that social media influencers have the ability to affect consumers' buying intentions. According to Grave (2017), traditional celebrities receive more attention and favors from an audience than social media influencers. However, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found the opposite and suggested that social media influencers are more persuasive and influential when endorsing a brand. Additionally, Wiley (2014) pinpointed that consumers consider micro-celebrities more accessible and convincing than traditional celebrities who are spiritually far away from the audience, so people tend to be more engaged with contents shared by social media influencers, which Camahort also proved in 2016.

### **2.3.3 Importance of influencer marketing**

Existing research confirmed the effectiveness of influencer marketing. For example, Swant (2016) found that over 40% of participants claimed they had bought the product that social media influencers admit they had used on YouTube, Vine, Twitter, or Instagram. This study also demonstrated that Twitter users' buying intentions increased by 5.2 times after viewing

the product and influencer tweets about the brand. Furthermore, Kirkpatrick (2016) stated that compared to traditional advertising, 11 times more return on investment could be generated by influencer marketing activities.

A range of research in recent years has supported the statement that a predominant number of companies view influencer marketing as the foundation of social media marketing. For instance, a survey of marketers undertaken Krasniak (2016) reported influencers have persuaded 60% of marketing professionals to include them in their marketing strategy to especially deal with potential customers who are difficult to reach. Moreover, Izea (2017) emphasized that more than one out of three marketing professionals have invested more than \$500,000 annually on influencer marketing. Morin (2016) also mentioned in their study that the market value of influencer marketing has been found to achieve \$US10-15 billion and that number is predicted to keep rising in the following five years. It is worth noting that influencers in the USA have received on average \$255 million monthly for posting content on Instagram (Forbes, 2016).

In the era of being targeted as important investments in a marketing plan, SMIs have been gaining enormous profits from promoting products and brands. Izea (2017) indicated that it costs between US\$100,000 to US\$300,000 to make Kylie Jenner (86.3 million fans) write a sponsored Instagram post. According to Influencermarketinghub.com (2017), even macro-influencers with less than 1 million followers receive \$5,000 for a single Instagram post. Nevertheless, influencer marketing is not necessarily relevant to financial purposes from the perspective of both corporate and influencers themselves. This current study will focus on how social media influencers can raise awareness for a social problem without any profits being generated by the campaign.

## 2.4 Social problem: An overview

Hart's (1923) studies lay a foundation for the definition of social problems. He believed that a social problem can be defined as any behaviour or condition that should be addressed due to the fact that such behaviour and condition can have negative effects on large numbers of people. Chang, Zurilla and Sanna (2004) summarized social problems from six perspectives with examples as below:

- Environmental: climate change;
- Educational: education accessibility;
- Socio-psychological: gender inequality and racism;
- Political: civil rights and immigration;
- Health: health systems accessibility, malnutrition and living conditions;
- Economic: unemployment and poverty.

One of the leading effects that social problems create is the massive social dissatisfaction due to misery and suffering (Chang et al., 2004). Social problems not only have direct effects on individuals, but also indirectly poison other people. For instance, children who have experiences of being abused are more likely to become criminals or victims of family violence when they are grown up. The traffic accident caused by a drug-addicted driver technically could happen to any random people. Thus, it is crucial to solve or at least minimise the effects of these types of social problems.

Racism is one of the most disturbing of social problems. According to the international dictionary Merriam-Webster (2020), racism is defined as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race”, which implies the concept of racial segregation based on



different races or ethnic groups. In 2019, roughly 58% Americans demonstrated that race relations of America are dreadful and very few of those think the racial situation has improved (Horowitz, Brown & Cox, 2019). This serious situation has aroused social concerns from all walks of life, especially among some influential figures who have committed themselves to the fight against racism. For example, ten activists brought the #BlackLivesMatter movement and spoke out for black people in 2020 (Guynn, 2021). Black people are not the only ones that are suffering from racial discrimination. Anti-Asian racism is also on the rise since the pandemic in 2020 (Chung, 2021). In the same year, a wide range of celebrities, social media influencers and individuals from various industries all over the world started the campaign #StopAsianHate by standing against anti-Asian hate crimes and condemning the violence on social media (Chung, 2021). The present study is conducted based on the context of racial discrimination towards Asians.

## **2.5 Impression management theory**

Many scholars have researched the relationship between self-perception and interaction (Goffman, 1959; Snyder, 1974; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1996; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006). Goffman (1959) was one of the first scholars who touched this area. He mentioned that individuals prefer to build decent, reliable and positive images of themselves and then convincing others to believe in those images. The book titled “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” written by Erving Goffman (1959) declared that people tend to be gratifying and socially acceptable in front of other people through presenting themselves in a selective way. The subconscious or conscious endeavour and intention of an individual to manipulate perceptions of other people about oneself is considered to be impression management (Goffman, 1959). The two types of performance – the sincere and the contrived - are also discussed in Goffman’s sociological book. The sincere comes from individuals who really

believe their performance and present their “pure self” to an audience, while the contrived acting, on the contrary, is pretending themselves to possess characteristics that meet the needs of a situation without truly believing in it.

Many other researchers have explored the notion of impression management. For instance, in the organisation behaviour and management disciplines, scholars defined impression management as the attempt by individuals to control and manipulate the views of others about them (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Drory & Zaidman, 2007). Schneider (1981) implied that multiple reasons cause impression management. One of the most prevalent reasons for engaging in impression management is to achieve approval seeking which refers to looking for validation from others. It is believed that people are spurred to make others confirm their competency (Schneider, 1981). Bolino and Turnley (1999) revealed that people apply impression management skills through status, speech, posture, and body language in real life. Self-representation plays an important role in communicating with the surrounding world (Rosenfield, Giacalone, & Riordan, 2002). With the feedback from the receivers, people are able to investigate and reinforce how others perceive them and alter the image they are trying to portray (Rosenfield, Giacalone, & Riordan, 2002).

With the ongoing advancement of digital and mobile technology, face-to-face impression management can no longer satisfy the rising interactional demands of people, which makes them start to seek out other effective approaches to maintain self-presentation (Grasmuck, Zhao, & Martin, 2008). In addition, Goffman’s and other related literature were mostly created before the Internet began to play a predominant role in the media world. Thus, academic attention on the application of impression management via online media is warranted. Rui and Stafanone (2013) stated that self-presentation management in online

activities has become an essential component in the personal and work life of individuals. People tend to present related and favourable parts of themselves in order to match the profile of the online community (Paliszkiewicz & Sawicka, 2016). This extensive self-presentation enhances relationships among other community members and helps people win acceptance from even strangers, thus online users are highly willing to manage their personal profile (Schwammlein & Wodzicki, 2012). Furthermore, as illustrated by Siibak (2009), there are three aspects to self domains, including the actual self, the ideal self and the ought self. The first two refer to true and idealised versions of themselves separately, while the third one focuses on expectations of others, such as responsibilities and duties. Bruckman (1992) suggested that online communities are considered to be “identity workshops” that allow participants to easily shift from one identity to the another without much effort. Undoubtedly, not only normal online users benefit from hiding behind the Internet, but also SMIs are actively participating in managing their impressions and maintaining their respectful self-image (Krzynski, Haenlein, & Rautiainen, 2021).

Social psychologists and sociologists have come up with various impression management strategies to present preferred images both in a face-to-face situation and in an online setting. One of the most broadly employed typology is the impression management tactics introduced by Jones and Pittman (1982). They categorized these impression management tactics into five groups:

- Supplication (gaining help and sympathy by appearing needy)
- Intimidation (arousing fear by threatening the audience)
- Exemplification (portraying yourself as the superior one)
- Ingratiation (complimenting and flattering the audience)
- Self-promotion (highlighting competency and downplaying deficits)

These five impression management tactics will be adopted as the basic taxonomy for this current study, with appropriate modification to reflect its background. Under the circumstances that the majority of this work addresses the issues of adjusting self-image, this research focuses on how SMIs influence the views of online users during a campaign created specifically to stop racial discrimination rather than being about social media influencers themselves using impression management theory on social networks.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter shedded light on a review of related literature, which provides the supporting knowledge of the present study. In the following chapter, I will discuss the research methodology adopted for this dissertation.

# **Chapter 3: Method**

## **3.0 Preface**

The purpose of this chapter is to delineate the methodology and process chosen by the researcher. This chapter begins with a discussion on the case study method and justifies the reasons for choosing this method to guide the current study. Following this, I introduce Instagram as the selected platform for data collection and outline why this was deemed the most appropriate channel for this dissertation. Subsequently, this chapter presents research procedures from four facets, including sampling, data collection, data analysis and manual coding. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary that recaps the main elements mentioned throughout this chapter.

## **3.1 Justification of chosen methodology**

As previously explained in Chapter 1, the overall objective of this dissertation is to explore what impression management tactics are employed by social media influencers and what outcomes influencers achieve with the application of those tactics in the context of promoting #StopAsianHate. In doing so, I chose to adopt a qualitative case study methodology to guide this research and using impression management theory, attain an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of social media influencers supporting the campaign #StopAsianHate. As suggested by Simons (2009), a case study refers to an in-depth exploration of a system, program, institution, policy, project, person or group of people from multiple aspects in a real-life context, which implies that this method enables researchers to investigate the inner meanings and implications of both influencers posts and their audiences' responses. Accordingly, a case study method is suitable for the present context. In this dissertation, the

campaign #StopAsianHate as the case was examined on a social media platform called Instagram.

The case study method has received diverse explanations from different industries. For example, scholars specializing in law and medicine have adopted case studies as their approach for elucidating typical and unique phenomena relevant to their respective fields, while psychologists, educationists and sociologists have used this method from the perspective of it facilitating interpretation (Thomas, 2011). Additionally, people from politics and businesses tend to support the interpretivist holism of the case study method (Thomas, 2011). In the marketing field, many attempts have been made to apply a case study approach in social media or digital related marketing studies. For instance, Azzam and Mizeed (2021) used a case study in Jordan to probe the effect of digital marketing on consumers' buying decisions. Ng (2014) also examined the relationship between social media and Chinese consumers through analysing the case study of Coach.

### **3.2 Why Instagram?**

I have collected social media influencers' posts and followers' responses, specifically from Instagram, as this platform possesses certain features, such as it is primarily image-based, has a sense of closeness and engagement and a high social media rate (social media engagements divided by social media exposure), that are required for the present study. According to Tankovska (2021), Instagram is a picture sharing social network platform which has roughly 500 million active story users each day and nearly one billion active users on a monthly basis, which makes Instagram an effective tool for social media influencers to use to reach large audiences, interact with fans and spread contents. Additionally, RythmOne's Influencer Marketing Benchmarks Report (2016) demonstrated that Instagram has delivered a social

action rate of 3.21%, which was twice as much as all other social networks in 2015. Hence, this application was considered the best performing channel for social action in that year. Moreover, since the main visual content affordances of Instagram are videos and images with relevant captions, it is easier for social media influencers to attract users' attention and establish engagement and connection with them (Silva, 2021), especially for the campaign #StopAsianHate containing various visual contents such as live videos, hate crimes' surveillance videos and family photos. Although Asian hate crimes have received attention from multiple social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and TikTok, the discussion on Asian hate has been heating up on Instagram compared to other sources. Besides, Instagram not only allows users to react to shared content, but also provides an opportunity for social media influencers to respond to their followers via direct messages and comments (Silva, 2021). Thus, Instagram is the ideal channel from which to gather information for the current study.

## **3.3 Procedure**

### **3.3.1 Sampling & data collection**

The present study has adopted purposeful sampling as the sampling method. The reason for selecting purposeful sampling is that this method enables the researcher to choose and identify cases with rich information based on her own judgement (Patton, 2002). The leading objective of this research is to examine and explore what impression management tactics are widely used and what critical responses social media influencers have received from their respective audiences, which requires the researcher to selectively identify social media influencers who were actively participating in #StopAsianHate, through posts with rich information and comments containing clear messages. Thus, purposeful sampling is appropriately aligned with the research objectives and the overall study design.

The data collection process has taken nine weeks, from 11<sup>th</sup> October 2021 to 12<sup>th</sup> December 2021. During this period, I initially searched all social media influencers who had been reported as being active participants in the #StopAsianHate movement by way of newspapers, magazines and websites. Based on the results, I browsed to check how many of them used Instagram as their main social media platform to promote this campaign. In accordance with certain criteria, I finally narrowed it down to eight Instagram handles which are: @heymichellelee, @susiebubble, @evachen212, @danieldaekim, @gemmachan, @oliviamunn, @jlin7, and @jamiechung. I formulated the following criteria for the selection of social media influencers, the campaign posts of influencers and their responses to comments:

The selection criteria of social media influencers include:

- Macro influencers and mega influencers (more than 100k followers on Instagram);
- At least five posts in total about stopping Asian hate.

The selection criteria of social media influencers' posts include:

- Tag #StopAsianHate or #stopasianhate;
- Original contents without any forms of reposting from other social media influencers;
- Generate at least 500 informative responses;
- Posts were mainly focusing on AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) or ESEA (East and South East Asians) but fundraising foundations are excluded.

The selection criteria of followers' responses:

- Text-dominant messages (pure emojis comments are not taken into consideration);
- Only English-based responses.



Based on the above selection criteria, twelve social media influencers were chosen. However, four of them were found to have failed to produce informative and valuable Instagram posts because of either reposting content or lack of tagging the campaign. Even though some social media influencers and Instagram posts that do not meet the criteria outlined above, but have developed high-relevant replies regarding the stopping Asian hate movement, it was difficult to ensure that those responses were triggered by social media influencers' impression management tactics towards this campaign, which led to their exclusion from this dissertation. Based on the criteria clarified earlier, a total of eight social media influencers (See Table 1 for their profile), 101 influencers' posts, including videos, pictures and texts, and over 28,000 comments were included in the current research's data collection.

Table 1: Profile of social media influencers

<b>Influencers</b>	<b>Number of followers</b>	<b>@Instagram handle</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Number of posts about #StopAsianHate</b>
Michelle Lee	194k	@heymichellelee	Chinese	Beauty	15
Susie Lau	571k	@susiebubble	Chinese	Fashion	8
Eva Chen	1.9m	@evachen212	Chinese	Fashion, Publishing	11
Daniel Dae Kim	738k	@danieldaekim	South Korean	Film, Television, Production	27

Gemma Chan	2.2m	@gemmachan	Chinese	Film, Television	16
Olivia Munn	2.8m	@oliviamunn	German, Irish, English, and Chinese	Film	12
Jeremy Lin	1.9m	@jlin7	Chinese	Sports	5
Jemie Jilynn Chung	1.5m	@jamiechung	South Korean	Film, Television	7

### 3.3.2 Data analysis

Before coding the data, the researcher initially read all the transcripts collected from posts and responses. According to Tesch (1990), this step enables the researcher to immerse themselves in the campaign and get familiar with the whole picture of Asian hate problems. Following this, content analysis was used to analyse the data and understand its context for this dissertation. Many scholars have attempted to define content analysis as a technique that creates refined content categories by extracting from many words of text (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). Peterson and Ross (2001) also demonstrated that content analysis enables researchers to identify the frequency of the data and categorize the patterns of the messages, which makes it an appropriate method for this dissertation to analyse the nexus between impression management tactics employed by social media influencers and the messages contained within recipients' responses. Additionally, Holsti (1969) considered content analysis as an approach to making presumptions through classifying and analysing attributes of certain information, which implies that this method can not only apply in the

context of textual analysis, but also deals with other fields such as videotapes (Stigler, Gonzales, Kawanaka, Knoll, & Serrano, 1999) and paintings (Wheelock, Haney, & Bebell, 2000). For this dissertation, content that needs to be analysed includes social media influencers' posts and online users' comments ranging from texts to video and images. Based on the reasoning above, content analysis was selected to systematically interpret the data collected for the current research.

The data was manually coded using Microsoft Excel for organising the coding details. Myer et al. (2010) defined coding as a process that requires coders to assign labels to the data for identifying and classifying those data into certain categories. Coding aims at interpreting, organising or describing various elements of the phenomenon by allocating explicit codes to the messages found in the dataset (Boyatzis, 1998). The researcher initially intended to code data through electronic methods such as NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software application. However, as the data acquired from Instagram posts involved several videos and pictures, it was difficult to preserve such image-based content in its original state. Therefore, I perceived that manual coding was applicable for the present study. The coding process of this dissertation is mainly associated with the method of cut-and-paste, which is a common approach used by the basic procedures of manual coding, as mentioned by Lofland (1971) and Bogdan and Bilken (1982). To be specific, the data was coded from two aspects: impression management tactics derived from Instagram posts and outcomes analysed from followers' responses. Figure 1 represents a thematic map that summarises general findings of four impression management tactics employed by social media influencers and five themes of followers' responses triggered by those tactics. Table 2 presents a more detailed coding procedure of followers' responses with exemplary quotes.

Figure 1: Thematic map summarizing impression management tactics and followers' responses

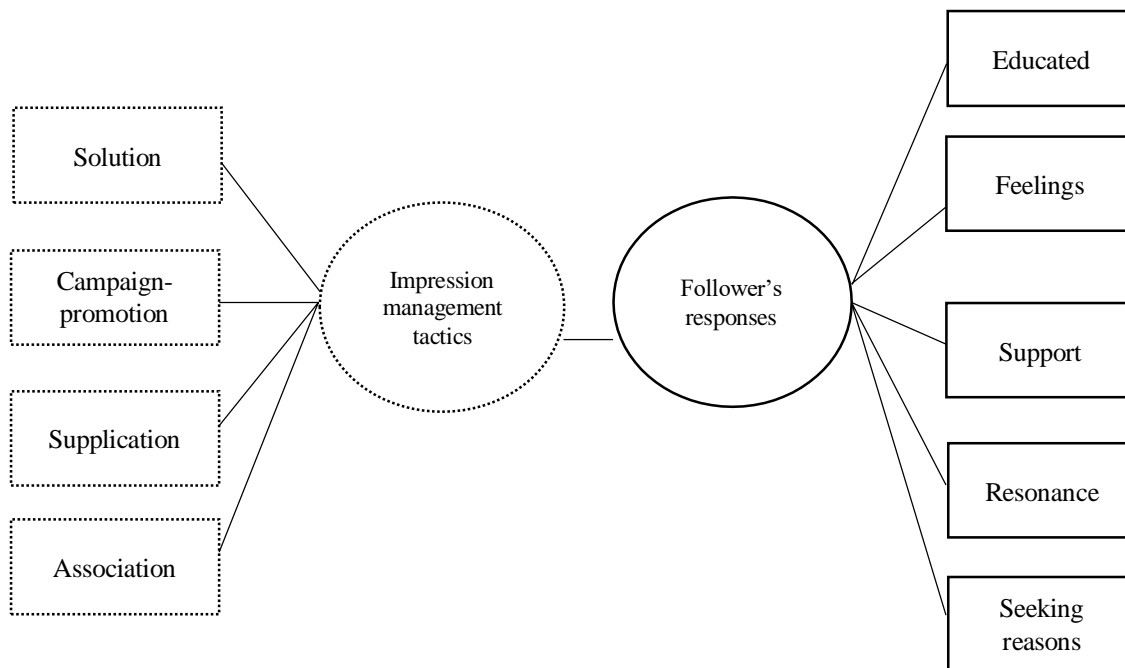


Table 2: The coding procedure of followers' responses with exemplary quotes

Themes	Categories	Open Codes	Example of quotes
Educated	Start to know about Asian hate crimes	Didn't know Asian hate exists	"Is that a thing, I've never heard of someone who hated Asians"
		Didn't know recent Asian hate crimes	"OMG! I'm from France and I didn't even know that is happening in the UK. So sad to heard this"
	Think people should be educated	Learned a lot of information from the posts	"I learned more about Asian American history from this video than in school. What does that say about our American education system? It's whitewashed. "
		Think themselves are educated	"Consider me educated. Wow!"

		Invest in education	"We should invest more in education to learn that asian is not the same as chinese and even if you are chinese you did not bring covid here."
Feelings	Strong emotions targeting the hate crimes	Sad	"That poor man with his groceries, I couldn't stop crying. He must have been so afraid (sad face)"
		Angry	"...also makes me so angry at the same time. What happened to humanity? Fuck me live in 2021 and ideocracy really exist. Its true stupid & naiv people get Kids and the intelligent people don't... it's getting worse..."
		Touched	"...I actually cannot watch the videos because I think of my own parents."
		Unbelievable	"What is literally wrong with the people that commit these horrific violent crimes? Not only are they racist but truly evil. I just don't understand what's making them evil. Any ideas?"
		All humans	"I can't understand why people attack others because of colour, race, gender and etc... we are all humans. There is no difference in that. "
		Empathy for elderly	"...How small are these criminals to brutally attack defenceless elders to feel important."

	Gratitude	Appreciate what social media influencers have done for #StopAsianHate	"thank you for using your celebrity status to bring awareness to the issue via national/ regional / local media outlets!"
		Well done	"I'm so proud to see my ESEA sisters not just speak out but rally organise and focus...Finally!!! Well done @susiebubble & the EAEA sister founders."
Support	Solidarity	Fight for racism together	"This is why it's so important for us not to be separated in this matter. We have to collectively come together to fight the systematic racism that has plagued us all.
		Encouraging	"I stand by all of my asian brothers & sisters"
		All people of colour unite	"We must must must work together - BIPOC - to end white supremacy. If we can manage that, we can make this shifts. Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, ALL People of COLOR. But we must be able to do this TOGETHER!!"
	Take into action	Make donations	"Just donated \$100 to go fund me campaign"
		Sign up for online classes	"I signed up for their online training."
		offer to help	"Great video, so powerful. We are based in NYC. Anyway we can offer our health and wellness services? Would like to collaborate with and

			help any in the AAPI community that has been affected by the events. Happy to help!"
		Look for organisations	"Are these similar organisations to support in Canada? Unfortunately we are seeing a rise in hate crimes against Asians in Canada too."
		Spread awareness	"sharing this now - stopping racism and committed to making this world a better place...now!"
		Provide other solutions	"try @hackneychinese and Newham Chinese association - all doing their bit at the moment and supporting. They can probably lead you to other orgs outside of London too."
		Interested in the organisations	"Love this collective measurably impactful community organisations working together to fight racism & contribute to long lasting solutions."
		Appeal for making change	"Stop hate. Feeling your pain. We need to be the change"
Resonance	Ubiquity of Asian hate	A long-term existence	"...Unfortunately, hate crimes have been happening for decades."
		Global problem	"...not just in America, but in so many western countries this issue is getting worse and worse...the UK, Canada and Australia..."
		Deeply ingrained in culture	"...it's so deeply ingrained in Western culture..."
	Too much ignorance	Ignorance from the media	"...There is no media coverage after his(the murderer) arrest!"

			Arrest is not the solution. He needs to be convicted!"
		Ignorance from individuals	"It is shoved under the carpet...I cannot do anything, no one pays attention unless I argue with them..."
	experienced same issues	Own discrimination experiences	"...I am unfortunately used to tolerating"
		Witness Asian hate incidents	"Yesterday I heard someone yelling at my neighbour...my elderly Asian neighbour...They yelled racial things and GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY!" I YELLED "HEY GET OUR OF HERE LEAVE HIM ALONE!"...I shudder to think what would have happened if I hadn't been there!"
	Think of their family and friends	Triggered by photos and videos shared by social media influencers	"...I actually cannot watch the videos because I think of my own parents."
		Triggered by texts and experiences shared by social media influencers	"...I grew up in hull and every day someone would tell me F off back to my own country even though I am BBC. My parents experience the same issues as your mum..."
		Worry for Asian family and friends	"I'm married to a korean woman and there is not a moment that I'm afraid someone is going to harm her over something that is not even her fault. That alone makes me think of all asian people that are going



			through this every day since the pandemic started"
Seeking reasons	Crime discussions	Trump empowering the hate crimes	"From a uk perspective I can't help but think the incitement of this is in no small part due to Donald Trumps incredibly racist commentary on covid 19 and continually calling it the 'China Virus'. It so important that globally we have leaders who do not incite hate!"
		Make assumptions	"Possibly the guard didn't react because he was afraid of the consequences of taking action against a chap who might come under the BLM list of candidates'
		Supplement to the posts about the crime	"According to an interview in a Korean language newspaper, a witness states the shooter yelled 'I'm going to kill all the Asians'."
	Suspect posts are misleading	Question accuracy of the posts	"Violence does not know race. These Asian people you talk about were simply Statistic to violent crime. NOT a Hate crime."
		Think posts contain unfair and misleading narratives	"but you are complacent in making black people the face of Asian hate with the ws media! Only to ignore the facts that ws hates you more. Why delusion your own community of the real enemy."
	Asians have their own problems that may cause the hate	Asians are not polite enough	"Well...Sometimes..there's a reason for ppl hating 'asian'. If 'asian' polite enough/respect others

			culture/follow the rule...things may get better."
		Asians are racists too	"Lmao, my fellow asians are pulling a victim card when they are just as prejudice & racist."
		China Muslims problems	"Maybe I am cruel but life is like a bumerang, In China a lot of Muslims suffers from Chinese people and government."

### 3.4 Summary

Overall, this chapter has provided a thorough presentation of the research method applied to the present study. The following chapter will discuss the findings of this dissertation based on the collected, analysed and manually coded data from the perspectives of the impression management tactics utilised and followers' engagement through their responses.

# Chapter 4: Findings

## 4.0 Preface

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the findings from the perspective of the impression management tactics employed in social media influencers' posts and followers' responses to those posts. By thoroughly analysing data for such purposes, four impression management tactics and five themes of audience comments have been found, as well as evidence of the relationship between those tactics and followers' reactions. The researcher firstly will give a brief description of the study. After this, this chapter explores our tactics that have been applied by influencers in their Instagram posts, which is then followed by an analysis of the followers' feedback triggered by those tactics. In conclusion, I will discuss the relationship between these two perspectives.

## 4.1 Brief description of the study

The findings revealed four impression management tactics employed by social media influencers, including solution, campaign-promotion, supplication, and association. The insights gathered from the followers' responses were then categorised into five themes: educated, feelings, support, resonance and seeking reasons.

At the very beginning, I intended to collect data based on racially diversity sources, i.e., focusing on social media influencers with various ethnic backgrounds. However, it turns out that influencers who are active in this #StopAsianHate campaign are mostly Asians. Notably, the industries those influencers come from are fashion, beauty, film, television and sports, which are often in the public domain, so it is easy for this campaign to reach a great audience (See Table 1 for a profile of those influencers).

## 4.2 Impression management tactics adopted by social media influencers

As shown in Table 3, this study unveiled four types of tactics – solution, campaign-promotion, supplication, and association. Among these four, campaign-promotion and supplication are primarily based on Jones and Pittman’s (1982) study, while the solution and association tactics are grounded from the data of the present research.

Table 3: Impression management tactics with exemplary quotes

Impression management tactics	Description	Exemplary quotes
Solution	Concrete ways to help stop Asian hate	<p>“The answer is by funding empowering community organisations.” (Michelle Lee)</p> <p>“If you have any issues in your community, or if you have any solutions, you can apply for our program.” (Eva Chen)</p>
Campaign-promotion	Effectively advertising or promoting a certain campaign in order to increase its exposure and publicity (Jones & Pittman, 1982)	<p>“Targeted, hunted down, 8 murdered. We do not feel safe.” (Jemie Chung)</p> <p>“heartbroken for the families of the 8 victims, 6 of whom were Asian women.” (Gemma Chan)</p>
Supplication	Obtaining help from others by presenting purposely to be	<p>“MEDIA YOU NEED TO DO BETTER, CALL IT WHAT IT IS, DOMESTIC WHITE</p>

	needy and powerless (Jones & Pittman, 1982)	TERRORISM HATE CRIMES AGAINST ASIANS.” (Jemie Chung)  “Please help us. What can we do??!! PLEASE HELP STOP ASIAN HATE. Please.” (Olivia Munn)
Association	Collaborating with other opinion leaders or authorities in order to boost reliability	“The following leaders support relief for ESEA communities...” (Daniel Dae Kim)  “Thank you @gemmachan for spearheading this and @miss_zing for bringing me onboard and to all the wonderful ppl on our leaderboard.” (Susie Lau)

**Tactic 1: Solution.** This is a very common tactic used by social media influencers. It refers to the concrete ways to help stop Asian hate, such as helping raise awareness, helping people who are suffering from Asian hate, and financially supporting this campaign by donating money to diverse fund organisations. Most influencers consider attracting public attention as the first step for promoting a campaign. For example, Michelle Lee posted, “How you can help: 1. speak up: Help raise awareness and SHARE this video and share your story”. Gemma Chan informed, “Some accounts to follow for more info and ways to help @stopaapihate @hateisavirus\_ @acttochange @nextshark @aapiwomenlead”. Daniel Dae Kim also supported the same idea in an interview when he was asked, “What can allies do? How can people provide support?” He answered, “If you have a platform. Use it...I ask you to use your voice...”

Besides, influencers mentioned ways that bystanders could help stop Asian hate. Daniel Dae Kim brought up Hollaback's Five D's to bystander intervention with detailed instructions and examples:

What should I do if I witness an anti-Asian hate crime? Distraction: ... The idea is to ignore the harasser and engage directly with the person who is being targeted. You can try the following: pretend to be lost... get in the way... accidentally-on-purpose spill your coffee, the change in your wallet, or make a commotion.

Delegation: ...ask for assistance, for a resource, or for help from a third party.

Documentation: ...record an incident as it happens to someone.

Direct: You may want to directly respond to harassment by naming what is happening or confronting the harasser.

Delay: Even if you can't act in the moment, you can make a difference for the person who has been harassed by checking in on them after the fact...Ask them if they are okay... Offer to accompany them... Share resources... If you've documented the incident, ask them if they want you to send it to them or share it.

However, this movement is not solely dependent on the efforts of individuals. Social media influencers believe that relevant organisations and groups could contribute to #stopasianhate. Thus, they have in the past collaborated with a number of communities and funding organisations. For instance, Michelle Lee brought up "We partnered with @GoFundMe to launch the AAPI Community Fund to uplift grassroots neighbourhood campaigns." Daniel Dae Kim also identified a range of fundraising groups as follows:

Many of you have asked how you can do your part to help end the violence and acts of hate against the Asian American community...Recently, there are several funds that have been started: The @hateisavirus\_ CommUNITY Action Fund, The @Stopasianhate: Support @aafederation Go Fund Me page, and now here is another great way, The #AAPI Community Fund.

Susanna Lau (known as Susie Lau) chose to provide more straightforward ways to her followers by stating, “Donate by following the link below” and “Link in bio for donations”.

**Tactic 2: Campaign-promotion.** The term “campaign-promotion” was modified by “self-promotion” from the original impression management techniques, which refers to emphasizing the superior quality and competency of someone (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986). However, the current study focuses on the #stopasianhate (or #StopAsianHate) campaign rather than individuals. Thus, the campaign-promotion tactic is defined to refer to both effective advertising and the promoting of a certain campaign in order to increase its exposure and publicity. Notably in this current study, the chosen social media influencers talk about both recent hate crimes and their experiences of being discriminated against.

Olivia Munn shared a video of a hate crime and wrote as follows:

Imagine being brutally attacked IN FRONT OF YOUR CHILD!!! After getting repeatedly punched in the head, he jumps up to check on his baby.

Because HIS BABY was RIGHT THERE WHEN THIS WAS HAPPENING. [angry emoji]

The post by Munn is one example of social media influencers discussing hate crimes that were happening among people. She explicitly capitalised the section she perceived to be impressive and ended the text with an angry emoji. By sharing these with fans, she expressed her strong feelings and conveyed the idea that incidents like this are unacceptable. Likewise, Munn and other leaders in the cultural and entertainment industry recounted the history of violence against the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, including the hate crimes in early 2021, by passing on a candle in a black-and-white short film. Here are the texts of the video:

On March 16th, 2021, six women were among the victims of a horrific shooting in Georgia. They were grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. They were killed because they were Asian but anti-Asian violence is not new. It is part of our collective memory. As the families in Georgia mourn and memorialize the lives of their loved one, we remember the history of racism our community has faced. In 1875, the Page Act passes, banning Chinese women from entering the United States. It's the first federal law to limit immigration. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act passes, prohibiting Asian immigrants from becoming US citizens. Its discriminatory practices survive for over 80 years. In 1885, 28 Chinese Americans are lynched and murdered in Rock Springs, Wyoming. 1930 - across California, hundreds of Filipino American farm workers injured and scores killed by rioters. 1942 - 120,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated in concentration camps by our own government. 1982 - Vincent Chin beat to death by two men with a baseball bat right before his wedding, mistaken for being Japanese, accused of stealing their jobs. 1989 - Five Vietnamese and Cambodian children killed, more than 30 wounded, Stockton, California. In the wake of September 11, 2001, attacks against Muslims and South



Asians surge. 2012 - Six Sikh Americans killed in a temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. This past year, almost 4,000 incidents of anti-Asian violence including murders of our elders simply walking in their own neighbourhoods.

The above quotes are presented as a whole story in a video discussing the hard facts of Asians being targeted in history. Opinion leaders who participated in this activity chose not to use boring texts but to film a video to give the audience a visual shock. The video indicated that what happened in the past continues to the present day. Susie Lau provided some data to substantiate the recent hate crimes.

Since covid-19, anti-asian hate crimes have increased by 1900% in the United States. Nearly 3000 reports of anti-Asian hate incidents were reported in over 47 states and the district of Columbia. And 7.3% of the reports counted the most vulnerable-elderly Asians - as the victims. And many crimes go unreported or are not classified as hate crimes.

Lau quoted numbers in her post, making her narratives more appealing and reliable. In fact, social media influencers often use statistics as a weapon in this campaign to fight those who refuse to admit these are hate crimes. Besides, real-life experiences are found to be massively used by influencers. Gemma Chan shared, “Like many others, I worry for my family members every time they leave the house or use public transport. My mum has worked for the NHS for most of her life - she and my dad have been followed and subjected to a number of verbal assaults since the beginning of the pandemic. Whilst I'm relieved that these attacks didn't become physical, unfortunately, that is often not the case...” Susie Lau also expressed worry about her parents during the pandemic in a video she filmed at home, she said,

These incidents like, my mum had an earing injection a few weeks ago, and the GP was doing a video call with her, because she can't go to the GP surgery...She couldn't articulate fully exactly what is wrong with her, and the GP was just quite dismissive...there are more things, such as me taking the bus with my daughter Nicole. People telling her that she should stay home, not telling other children there on the bus to do the same.

Chan and Lau gave real examples of the dilemma their family was going through during COVID-19, which emphasized that incidents are widely happening and close to everyone. Notably, Eva Chen shared a photo of her grandmother and herself and shared the story of them. She wrote:

This is a photo of me and my grandmother June (Juno Valentine's namesake). I remember her making bao for us for hours and waiting for them to come out of the streamer (and always burning my fingers of them). I remember her walking down the aisle at my wedding in a St. John suit. I remember going to her apartment weekly to give her manicures (always red!). She has advanced Alzheimer's now, but my memories of her are filled with joy, laughter, and safety. There is a tidal wave of HATE against Asians right now... with the elderly as victims. Why?

The post by Chen aimed to arouse empathy and build a close relationship with her followers. Her thorough introduction of her grandmother tried to tell the audience that elderly people like her grandmother or other people's grandmothers are potential victims of the recent hate crimes.

**Tactic 3: Supplication.** Supplication refers to obtaining help from others by purposely representing oneself as being needy and powerless (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). In the current study, social media influencers have requested help for the campaign in almost every post. Olivia Munn wrote, “Please help us. What can we do??!! PLEASE HELP STOP ASIAN HATE. Please.” Gemma Chan stated, “Please spread awareness, check in on your Asian friends because we are not ok...Educate yourself and others on the model minority myth and the long history of anti-Asian racism...Please don't be silent.” and “If you witness something, please don't be silent, even (and especially) when the news cycle moves on.” Susie Lau asked followers to contribute to the campaign. She posted, “I encourage EVERYONE - Asian or not - to share and raise awareness to these crimes, as well as resources for volunteering and donating where possible and just KNOW this goes on.” and “Please reshare, donate, learn and SEE us.” Social media influencers are aware that their followers like them, so this tactic makes followers more likely to help the influencers out when they are in need.

**Tactic 4: Association.** This tactic is considered to be the act of collaborating with other opinion leaders or authorities in order to boost reliability, especially when it comes to donation requests. Gemma Chan mentioned, “I'm proud to support this important initiative started by my friend @gemma\_chan.” and “Today, we're proud to collaborate with @GoFundMe, the world's largest donor platform, as well as a legion of top API cultural leaders who are devoted to putting our money where our mouths are.” Susie Lau also brought up the collaboration between UK ESEA communities and fund organisations. She wrote, “I'm so happy that @gofundme @gofundmegb has launched a UK specific #StopESEA Hate fund inspired by its US counterpart and that we will be raising money to direct funds to UK ESEA communities and organisations (to be announced later) to give support to the families

affected by hate crimes and to also lend general support to the ESEA communities...”

Besides, Eva Chen posted a recorded video of a live room with three other social media influencers on Instagram who talked about their experiences as Asian woman and the Asian hate they have been through. Daniel Dae Kim mentioned a lot of leaders or organisations in his posts. For example, he wrote, “Thank you to @baomnguyen @oliviamunn @kenjeong @simuliu @akemilook @lisalingstagram @khalifboyd @alwaysbewright @winstonecduke @deeeeeezzyy @iambang @briflys and everyone involved for this beautiful and moving piece.” and “Thanks to @goldhouseco, @capeusa, @gofundme, and everyone who worked for hard to put this together.”

### 4.3 Followers’ responses to influencer posts

**Theme 1: Educated.** In this cluster, repliers implied that they started to learn about the idea of Asian hate. Although Asian hate crimes have become a global problem since the pandemic, it is undeniable that some people still have less knowledge of it (Haynes, 2021). Some replies are “didn’t know this was a thing”, “I didn’t know a lot of information you shared”, “never heard of anyone who hated Asians”, and “don’t know what happened, or subject facts”. Also, some responders suggested that they were educated by posts shared by the celebrities. An American white woman wrote, “as a privileged white girl I will never fully understand the struggles every single one of you faces yet I am so thankful to be educated”. Another French person stated under a post containing a video recording of a hate crime, “OMG! I’m from France and I didn’t even know that is happening in the UK. So sad to hear this”.

**Theme 2: Emotion.** People expressed multiple feelings referring to racist crimes. On the one hand, people feel racists are unbelievable and they are angry and sad about the crimes. This

was evident in the following replies: “this is unbelievable and sadly entrenched in social systems”, “disgusting, unacceptable & heartbreaking”, and “this is sooo pathetic! What is wrong with our country?”. One online user declared, “We are all humans, we breath the same air, we have feelings, we all deserve the right to live our lives happy and safe, See the person not there colour, religion etc...” Another follower conveyed strong anger about elderly people being targeted and noted, “Coward bullies!!! so upsetting!! These are elderly indefensible people that cannot fight back!”

On the other hand, respondents appreciated the efforts of social media influencers promoting #stopasianhate. All posts about this campaign were found to receive grateful replies such as “Thank you for using your voice & standing up for our community”, “Thank you everyone who made this happen”, and “Glad you’re shedding light on the issue”. Besides, people acclaimed what influencers are doing as “about time”, “really well said”, “a freaking amazing job”, “best speech 2021 ever”, and “beautiful said”.

**Theme 3: Support.** In this theme, people focused on contributing to this campaign and making changes. Besides emotional experiences, followers tend to advocate social media influencers through both verbal and behavioural approaches. People suggest humans should be united and fight for the hate crimes, such as “standing and fighting with you in solidarity”, “We all need to partner together and fight racism! Period!”, “not to be separated in this matter...collectively come together to fight the systematic racism”. In the meantime, responses indicate that people will tend to join in this campaign and make contributions. The following two excerpts illustrate the willingness of people to take action:

What can we all do to be more proactive about this stain on our American culture?

Are there any activists organisations that we can become involved with? I'm ready.

and

We are based in NYC. Anyway we can offer our health and wellness services?

Would like to collaborate with and help any in the AAPI community that has been affected by the events. Happy to help!

Some people even tagged other opinion leaders and authorities and asked them to use their platforms. One person stated, "Please use your voice to speak out on this... ..@lizakoshy @madisonbeer @daviddobrik @rudymancuso @tonimahfud @hannahstocking @gabrielconte @jess @dylanminnette @kendallijenner", while another person indicated, " @cnn @latimes @msnbc These stories need to be covered in major news outlets. You all have a responsibility to call out racism in the US and the harms caused by it". Some concrete actions such as "reposted", "will continue to share", "signed up for their online training", and "Just donated \$100 to go fund me campaign" were also very often seen.

Apart from solutions mentioned by social media influencers, followers offered answers for themselves. One person believed that early childhood education could possibly help children avoid becoming a bully in the future, he noted:

It should be made mandatory in schools to teach young children about the harms of racism. I cannot recall ever being taught it growing up. I think education is the biggest factor in preventing this type of violence.

Another person introduced other authorities for people who are eager to help stop Asian hate as follows:

Try @hackneychinese and Newham Chinese association – all doing their bit at the moment and supporting. They can probably lead you to other orgs outside of London too.

**Theme 4: Resonance.** In this theme, repliers presented their insights into Asian hate. They considered this social issue to be pervasive globally. One person described racism as “something that has been ingrained into some people their entire life”, while another response gave a further explanation of this phenomenon, it noted, “it’s not as visible to prove in other ways such as being targeted at a workplace, but it’s there and always have been”.

Many experiences of being discriminated against were shared by online users from all over the world, which further illustrated how prevalent this problem is and how widely it influences others. One statement explained:

Hey, I’m an Egyptian brown skin male here. I first moved to Arizona in 1994, where an old white male told me this. “Boy, you ain’t white. And if you ain’t white, you ain’t right.” This will never change. It is ingrained in their DNA. They hate everyone who does not look like them.

Another Korean replier complained about being bullied in America, he mentioned:

I been discriminated my while life here (USA) by employees, coworkers just hateful idiortic people. I wish I was in Korea my birth place unfortunately I was adopted when I was a baby.

Although Asian hate has become an obvious global issue, it is believed that ignorance from both media and individuals exists at the same time. Some people blame the press for hiding this critical problem from the public on purpose. “You haven’t seen this bc the media only wants you to see what is on their agenda!” This helplessness and anger were delineated in the statement, “The media and press both in the British, America, and Canada do NOT do enough to highlight this hate. It is shoved under the carpet”. One person emphasized how the media manipulate the news market as follows:

The lack of reporting this and it not going viral truly gives me the full 360 of how the media “picks and chooses” what it wants to push the narrative “they decide” to give the public.

Other respondents consider that individuals do not see enough or even though they have seen it, they choose not to do or say anything about it. They wrote, “disheartened by the silence of most” and “this is really awful speaking to how ignorant people can be

**Theme 5: Seeking reasons.** In this cluster of responses, people discussed the incidents and explored the reasons behind these racist crimes. The answers they need are not only why those incidents happen but why the campaign exists. Some people believe Trump empowers those anti-Asian hate crimes. According to Hart (2021), anti-Asian hate was fuelled by a tweet referring coronavirus to “Chinese virus” created by then-President Donald Trump on



March, 2020. People accused Trump of being a racist and a killer, such as “heartbreaking deaths caused by Trump rhetoric”, “Trump has blood on his hands”, “sure has contributed to all sorts of hate crimes all over the place”, and “at least partially responsible for this”. One response specified the damage produced by Trump from his point of view as follows:

Trump constantly called covid the “kung flu” which is derogatory towards asian people and has called it the “Chinese virus” over and over. Many of his supporters took his rhetoric and started blaming and scapegoating asian people for the virus. Hate crimes went up significantly as a result. Words have consequences, especially when you are the president.

Nevertheless, some people speculated Asians are hated because of their own problems. The following two statements are examples that followers bringing up religious issues existing in China:

I don't agree with this what so ever what about the people in China that are being tortured in camps because off there religious beliefs Asians deserve this they will rot in hell you guys torture innocent people so shame on you.

and

Well...Sometimes there's a reason for ppl hating 'asian'. If 'asian' polite enough/respect others culture/follow the rule...things may get better.

With regard to the crimes themselves, people held different opinions, which led to a heated argument. Except for admitting those were hatred-based crimes, some responses questioned the accuracy of the posts and considered the posts misleading and unfair. One person stated, “Honestly, I don’t think this is just a racism issue by now. People in general just have so much repressed anger atm that they choose to let it out on innocent people.” Another person supported this viewpoint by clarifying, “The shooter literally confirmed it had nothing to do with race. Just more race-baiting, virtue signaling and divisiveness from the usual suspects.” Some people believe those incidents are normal violence without targeting any race. One example is:

They were not killed because they were 'Asian' it's most definitely a horrible crime and hopefully justice will be served quickly but this is misleading information twisting it to whatever fits the narrative. 8 victims, 2 different races and was never ruled an 'Asian' hate crime. Use your platform to tell the truth, not spin it.

Another example is the Atlanta spa shootings. Social media influencers in the current study were not satisfied with the police saying the shooter was “having a bad day”, but some online users viewed it differently. One person indicated:

The shootings took place at massage parlors of course 6 out of 9 are going to be Asian! But you failed to address that 3 out of 9 were not!m...The shooter told the Atlanta Police Department that he was a sex addict and was seeking to eliminate the temptation that he perceived these outlets represented to him.

## 4.4 Discussion

In summary, social media influencers involved in the #StopAsianHate campaign have used the impression management tactics of solution, campaign-promotion, supplication, and association, which triggered themes within the responses including educated, feelings, support, resonance, and seeking reasons. However, not all follower responses will be aroused by each tactic. Among the four impression management tactics, solution and campaign-promotion are considered to be the main tactics that social media influencers have employed to promote the concept of eliminating racial discrimination, while supplication and association are additional tactics that can enhance the influence of the two main tactics, due to the fact that the supplementary tactics basically exist in the majority of posts no matter who is collaborating with the tactics of solution or campaign-promotion and leads to different responses. Thus, I believe the reaction of an audience primarily relies on the use of solution and campaign-promotion tactics with the additional help of the supplication and association tactics.

Specifically, when social media influencers use the tactic of solution, respondents tend to feel educated as well as being supported spiritually and physically. That is because many people are not aware of racial discrimination and the ways or methods to stop it. This tactic makes it hard for the recipients to standby like the other people, but encourages them to have to confront this serious social issue directly. The use of the campaign-promotion tactic generates responses described as educated, builds resonance, and seeking reasons. Again, people start to learn this message delivered from social media influencers as they may not have been taught in school or seen with their own eyes. Also, some people make comments about these issues, such as “it’s very common”, “there are too much ignorance”, and “I have experienced (or seen) the same discrimination”, which builds resonance with this campaign and social

media influencers. Additionally, people will try to discuss the reasons behind this disturbing issue after reading the text description or watching a video of a hate crime. The description of these undoubtedly wrong behaviors makes the audience think about why this is happening or even question the accuracy of the post. It is worth noting that followers are eager to express their feelings ranging from anger, sadness, and empathy to gratitude for every single post because of either the intense images and videos or the unpleasant topic brought up by social media influencers. Since supplication and association were both basically utilised along with the two main tactics, there are no obvious responses found that directly related only to the effects of the two supplementary tactics.

# **Chapter 5: Conclusions & Implications**

## **5.0 Preface**

Being the final chapter of this research study, its aim is to wrap up the wholeness of this dissertation and underline the significance of the research findings for the different stakeholder groups relevant to social media influencers' engagement with their followers by applying the elements of impression management theory in a social problem context. To achieve this purpose, the present chapter begins with a brief summary of the findings. After this, I will present the theoretical and social implications and contributions this study will bring to the key parties, which is followed by a description of the limitations of this research study that would need to be addressed by future scholars in their subsequent research work. At the end, I conclude this dissertation as the epilogue.

## **5.1 Summary of findings**

Reflecting on Chapter One, the present study was initiated using two research questions to direct the structure of this dissertation. The first was to identify the impression management tactics that have been adopted by social media influencers in the #StopAsianHate movement on Instagram. With this first question in mind, the second one was to analyse followers' reactions and responses to those tactics. In order to appropriately answer these research questions, I chose to use a qualitative case study methodology to collect data and obtain in-depth descriptive information related to this research area. Then the content analysis method was used to systematically analyse the collected data. By taking this approach, the researcher discovered that social media influencers basically apply four recognise impression management tactics in their campaigns, namely, solution, campaign-promotion, supplication and association. The 'solution and campaign-promotion' tactics were found to strongly

influence how online users reacted to each social media influencers' campaign posts, while the other two tactics took on a supplementary role. To be specific, followers reflected they had been educated and supported when they were exposed to solution tactics. However, when campaign-promotion tactics were employed followers indicated they were likely to feel educated, had developed resonance with victims of hate crimes and had begun to try to figure out the reasons behind those incidents. Based on these findings, I outlined the implications, limitations and future research opportunities in the remaining section of this chapter.

## **5.2 Theoretical implications**

This research study's initial contribution has been made by applying impression management theory and tactics within the overall marketing discipline. Past research has provided valuable insights that applied impression management theory and tactics in management and psychology areas. For example, Wayne and Liden (1995) examined how performance ratings were influenced by subordinates' impression management behaviours in the management field. Bourdage, Roulin and Tarraf (2018) offered insights into the psychology field by creating a self-reporting Honest Interview Impression Management (HIIM) system which was designed to identify deceptive and honest impression management behaviour from the perspective of both antecedents and consequences. Tedeschi (2013) also edited a book that discusses impression management theory in a social psychological research context. Nevertheless, this dissertation focuses on adopting impression management theory and tactics to understand social problems through the lens of social media and influencer marketing, which extends the acute shortage of impression management research within the broad field of marketing. More importantly, it is hoped this current study will also inspire scholars to use it as an anchor from which to explore more diverse applications of impression management theory in the marketing area.

Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, most previous studies have probed how organisations and individuals manage their self-image utilising impression management theory (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004; Avery & McKey, 2006). Departing from past studies that focus on self-interest and manipulation, this dissertation analyses how impression management tactics employed by social media influencers might affect people's impressions of a social media message campaign rather than the promotion of the influencers themselves. By exploring the #StopAsianHate movement as an example of a social problem, the current study extends the scope and perspectives of impression management utilisation and encourages future scholars to contribute more valuable work to this research field.

Another contribution worth mentioning is the expansion of impression management tactics. As explained in the literature review section, Jones and Pittman (1982) brought up the typology of five impression management tactics which are supplication, intimidation, exemplification, ingratiation and self-promotion. The four impression management tactics focused on in this dissertation were based on the work of Jones and Pittman and incorporated certain modifications. For instance, as the present study reviews how social media influencers can promote a specific campaign message instead of themselves, the tactic of self-promotion was adjusted to be called as 'campaign-promotion' tactic so that it applied to the context of this research. While the tactics of supplication and self-promotion from Jones and Pittman's study remain relevant to this study, based on the analysis of influencers' posts on Instagram, I discovered two new possible impression management tactics, namely, solution and association which are new dimensions and have not been discussed in any other psychology, management or marketing studies. Such a development of two new possible impression management tactics enriches the long-established impression management tactics originally derived from Jones and Pittman in 1982 by providing two significant new approaches or

tactics to manage an audience's perceptions of a particular subject. This study also animates future research to cultivate more impression management tactics and add to the traditional work in any future explorative studies.

### **5.3 Social and policy implications**

This dissertation has critical social and policy implications. In a materialistic era, it is not very common to see individuals or groups dedicate themselves

to non-profit and social activities. Social media influencers, as a group of people who are well-known for generating money from influencing other people's purchase decisions, typically focus on endorsing products or brands. However, unlike traditional influencer marketing activities, the findings of this present study have unveiled how social media influencers might raise awareness for a non-profit campaign, especially one targeting a social problem, for example, Asian hate, which has been a long-standing racial discrimination issue but which has also been inflamed by the pandemic over the last two years. The current study contributes to means, especially the two newly added impression management tactics of solution and association, that social media influencers, opinion leaders and experts can wield to resolve or alleviate other social problems such as unequal opportunity, unemployment and poverty. For example, social marketers and policy makers are encouraged to provide reasons not only as to why these social problems should be resolved but also as to how people can contribute to the movement with informative advice and solutions. They could also collaborate with reputable influencers and prestigious organisations and groups to increase the visibility and reliability of the messages delivered to the influencers' audiences. Furthermore, as I found that solution and campaign-promotion are the two dominant tactics that affect how online users react to campaign posts, it suggests social marketers and policy makers should put more efforts into implementing these two



tactics, rather than the other two. For instance, key stakeholders could give detailed descriptions of social problems and the consequences of those problems as well as ways that individuals could help to mitigate the social and economic damage arising from them.

## **5.4 Limitations and future research**

While the present research solves the research objectives and furnishes novel contributions to this field of study, it does have its limitations. Firstly, due to the nature of the qualitative content analysis methodology utilised, it is difficult for the researcher to separate herself from the data. Even though the researcher has tried her best to maintain objectivity during the coding process, it is undoubtedly possible that bias still might exist within the data analysis as the findings section was generated based on the researcher's own knowledge and understanding. Also, since this dissertation has adopted a purposive sampling technique, the selection of social media influencers, Instagram posts and followers' responses is likely to exhibit some bias. Thus, it is an opportunity for future research to evaluate aspects such as other social media influencer campaigns, other social media platforms and impression management tactics that have been used by other social media influencers. Secondly, since one of the data providers is a social media influencer who is considered to be the most favoured and appealing, this makes it difficult to confirm if the followers' positive responses were resulting from the impression management tactics or because of this influencer's popularity. Therefore, future research might take the factor of relationships between social media influencers and their audiences into consideration.

## 5.5 Epilogue

This research has shown that social media influencers have a certain power to influence and control the perceptions of their followers. Such power not only can be used in generating profits, but it also could be very effective at promoting social causes and raising and spreading awareness because they are viewed as more trusted and sincere compared to famous celebrities who are often seen as out-of-touch. The activism of social media influencers is thus considered to stem from their authentic interests in the social problem movement rather than being used as a method to gain fame or fortune. Although some social media influencers have started to take part in the fight against some social problems in recent years, this activity is way less than it should be. I truly hope this dissertation becomes fresh impetus for further conversations among research scholars, policy makers and even individuals who might be motivated to devote themselves to relieving racism and other social problems.

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