

Influencer marketing in B2B services: A holistic approach for the container shipping industry

Theo Notteboom^{1 2 3}, Sedat Baştuğ⁴, Fevzi Bitiktaş⁵, Ercan Akan⁶, and Funda A. Yercan⁷

¹Maritime Institute, Faculty of Law and Criminology, Ghent University, Belgium. ²Faculty of Sciences, Antwerp Maritime Academy, Belgium. ³Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Antwerp, Belgium. Email: theo.notteboom@ugent.be. ⁴Maritime Faculty, Bandirma Onyedi Eylül University, Bandirma, Turkey. ⁵Maritime Faculty, Dokuz Eylül University, Turkey. ⁶Barbaros Hayrettin Naval Architecture and Maritime Faculty, Iskenderun Technical University, Iskenderun, Turkey. ⁷Maritime Faculty, Piri Reis University, Istanbul, Turkey.

Abstract This study examines how container shipping companies Maersk and MSC as B2B service providers effectively manage influencer marketing and implement managerial influencer marketing strategies within their industry. After the elaboration of a conceptual framework on constructs and protocols for effective influencer marketing, the Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Analytical Hierarchical Process (IT2F-AHP) method is used in combination with structured interviews to identify crucial attributes for successfully managing influencer marketing strategy in a B2B context. The findings underscore a notable emphasis placed by container shipping companies on internal influencers sourced from their workforce, as opposed to external influencers from the global market. This signifies a strategic orientation towards managing interaction-based marketing strategies. Additionally, when applying the 4M Model to the essential protocols for influencer marketing (i.e., make, manage, monitor, and measure), we observed a preference for the "manage" protocol and a lesser emphasis on measurement tools for assessing influencer marketing success. Despite the importance of corporate user accounts in social media, Maersk and MSC generally do not prioritize a protocol "measure" through these channels. We also found that trust is the highest weighted criterion in managing influencer marketing. In conclusion, this research sheds light on the nuanced strategies employed by liner shipping companies in leveraging influencer marketing strategy and engagement in a B2B context. These insights offer managers practical guidance and benchmarking opportunities to navigate the complexities of influencer marketing and optimize influencer marketing strategies and engagement in B2B markets.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Container Shipping, Maersk Line, Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), Analytical Hierarchical Process, Interval Type-2 Fuzzy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a marketing innovation, businesses are rapidly adopting influencer marketing (OECD, 2005; Reinikainen et al., 2020). According to various studies, the value of the influencer market more than tripled from USD 6.5 billion in 2019 to USD 21.1 billion in 2023 (Business Insider, 2021). This strong growth underlines that influencer marketing produces better engagement and return on investment (Ahuja & Loura, 2020; Childers et al., 2019; Gretzel, 2018), and enables more direct and organic communication with potential customers (Talavera, 2015). Influencer marketing practices are widespread in consumer markets (B2C), such as personal care, fashion, food, and entertainment. Influencers can range from celebrities to industry professionals and thought leaders, such as bloggers and other content builders (Melzer & Zech, 2018). About 50 million people worldwide consider themselves influencers or creators (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Sponsorship by brands is the primary way influencers earn money. Most influencers are nano- and micro-influencers (up to 50,000 followers). The pricing of influencer services is determined by the influencer's reach, follower engagement, the channels used, the type of industry (fashion, etc.), the number and type of posts, and the level of exclusivity requested. Influencer marketing is highly suitable in a B2B market environment. B2B purchasing decision-makers benefit from the insights of industry experts (Barry & Gironda, 2019). B2B marketers aim to become the trusted brand of digital marketing (Holliman & Rowley, 2014) and build thought leadership (Magno & Cassia, 2019). The narrower structure of industrial markets compared to consumer markets enables B2B influencers to have fewer followers (referred to as micro or nano) and thus establish stronger connections with them. In the academic literature, however, research on influencer marketing is still in its infancy, with most influencer marketing studies emerging after 2017 (Vrontis et al., 2020). Extant studies have mostly focused on B2C markets (Hudders et al., 2020) whereas only a few studies have considered B2B and none have targeted industrial services.

The literature (Christofi and Thrassou, 2021; Sundermann and Raabe, 2019; Vrontis, Makrides, Hudders et al., 2021) points to a significant focus on social media platforms rather than exploring alternative media channels. Also, there is a predominant emphasis on investigating the influence on consumer behaviors, intentions, and attitudes. Organizational aspects concerning the utilization of influencer marketing have instead received relatively little attention. Crisafulli et al. (2022) conducted a study focusing on the impact of B2B influencer characteristics, specifically competence and warmth, on purchasing managers' assessments and choices regarding advocated vendor solutions. While their research delved into the effects of product endorsements through social media on customer attitudes and intentions, it fell short of offering a comprehensive conceptualization of influencer marketing within B2B markets. However, the study underscored the need for broader exploration in the field, hinting at a gap in understanding the full scope and potential of influencer marketing strategies tailored to B2B contexts in different sectors.

Considering the above, this paper explores the successful management of influencer marketing in the B2B container shipping industry by addressing the research question “How do container shipping companies apply influencer marketing strategies?”.

We propose a two-layer methodology. After a literature review, a conceptual framework of constructs and protocols for effective influencer marketing is presented. Then, the paper introduces the “interval type-2 fuzzy Analytical Hierarchical Process” method (IT2F-AHP) for construct testing. The conceptual framework and the IT2F-AHP method are applied to analyze influencer marketing in the container shipping industry. The empirical application shows the relative importance of constructs and protocols in terms of creating content that builds the influencer marketing strategy through influencer marketing in the researched B2B market.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Literature review process

To feed the literature review, we selected relevant papers based on a refined research string deployed across designated databases, filtering exclusively for peer-reviewed articles. Search parameters included the title, abstract, author keywords, and full-text content. The search scope extended from 2008 to 2023, spanning Scopus and Web of Science databases. The preference for peer-reviewed papers stemmed from the need to mitigate authorial bias and ensure the objectivity of approaches. Such papers serve as indispensable reservoirs of information, having undergone rigorous scrutiny wherein relevance and quality are discerned (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Eventually, the literature review leads to the identification of relevant protocols and constructs for effective management of influencer marketing in a B2B context, as presented in Table 2 at the end of this section.

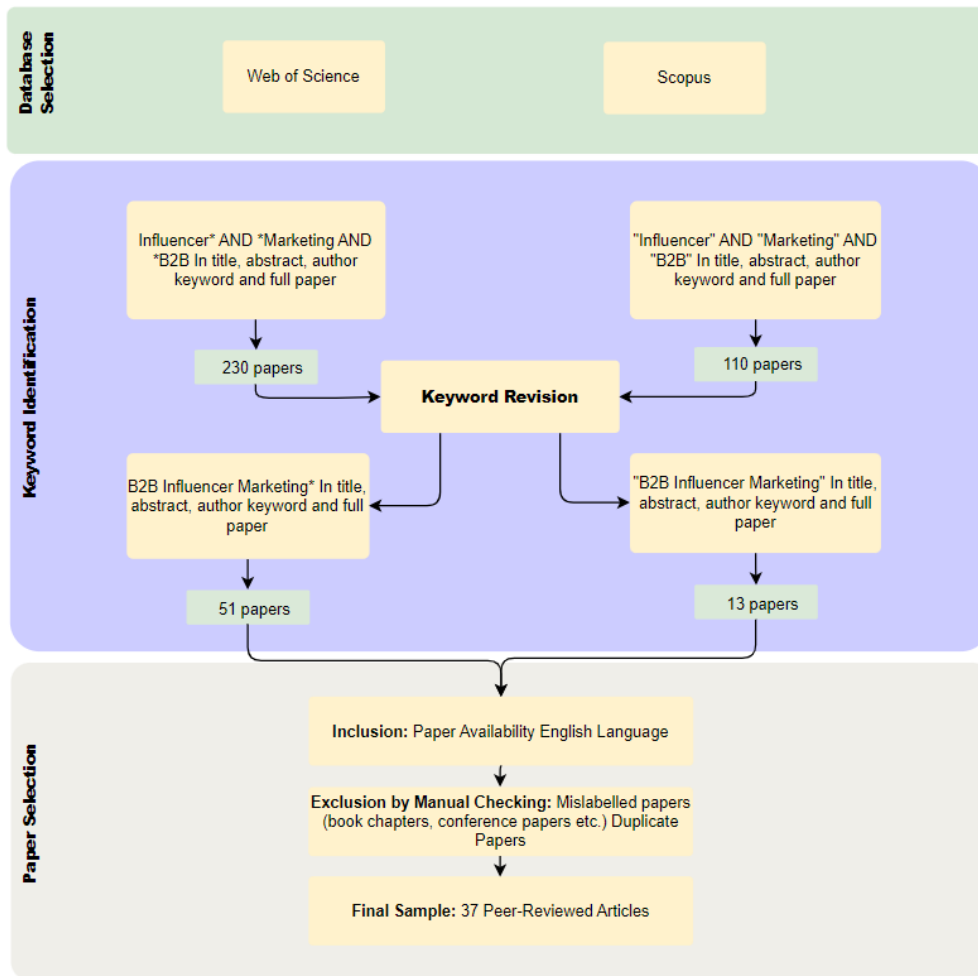


Figure 1. Literature Review Process

Source: Authors

2.2. Definition and Scope of B2B Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing leverages social media platforms for endorsements and product referrals from influencers, who are individuals with a dedicated social following and are recognized as experts within their specific niche (Vrontis et al., 2020). Influencer marketing in a B2B context, in general terms, refers to the endorsement of products or services through third-party individuals on social media platforms, often transacted with pecuniary or tangible recompense (Mero et al., 2023). B2B influencer marketing is evolving beyond mere social media product endorsements, unveiling an intricate tapestry of collaborations between enterprises and influencers (explained below in the section on strategies for influencer marketing). Schaffer (2022) discusses diverse B2B cases where external influencers play a pivotal role not only in traditional product endorsements but also through immersive engagements in industry events, and expansive marketing initiatives (e.g., blogs, podcasts, webinars, eBooks).

Influencers thus acquire a pivotal role in comprehensive corporate strategies, not only in social media-centric practices but also in other facets of organizational communication and marketing endeavors. By actively participating in industry events, contributing to content creation initiatives, and

championing internal advocacy endeavors, influencers transcend their conventional roles, becoming instrumental components in shaping the broader narrative of corporate identity and outreach. This collaborative dissemination is typically executed through social networking channels, often in tandem with recognized thought leaders (Levin, 2020).

2.3. B2B Users in Influencer Marketing

Huotari et al. (2015) distinguish between internal and external users. The internal user group consists of employee users and corporate users. While an employee user is linked to his or her employer, a corporate one might be the company itself. External users refer to social media users other than internal users such as corporate users, customer users, professional users, and civilian users.

The marketing literature has progressively focused on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which, along with traditional offline WOM, serves as a potent mechanism to influence customers' purchasing decisions, satisfying both company and customer needs (Solomon, 2015). Research on eWOM within social media primarily delves into strategic perspectives (Williams et al., 2014), typology (Weisfeld-Spolter et al., 2014), customer behavior (Godey et al., 2016), customer loyalty (Kandampully et al., 2015), and social selling (Ancillai et al., 2019). Overall, existing research encompasses both content- and emotion-oriented investigations. In emotion-oriented inquiries into eWOM, scholars aim to discern individuals' sentiment attitudes towards eWOM marketing. Conversely, in content-oriented studies, researchers focus on collecting online customer reviews.

According to Shen (2021), consumer adoption through influencer marketing is crucial and hinges on two criteria: source credibility and argument quality. Argument quality defines the persuasive power of the influencer in satisfying message subscribers (Cheung et al., 2009). Earlier studies have examined how argument quality impacts the attitudes of message subscribers in a social media context (Hsu et al., 2013; Teng et al., 2014). Hsu et al. (2013) defined constructs that influence users intent to change and circulate eWOM messages.

Source credibility constitutes the link between eWOM quality and customers' purchasing intention (Tsao & Hsieh, 2015). Previous studies have explored the dimensions of source credibility, i.e., trustworthiness and expertise (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Cheng & Ho, 2015). According to Grabner-Kraeuter (2002), many consumers exhibit skepticism towards the functional mechanisms, processes, and effects of e-commerce, as well as the quality of goods or services offered online. Skepticism may arise from a lack of experience or perceived lack of credibility in e-commerce. Trust is instilled in the recipient, while credibility is attributed to the sender as an expert. Expertise encompasses the source's qualification or competence along with skills and knowledge related to a specific topic (Cheng & Ho, 2015). Trustworthiness refers to the audience's understanding of the sender's honesty (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Numerous researchers have examined the significance of source credibility on customers (Bao and Wang, 2021; Kim et al., 2020; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Bao & Wang (2021) suggest that

the credibility of a brand's microblog can foster customer community trust, commitment to the microblog, and encourage sharing.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is gradually transforming the landscape of influencer marketing, particularly at the level of influencer identification, campaign optimization, audience targeting, and performance measurement (Sands et al., 2022; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). AI technologies can assist in generating content ideas by analyzing trending topics, keywords, and visuals. It can also assist influencers and firms in personalizing messages that resonate with their audience. AI also helps in segmenting followers and in developing and implementing relevant metrics like engagement rates, conversion rates, ROI, and even sentiment analysis. However, the rise of AI-driven influencer marketing campaigns can undermine trustworthiness and the feeling of personal outreach among the targeted audience, particularly in the case of fake messages and fully AI-generated campaigns.

2.4. Strategies for Influencer Marketing

Firms can pursue and implement different strategies when implementing B2B influencer marketing, as outlined in Table 1. A distinction is made between reference, interaction, content, and purpose-based influencer marketing. Reference-based influencer marketing strategically leverages external influencers to endorse and recommend the company's services, products, or customer experiences. This approach aims to increase brand and product awareness by utilizing the credibility conferred upon the message through the influencer's authoritative representation, ideally as an existing customer within the industry. Content-based influencer marketing concentrates on collaborative content creation and distribution by influencers. This approach is primarily aimed at enhancing brand image or establish thought leadership within a specific sector. The influencer's subject matter expertise takes precedence, influencing the target audience by offering informational value through content creation.

Table 1. Benchmarking of B2B influencer marketing strategies.

	Reference-based	Content-based	Purpose-based	Interaction-based
	Marketing Strategies			
Logic	An influencer advocates for a company's product or client interaction.	An influencer endorses a company's product or engages with its clientele.	The influencer articulates the company's impact on society and/or the environment.	The influencer engages and fosters social connections with the intended audience.
Primary goal	Elevating brand and product recognition.	Fostering thought leadership and brand image	Evoking positive emotions towards the firm	Building new relationships
Type of influencer(s)	External influencer	External or/and internal influencers	External influencer	Internal influencer
Typical influencer profile	Distinguished customer	Industry expert	Credible spokesperson	Knowledgeable employee
Source of influence	Influencer authority	Influencer expertise	Influencer authenticity	Interpersonal trust
Motivational basis of influencer	Monetary compensation	Mutual interest	Societal concerns	Internal motivation

Exemplary influencer marketing tactics	Client endorsements, testimonials, and case analyses.	Webinars, help documents, podcasts, research papers, ebooks	Testimonials, videos and case studies	Social media conversations and discussions with active engagements
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Source: Adapted from Mero et al. (2023)

Purpose-based influencer marketing adopts a broader perspective by utilizing external influencers to convey the company’s societal contributions, environmental impact, or any purpose transcending traditional business metrics. Deployed to stimulate positive emotions towards the firm, this strategy varies substantially from other B2B influencer marketing approaches, often involving influencers who may not be industry experts but credible spokespersons representing beneficiaries, such as the director of a non-governmental organization. Interaction-based influencer marketing shifts the focus to internal influencers who actively engage and build social bonds with target people. This policy relies on interpersonal trust developed through meaningful interactions to cultivate connections with clients and other parties. The influencer's role involves participation in industry discussions on social media, the sharing of insights, and contributions to various topics. For interaction-based influencer marketing to be successful, the influencer must demonstrate a genuine willingness to invest time in helping others. The interaction-based influencer marketing strategy demonstrates a correlation with social selling, which refers to a sales approach utilizing social channels to figure out, interact with, and nominate influencers, prospects, and current clients at related elements in the client journey to foster business connections (Ancillai et al., 2019; Terho, Giovannetti, & Cardinali, 2022). Social selling literature (Terho, Giovannetti, and Cardinali, 2022; Ancillai et al., 2019) perceives influencers as people whom salespeople plan to employ. In contrast, interaction-based influencer marketing regards internal employees as influencers who actively cultivate links with external parties.

2.5. Managing Influencer Marketing

Several studies (Mero et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019) present different approaches to managing influencer marketing. Mero et al. (2023) suggest five key stages for effective influencer marketing management: (1) planning, (2) influencer selection, (3) preparation and coordination, (4) content creation and delivery, and (5) evaluation. However, the same authors overlook the factors that influence the management of influencer marketing. To address this gap, we propose the 4M Model, which was introduced by Brown & Fiorella (2013). The 4M Model comprises four essential protocols for influencer marketing: make, manage, monitor, and measure. These protocols are defined in Table 2.

a) Make: Companies should identify a social media manager who is also an influencer to create their content. Brown & Fiorella (2013) define this as the ‘make’ protocol, which has two parts: identification of the persona’s path and activation of the influencer. They suggest that there are two parts to an

influencer marketing campaign: trickle and ripple. In the trickle part, the created content is delivered but the success of the campaign depends on the distribution of messages among targeted customers. The protocol ‘make’ requires building specific personas based on the following constructs (Brown & Fiorella 2013; Morello, 2013; Chopra et al., 2021): .

- **Demographics** refers to the gender, age, and locale of target customers, and it provides important criteria regarding how the message will be perceived and how it should be created. Demographics should be used to select targeted customers.
- **Attitude** represents the level to which a person has a positive or adverse assessment for the specific behavior. It is favorable when influencers ensure fast access to information, are professionals in their field, update followers, and interact efficiently.
- **Perceived Behaviour Control** refers to personal experience with the performance of the behavior and obstacles that hinder this behavior.
- **Timescale** is the time interval of the collaboration for the success of influencer marketing activities.
- **Technology** refers to the channel or technology used, which has its target users.
- **Subjective norms** are based on insight of the others’ role in accepting or rejecting a specific behavior.

The ripple effect, or butterfly effect, is a theory which contends that even a small movement can create significant subsequent motion. Once the ripple part has begun, the influencer must enhance its spread while remaining out of the way to allow it to take its natural course. Google has implemented Google Ripples in its Google My Business (ex name Google+) social network. This provides a compelling integrated visualization of the effectiveness of post-sharing that significantly assists marketers.

In the second stage of the “make” protocol, the company should segment the market to focus on targeted users and engage a suitable influencer for the brand message. Using knowledge gained from the first stage influencer filter, a brand can become more effective at knowing how to engage a suitable influencer (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). The customer must be at the center of all influencer marketing activities applied by brands.

b) Manage: The ‘manage’ protocol enables companies to determine their influencer marketing efforts and to track the impact on their customers by answering the following questions: Are influencers creating a positive or negative view of the service? Did the influencer campaign disrupt or enhance the brand? Did the company’s efforts remove the influencer from the purchase path altogether? Did the company’s efforts move the influencer along to the next stage of the purchase life cycle? The ‘manage’ protocol consists of four constructs: personal relevance, trust, inspiration, and perceived risk (see Table 2). Influencers should ensure the content matches their audiences; something that Chopra et al. (2021) call ‘**personal relevance**’. Each influencer should establish **trust** by paying attention to their followers because audiences trust their influencers’ suggestions over brand advertisements (Akhter et al., 2004).

This helps to create long-run relationships with customers (Keen, 1997), motivates further purchases (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), and improves resilience to price increases (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). A greater insight into **inspiration** helps to recognize the feelings of people while acting on their beliefs. Inspiration turns influencers into good storytellers who continuously share their own stories while following other influencers' stories. Finally, audiences may stop following influencers if their requirements are not met, which Chopra et al. (2021) call "**perceived risk**". This happens when customers worry that a specific purchase will not align with their expectations (Horton, 1976).

c) Monitor: Influencer monitoring aims at monitoring the positive or negative conversations around a brand, as well as determining how influencers are talking about brand offerings to buyers. This is where the company can intervene, and create loyalty or even distress. Monitoring is composed of three constructs: awareness, reaction, and action (Brown & Fiorella, 2013), as further explained in Table 2.

d) Measure: While measuring a campaign is always very challenging, online marketing possibilities make this rather effortless. The measurement of influencer marketing is important in answering particular questions: How productive was the whole campaign? How productive was the reach of the influencer? What were the general responses to goods or services offered, visits to company blogs, and web pages? What was the general effect on brand equity, competitor responsiveness, etc.? The protocol is composed of four constructs (Kumpumäki 2019; Kotler et al., 2016; Brown & Fiorella 2013), see also Table 2. **Return on investment (ROI)** is a widely used financial metric for estimating the probability of enjoying a return from an investment (Chen 2019). The construct **resources** refers to the actual investment in influencer activities. For example, measurement actions may be managed against employee hours spent to manage the campaign and related costs, alongside the training of the influencers and the usage of employee resources. **Ratio** refers to valuable ratios, such as engagement rate in influencer marketing. If an influencer has a large number of followers but only a few of them communicate with the influencer and take care of their posts, then the collaboration is not very successful. Finally, by measuring **sentiment**, the company can get insight into the sentiment around the brand message offered and how the audience understands the brand.

Table 2. Literature Review Findings on Protocols and Constructs for Effective Management of Influencer Marketing in a B2B context

Protocol	Construct	Definition	Reference
Make	Demographics	Gender and age of the target audience	Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Morello, 2013
	Attitude	Quick and Up-to-date information used by the influencer, likes, and followings given to this information	Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021, Trivedi and Sama, 2020
	Perceived behavior control	Sharing industry-specific information	Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021
	Timescale	Compliance with the timeline in content sharing	Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Morello 2013
	Technology	Compatibility of content with technology	Brown & Fiorella 2013; Morello 2013
	Subjective norms	Sensitivity in the selection of the target audience or information channel, competence or qualification	Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021; Cheng and Ho, 2015
Manage	Personal relevance	Exclusive content sharing for followers, relative advantage, and exclusive storyline building.	Hsu et al. 2013; Chang 2013; Escalas, 2007; Burnkrant & Sawyer, 1983; Bloch & Richins, 1983; Cohen, 1983; Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984; Bloch et al., 1986; Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021
	Trust	Original and reliable content for followers, informativeness, playfulness, source creditability	Bao and Wang, 2021; Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021; Hsu et al. 2013; Akhter et al., 2004; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Keen, 1997
	Inspiration	New content motivation, social interactivity.	Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021; Hsu et al. 2013; Oleynick et al., 2014
	Perceived risk	Lack of expectation in delivered content, complexity, compatibility	Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2021; Hsu et al. 2013; Dholakia, 2001; Sweeney et al., 1999; Dowling & Staelin, 1994
Monitor	Awareness	The number of blog posts, social shares, new articles, interviews, and mentions regarding the brand.	Lou & Yuan, 2019; Coates et al. 2019; Brown & Fiorella, 2013
	Reaction	Number of website visitors, WOM suggestions, and increased social following count	Lou & Yuan, 2019; Coates et al. 2019; Brown & Fiorella, 2013
	Action	Conversion rates	Kotler et al., 2016; Brown & Fiorella, 2013
Measure	Return on Investment	Value per investment (people hours, ad budget, etc.) x 100 = percentage social media ROI	Kotler et al., 2016
	Resources	Employee hours, costs for educating influencers, specific employee resources	Brown & Fiorella, 2013
	Ratio	Engagement rate, website traffic, number of followers	Kumpumäki, 2019; Brown & Fiorella, 2013
	Sentiment	Ratio of customers' brand perceptions (Positive, Negative, and Neutral)	Tran, 2019; Brown & Fiorella, 2013

Source: Author's own elaborations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Conceptual framework

Following the literature review on influencer marketing and the associated identification of protocols and constructs for effective management of influencer marketing in a B2B context, this section presents our methodological approach. This paper examines the role of influencer marketing in creating brand awareness in the container shipping industry. To answer the research question “How do container shipping companies apply influencer marketing strategies?”, a methodology has been developed combining two building blocks, i.e., a conceptual framework on constructs in influencer marketing, and the development and application of the “Analytical Hierarchical Process” method (IT2F-AHP) for construct testing. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 2 and builds strongly on the 4M Model discussed above and Table 2. The proposed conceptual framework consists of different constructs related to influencer marketing and the associated building of brand awareness.

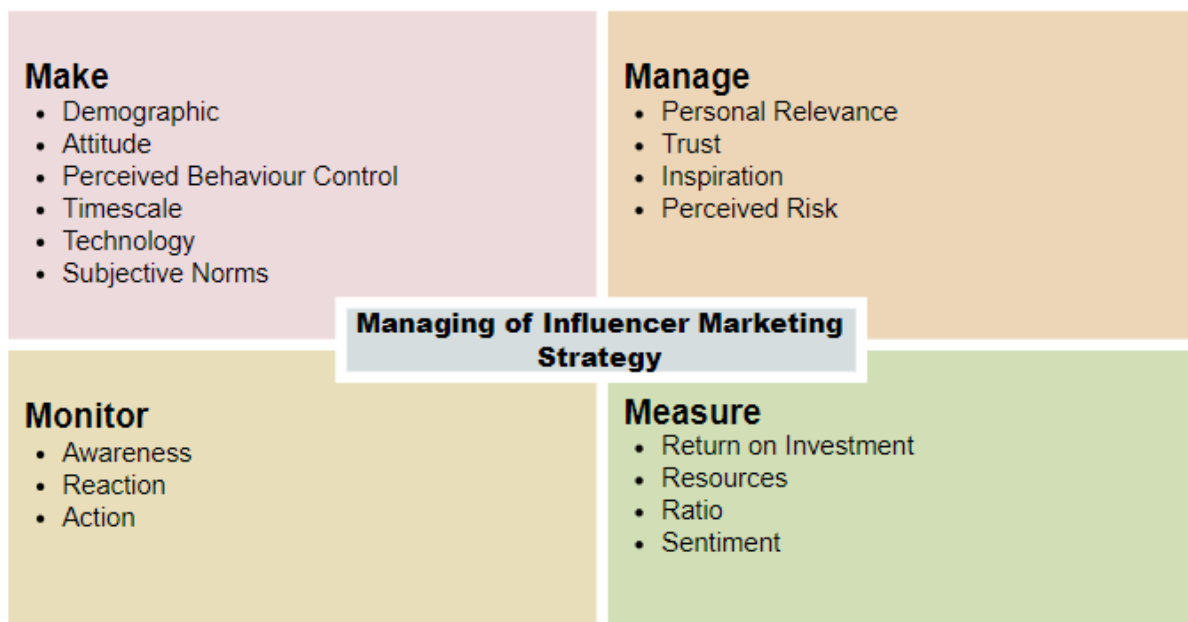


Figure 2. Conceptual framework

Source: Authors’ own elaborations

3.2. Case study-based approach

The conceptual framework and the IT2F-AHP method are applied to analyze influencer marketing in the container shipping industry. For our case study data collection process, depicted in Figure 3, we adopt the well-established case study approach outlined by Yin (2003), structured into two key phases: case study design and data collection preparation. In the initial phase, we have carefully selected two cases representing best practices in container shipping. Subsequently, we crafted tailored data collection protocols for each case, encompassing secondary sources pertinent to the respective contexts.

Before full-scale data collection, we conducted pilot studies with two industry experts via Zoom, meticulously documenting their insights and feedback in each report. Drawing from the insights garnered through case reports, we iteratively refined and enhanced our approach. This iterative process allowed us to create and refine case reports and to enrich our understanding through conceptual modeling, thus facilitating a robust analysis of the maritime logistics landscape.

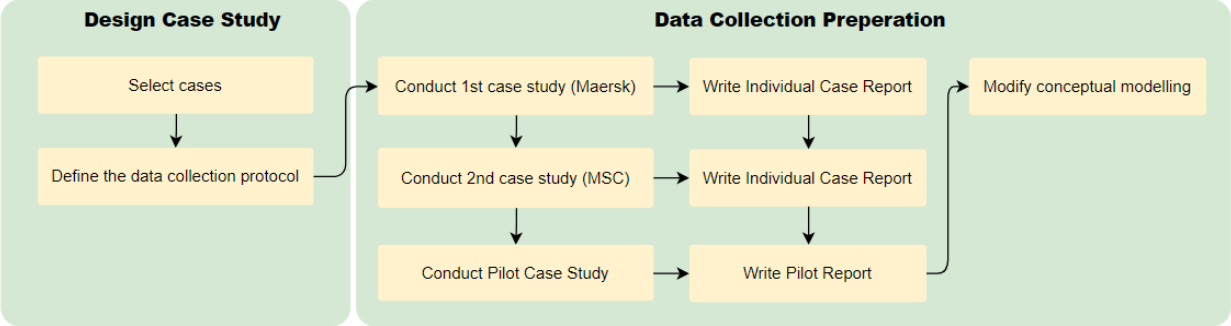


Figure 3. Case Study Data Collection Process

Source: Adapted from Yin (2003)

The empirical analysis focuses on two major container shipping lines, i.e., MSC and Maersk. These companies rank respectively first and second in the world when considering the total slot capacity of their owned and chartered fleet of container vessels, i.e., 6.02 million TEU for MSC and 4.36 million TEU for Maersk out of a world total of 30.4 million TEU (Alphaliner, 2024; data for August 2024). To engage in the case studies, data was collected from multiple sources: the internet news domain (business2community, casehero, etc.) and social media statistics of the two companies (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.).

The container shipping industry uses specific assets (ships and containers) to offer regular liner services on a range of trade routes between designated ports of call. Cargo owners or their representatives such as freight forwarders book slot capacity on the spot market or engage in medium to long-term freight contracts with shipping lines (Notteboom, 2021). Container shipping is a highly concentrated industry with the top five companies (i.e., MSC, Maersk, CMA CGM, COSCO and Hapag-Lloyd) controlling, either through ownership or long-term time charters, two thirds of the total container fleet capacity expressed in TEU (figures Alphaliner). The largest companies are also involved in multi-trade vessel-sharing partnerships, better known as alliances. At the time of writing, three alliances were operational on the main east-west trade routes: THE Alliance (Hapag-Lloyd, ONE, HMM and Yang Ming), 2M (Maersk and MSC) and Ocean Alliance (CMA CGM, COSCO and Evergreen). However, the alliance landscape will undergo major changes in early 2025 given the termination of the 2M alliance and the creation of the Gemini Cooperation between Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd. The dominant business strategy of container shipping companies has always relied on saving costs, chasing economies of scale via larger ships, and industry consolidation focused on an increase of market share (Notteboom, 2022).

This trend has led to a "commoditization" as shipping companies provide increasingly similar liner services to price-conscious customers who face minimal expenses when switching suppliers. Therefore, the advantages of horizontal integration through mergers and acquisitions and alliance formation are getting smaller. In a reaction, major shipping lines such as Maersk, MSC and CMA CGM have invested heavily in vertically integrating activities to include port terminal activities, land transportation, warehousing and logistics, air freight, and even e-commerce and last mile logistics (Paridaens and Notteboom, 2022).

3.3. “Analytical Hierarchical Process” (IT2F-AHP) methodology

The constructs in Figure 2 are weighed and tested using “Analytical Hierarchical Process” (IT2F-AHP) methodology with an empirical application to two leading companies in the container shipping industry. The methodology can be used to solve Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) problems through pairwise comparisons of constructs. Pairwise comparison criteria are decided by experts and computed using IT2F-AHP to create a decision matrix. In the end, the scores of the alternatives are evaluated by aggregating the weights from different sets of criteria and alternatives, based on the most important construct selected to achieve success in the influencer marketing strategy using influencers in the B2B context. A full mathematical presentation of the IT2F-AHP methodology is included in the Appendix.

For the application of the IT2F-AHP methodology to our case studies, data was collected from a panel of twelve (12) experts, presented in Table 3. The experts had a rich experience in the maritime industry and were adepts in social media marketing. Their professional backgrounds spanned roles such as marketing manager, head of marketing, social media manager, and IT manager. Notably, they held pivotal positions as marketing representatives within the branch offices of container shipping lines in Turkey. The age range of the respondents fell between 36 to 42 years. This selection criterion aligns with the insights of Gottfried & Shearer (2016), who underscore the significance of understanding internet usage dynamics, particularly among millennials and younger demographics. Hence, our panel comprised individuals who possessed a nuanced understanding of internet usage trends, which is pivotal in the context of contemporary marketing strategies, especially within the maritime sector.

Table 3. Profile of Shipping-related Respondents

Resp. No.	Age	Education	Experience (Years)	Job Position	Job Functions related to Social Media
1	36	Bachelor	6	Social Media Manager	To manage digital technology and social media campaigns by influencers
2	41	Master	8	Marketing Manager	To manage marketing operations
3	38	Bachelor	5	Marketing Expert	To collect data and analyze the market to improve shipping company marketing efforts in social media
4	40	Master	10	Head of Marketing	To manage the company's success stories and to disseminate marketing messages of the company to different social media networks
5	38	Bachelor	7	Social Media Expert	To select the influencers for right social media channels and manage them in social media
6	39	Bachelor	10	IT manager	Handle project and technology management
7	42	Bachelor	11	Marketing Coordinator	Develops, coordinates, and executes marketing campaigns
8	36	Bachelor	8	Marketing Expert	To develop marketing strategy for better marketing campaigns with influencer
9	40	Master	10	Head of Marketing	To manage the company's success stories and to disseminate marketing messages of the company to different social media networks
10	35	Bachelor	12	Social Media Expert	To select influencers for the appropriate social media channels and overseeing their management on social platforms.
11	32	Bachelor	15	IT manager	To manage project and technology operations.
12	40	Bachelor	9	Marketing Coordinator	To plan, organize, and implement marketing campaigns.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Case study-based qualitative analysis

To answer our research question, we first engaged in a qualitative analysis of the practices and processes of Maersk and MSC. We first focused on the protocols “Make” and “Manage” of the conceptual model presented in Figure 2.

In 2011, Maersk implemented a social media strategy in three communication areas: customer services, sales, and internal usage. The company’s goal was to get closer to its customers while understanding other opportunities like more awareness, higher employee engagement, and better press coverage. They garnered over one million fans on social media accounts, including 400,000 followers on Twitter and 22,000 on Instagram. They effectively disseminated messages specialized for each digital channel. At the same time, they trained captains and employees to use social media effectively. The employees shared their experiences in their business life to attract more attention to the company’s identity. However, this is not enough to generate a successful influencer marketing strategy in shipping because social media needs good content to avoid being bland and boring as it usually happens in B2B industries. Maersk therefore embraced social media to integrate with its business communities by delivering engaging stories and useful content. This not only provides information and support, but it also triggers dialogue and the sharing of ideas and impressions.

To create compelling stories, Maersk hired a top content creator, Jonathan Wichmann, who works as an independent communications advisor and consultant. By telling stories, he emphasized the “human side” of Maersk's business activities and stressed the importance of showing the firm’s many facets. Instead of being just an ordinary business portal, they generated good stories from employee users. After commencing with random Facebook posts featuring stories and photos, he later responded to follower engagement with polls and audience contributions. Initially, reinforcement primarily stemmed from a niche group of customer users and professional users. However, Maersk's Facebook availability expanded to an audience of 410,000 page likes within 11 months. His campaign ultimately earned the company the European Digital Communications Award in both 2012 and 2013, among other influential recognitions. While the campaign's primary focus was on encouraging public engagement rather than direct sales, integrating social selling into the company's social media availability was anticipated to enhance the company's growth trajectory.

MSC is the biggest market player with Maersk its closest competitor (Alphaliner, 2024). As a family business with a limited appetite for publicly disclosing detailed information on its activities, MSC avoided social media for many years before finally adopting it. Crucially, Maersk’s successful content creator, Jonathan Wichmann, moved to MSC in 2015. This important collaboration materialized as MSC decided to engage more in communications with its customers via online channels (MSC, 2015) and to create closer digital customer engagement. Although MSC previously used the LinkedIn channel, which B2B businesses have generally used for employment purposes, it activated Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts for the first time in August 2018 (MSC, 2018). They have now 961,639 followers

and 25,031 users. In particular, large social media networks like Facebook have significantly reduced organic reach through changes in its News Feed algorithms.

The next protocol, “monitoring”, involves monitoring the effectiveness of influencers’ brand campaigns on their audiences. In B2B contexts, influencers are mostly selected from inside the company. For example, Maersk and MSC selected influencers from their workforce, such as ocean-going masters or seafarers who want to share their experiences about the brand. By increasing employee involvement, MSC followed the Customer-Centric Influence Business Model in their marketing strategies. For example, captains or seafarers use different actions (follow, share, link, etc.) to build relationships with their audiences who can also interact directly with them.

The final protocol, “measure”, provides marketers with information about an influencer’s performance. Although numerous factors determine this, factor ratio and ROI are the most important. As Wichmann (2013) points out, creating value in social media is multidimensional, so it makes no sense to look at just a few quantitative parameters to measure the value of the total business. For example, the ROI on Maersk’s Facebook page was determined to be approximately 1.500%. However, the return on the Twitter page (now X) was much higher, having invested almost no resources. There were 15 times more influential followers than the average Twitter user. Thus, the amount of interaction varies between different networks. The engagement rates of Maersk and MSC in the five most popular social media networks in the shipping industry are presented in Table 4. There were 703 posts from 13 December 2020 to 24 November 2022 on the two companies’ social media pages. The table shows the average engagement per post and the ratio of engagement rates to followers. Since both companies disabled the comments on their YouTube channels, engagement was calculated from the number of views. While Maersk, as the pioneer of social media use in its industry, has more followers overall, MSC has a higher engagement rate despite having adopted social media much later. Prioritizing the level of engagement fits with MSC’s global marketing executive’s description of the purpose of their social media strategy: “to talk with customers in a way that’s right for them” (MSC, 2015). That is, MSC measures its social media success by engagement rate rather than follower numbers.

Table 4. Social Media Statistics of Maersk and MSC

	Maersk			MSC		
	Follower (K)	Avg. Engagement Per Post	Follower Engagement Rate (%)	Follower (K)	Avg. Engagement Per Post	Follower Engagement Rate (%)
Facebook	3,088	983	0.314	81.4	443	18.28
X / Twitter	113,8	83	0.3	19	45	0.12
Instagram	306	4826	1.54	109	5242	4.53
LinkedIn	1428	1874	0.127	702	2143	0.305
YouTube	92	1886	30.21	6.17	869	102.65

Note: Data from 13 December 2020 to 24 November 2022; average engagement per post data multiplied by 1,000; Youtube data calculated from number of views; other channels’ data calculated from interactions, such as likes, comments, and re-sharing.

4.2. Application of IT2F-AHP

The proposed conceptual framework in Figure 2 consists of different constructs related to influencer marketing and the associated building of influencer marketing strategy. These constructs were weighed and tested using “Analytical Hierarchical Process” (IT2F-AHP) methodology with an empirical application to two leading companies in the container shipping industry, i.e. Maersk and MSC.

Using the IT2F-AHP method, Table 5 lists all values connected with constructs for managing successful influencer marketing that builds the marketing strategy from the perspective of the twelve expert respondents working in the container shipping industry (the full data representation and results for all 12 respondents are available to readers upon reasonable request). These datasets and results encompass linguistic variables concerning the pairwise comparison matrix for the primary criteria outlined in Figure 2, which include “make”, “manage”, “monitor” and “measure”, along with their respective sub-criteria. Additionally, we also created the aggregated interval type-2 fuzzy pairwise comparison matrix for both the main criteria and sub-criteria, along with the interval type-2 fuzzy and normalized weights assigned to the protocol and construct.

The outcomes show that the most important construct for container shipping lines was trust which is in line with the findings in earlier studies (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Trust is respectively followed by return on investment, technology, and resources. The least important constructs for respondents were demographics and timescale, respectively. Furthermore, a social media trends report highlights that 94% of marketers who favor influencer marketing campaigns consider them effective (Ahmad, 2018). The study also indicates that the importance of “measurement” is comparatively lower than other protocols.

Table 5. Interval type-2 fuzzy and normalized weights of protocols and constructs

Protocol	Weight	Rank	Construct	Global		Rank
				Weight	Weight	
C ₁ Make	0.232	2	C ₁₁ Demographics	0.101	0.023	17
			C ₁₂ Attitude	0.164	0.038	14
			C ₁₃ Perceived behavior control	0.118	0.027	15
			C ₁₄ Timescale	0.224	0.052	10
			C ₁₅ Technology	0.283	0.066	7
			C ₁₆ Subjective norms	0.110	0.026	16
C ₂ Manage	0.341	1	C ₂₁ Personal relevance	0.170	0.058	9
			C ₂₂ Trust	0.323	0.110	1
			C ₂₃ Inspiration	0.269	0.092	3
			C ₂₄ Perceived risk	0.237	0.081	4
C ₃ Monitor	0.232	3	C ₃₁ Awareness	0.307	0.071	5
			C ₃₂ Reaction	0.418	0.097	2
			C ₃₃ Action	0.275	0.064	8
C ₄ Measure	0.195	4	C ₄₁ Return on Investment	0.204	0.040	13
			C ₄₂ Resources	0.351	0.069	6
			C ₄₃ Ratio	0.212	0.041	12
			C ₄₄ Sentiment	0.234	0.046	11

The findings from the IT2F-AHP method provide insights into the relative importance of different criteria and sub-criteria within the specified categories. In the “Make” category, “Technology” emerges as the most influential sub-criterion, emphasizing its critical role in decision-making, while “Timescale” and “Demographics” also contribute significantly. Moving to the “Manage” category, “Trust” takes precedence as the most crucial factor, followed by the substantial impact of “Inspiration” and “Perceived risk.” In the “Monitor” category, “Reaction” stands out with the highest weight, signifying its pivotal role, accompanied by the noteworthy contributions of “Awareness” and “Action.” Lastly, in the “Measure” category, “Resources” assumes primary importance, highlighting its critical role in decision-making, along with the significant influence of “Return on Investment” and “Sentiment.” The assigned weights offer a quantitative representation of the criteria's relative importance, aiding decision-makers in prioritizing factors in their decision processes within each category.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary goal of interaction-based influencer marketing is building customer relationships. Relationship-building includes goals such as attracting customers, creating trust, and fostering emotional connection to the company. Engaging customers is a way to sustain and deepen that awareness. When customers are actively engaged, they are more likely to remember and recognize the liner shipping brand. Trust is also crucial for any successful relationship, including the one between customers and a company. Consistent exposure and positive interactions contribute to a sense of reliability and credibility, key components of trust. Increased awareness provides more opportunities to customers to form emotional bonds. As customers become more familiar with the brand, they may develop positive emotions and attachments, leading to a deeper, more meaningful relationship with the shipping

company. Those who feel heard and valued are more likely to become brand advocates, actively participating in spreading awareness.

This study formulated a conceptual model aimed at delineating the constructs of influencer marketing and elucidating their interrelationships within the B2B service sector. The model draws on concrete case evidence obtained from two prominent companies in the container shipping industry. The constructs were derived from pertinent influencer marketing literature and corroborated by industry practitioners well-versed in managing social media activities in container shipping.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

In the realm of B2B markets, influencer marketing stands as a swiftly emerging yet relatively uncharted terrain in management practices. Despite the expanding corpus of research on influencer marketing in broader contexts (Hudders et al., 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021), its exploration has predominantly fixated on consumer domains, particularly on product-centric promotions across social media platforms, as well as the study of consumer behavior and attitudes. As a consequence, insights into the intricate organizational processes and distinctive facets of B2B influencer marketing have to date remained scarce. In light of this backdrop, this study has offered two significant contributions.

The first contribution unveils the pivotal role of the “manage” protocol which is in line with the study of Lou & Yuan (2019) in influencer marketing management. These authors implied that social media users evaluate influencers as quality-information providers and develop their trust or purchase decisions based on content quality rather than their entertaining role. We also found that trust is the highest weighted criterion in managing influencer marketing. Shipping companies prefer to engage in an interaction-based influencer marketing strategy in social media directly through corporate users, thereby controlling their employee sharing and behavior. Their indirect training approach encourages employees to engage in social selling, as outlined in the interaction-based influencer marketing strategy. Social selling views influencers as targets for salespeople to interact with, while interaction-based influencer marketing identifies internal staff as influencers who cultivate relationships with external stakeholders (Mero et al., 2023). Interaction-based influencer marketing, as exemplified by MSC's approach, underscores the importance of fostering genuine engagement and relationship-building between influencers (in this case the internal staff) and external stakeholders. This strategy aligns closely with the customer-centric ethos of prioritizing meaningful interactions and trust-building within influencer campaigns.

From an academic standpoint, the efficacy of interaction-based influencer marketing can be evaluated through various theoretical lenses. For instance, social exchange theory posits that individuals engage in interactions with others based on the expectation of reciprocity and mutual benefit. In the context of influencer marketing, interaction-based strategies rely on establishing reciprocal relationships between internal influencers and external stakeholders, fostering trust, credibility, and ultimately,

customer loyalty (Mero et al., 2023). Additionally, the concept of social selling, as elucidated within the Customer-Centric Influence Business Model, introduces a nuanced dimension to interaction-based influencer marketing. From an academic perspective, social selling can be understood as a strategic approach, where influencers (in this case, corporate users) actively engage with potential customers, facilitating personalized interactions and driving conversion through authentic dialogue and relationship-building (Ancillai et al., 2019).

Second, this paper indicates that "measuring" is deemed least important by the analysed shipping companies for assessing influencer marketing success. Typically, these companies do not rely on measurement tools to assess the success of influencer marketing campaigns. Instead, they often resort to manual methods to evaluate the effectiveness of top-performing influencers in managing an effective influencer marketing strategy. While the findings corroborate the impact of corporate users on influencer marketing strategy, as evidenced by studies such as those conducted by Huotari et al. (2015), Kietzmann et al. (2011), Bernoff and Li (2008), and Ryan and Jones (2009), container shipping lines generally do not prioritize meticulous measurement through corporate user accounts in social media.

5.2. Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study provides valuable awareness of the intricacies of influencer marketing within a B2B context. The observations highlight the significant role of the "manage" protocol in influencer marketing management, emphasizing the importance of internal influencers, particularly employees, in shaping brand narratives and fostering trust among target audiences. Social media users in B2B marketing trust internal users who like to build more awareness and establish a good eWOM and influencer marketing strategy.

Unlike B2C influencer marketing, which often prioritizes product and celebrity endorsements for mass appeal, B2B influencer marketing focuses on attracting strategic business themes and building awareness through well-known industry experts within the organization's network. This study underscores the necessity for tailored influencer marketing strategies, considering diverse marketing goals and organizational resources. Furthermore, it emphasizes the critical role of trust as a key criterion in influencer selection and influencer marketing strategy implementation, advocating for a more cost-effective approach by leveraging in-house expertise rather than relying solely on external influencers. Additionally, we show that the shipping companies studied tend to prefer an interaction-based influencer marketing strategy, employing corporate users to directly engage with stakeholders and control messaging while eschewing traditional measurement tools in favor of manual evaluation methods for campaign success assessment. These insights offer managers practical guidance and benchmarking opportunities to navigate the complexities of influencer marketing and optimize influencer marketing strategies and engagement in B2B markets.

5.3. Limitations and future research recommendations

This study investigated Influencer Marketing in the context of B2B services, specifically in the container shipping industry. Future research can investigate industry and market differences through quantitative research and focus on comparing the influencer marketing-oriented social media content of businesses operating in B2B and B2C markets.

Future research can also explore the influencer marketing-oriented posts of businesses in social media networks based on content type. For example, content can be classified according to brand topic (business or product), media type (visual or text-based), and purpose (rational or emotional benefit). In addition, research can be conducted on the content shared by influencers on their networks. In particular, the engagement levels of the relevant social media posts of business employees or sectoral experts can be examined with permission.

To assess the effectiveness of interaction-based influencer marketing within the Customer-Centric Influence Business Model, academic research may delve into empirical studies evaluating key performance indicators such as engagement rates, brand sentiment analysis, and customer satisfaction metrics. Through rigorous analysis and qualitative research methodologies, scholars can elucidate the nuanced dynamics and outcomes of interaction-based influencer marketing strategies within B2B contexts, offering insights and recommendations for managerial practice and theoretical advancement in the field of influencer marketing and customer-centric business models.

Finally, this study examined influencer marketing strategies through a case study of two container shipping lines. Future research can take this further by investigating whether the content created by influencers affects the purchasing behavior of followers, and how much and in what direction it affects their perceptions of the brand. This can provide information about influencers' performance based on their characteristics. This would also provide important insights for businesses to use in their ROI calculations.

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APPENDIX

In this section, we provide a brief introduction to Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Sets (IT2FSs) and the Interval Type-2 Fuzzy-AHP (IT2F-IT2F-AHP) methodology.

a) Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Sets

In 1975, Zadeh expanded the concept of type-1 fuzzy sets by introducing Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Sets (IT2FSs), where the membership values are represented by type-1 fuzzy sets. An IT2FS within the universe of discourse X is characterized by a type-2 membership function, as detailed in Eq. (1) (Mendel et al., 2006; Zadeh, 1975; Zeng et al., 2007)

$$Z = \{((t, s), \mu_z(t, s) | \forall t \in I_t, \forall s \in I_s \subseteq [0, 1], 0 \leq \mu_z(x, \mu) \leq 1)\} \quad (1)$$

The interval $[0, 1]$ represents the range of possible membership degrees. The type-2 fuzzy set can also be defined using Eq. (2) (Mendel et al., 2006).

$$Z = \int_{y \in Y} \int_{Nefx} \mu_z(t, s) / (t, s) \quad (2)$$

In this context, t and s represent the ranges of all permissible values for t and s , respectively. An Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Set (IT2FS) within the universe of discourse X is described by its type-2 membership function. When all relevant parameters and equations following Z are considered, the resulting set is termed an IT2FS (Zadeh, 1975; Buckley, 1985). This IT2FS, denoted as Z , can address specific conditions of a type-2 fuzzy set, as detailed in Eq. (3) and depicted in Figure 2 (Mendel et al., 2006).

$$Z = \int_{y \in Y} \int_{Nefx} 1 / (t, s) \quad (3a)$$

A trapezoidal Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Set (IT2FS) is defined by a specific membership function (3b) with a trapezoidal shape.

$$Z = ((v_{t1}^y, v_{t2}^y, v_{t3}^y, v_{t4}^y; F_1(Z_1^y), F_2(Z_1^y)), (v_{t1}^w, v_{t2}^w, v_{t3}^w, v_{t4}^w; F_1(Z_1^w), F_2(Z_1^w))) \quad (3b)$$

Integrating trapezoidal Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Sets (IT2FSs) involves combining their respective membership functions. In this process, the type-1 fuzzy sets, denoted as v_t^y and v_t^w , serve as reference points. This integration of membership functions is illustrated in Figure 4. The arithmetic operations for Z is adapted from a study Chen & Lee, 2010.

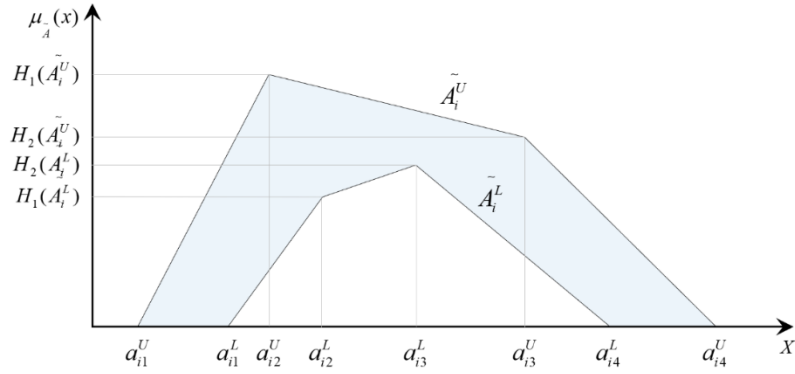


Figure 4. Trapezoidal interval type 2 fuzzy numbers.

b) Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process

The IT2F-AHP method, developed by Saaty (1980), offers a structured approach for Multi-Criteria Decision Making (MCDM) by incorporating a hierarchical framework with objectives and alternatives. Unlike traditional methods that use precise values, IT2F-AHP accounts for uncertainty and subjectivity by using Interval Type-2 Fuzzy Sets (IT2Fs), which handle the imprecision in decision-making better than Type-1 Fuzzy Sets (IT1Fs) (Büyüközkan et al., 2004). This method has gained popularity for its ability to handle fuzzy logic and uncertain environments, allowing decision makers to use linguistic variables for expressing preferences, thereby enhancing the decision-making process. The linguistic variables for IT2Fs, and all steps of the IT2F-AHP method are provided by Kahraman et al. (2014).