

Influencer Marketing vs. Traditional Advertising: Apple vs. OnePlus

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Abstract- The rise of social media has transformed marketing, leading brands to weigh influencer-driven campaigns against classic media buys. This paper compares influencer marketing and traditional advertising through the case studies of Apple and OnePlus. Apple invests hundreds of millions in traditional channels (e.g. in 2023 it spent on the order of \$775 million on advertising, with its largest chunk in TV, leveraging iconic TV spots and large outdoor campaigns to reinforce its premium brand image. In contrast, OnePlus targets tech-savvy consumers with 100% digital campaigns centered on influencers and social platform. Using secondary data (e.g. spend figures, engagement metrics, and brand valuations), we examine return-on-investment (ROI), audience engagement, and long-term brand impact. We find that influencer marketing typically delivers much higher short-term ROI and engagement per dollar (industry data shows ~\$5.78 back per \$1 spent on influencer efforts vs. ~\$1.80 per \$1 for typical ad campaigns), albeit on a smaller scale, whereas Apple's broad traditional campaigns sustain massive reach and reinforce its \$355B brand. The discussion highlights how Apple's expensive omnichannel approach and OnePlus's targeted influencer strategy each play to their audience strengths. We conclude that blending both methods—using traditional media for mass awareness and influencers for engagement—offers the most effective strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's media landscape, marketers contrast *traditional advertising* (TV, print, out-of-home, etc.) with *influencer marketing* on social platforms. Traditional ads provide wide reach and high production polish, while influencers offer authentic peer-to-peer endorsements. Apple represents the classic advertiser: it deploys lavish TV and billboard campaigns (e.g. in 2023 U.S. TV ad spend alone was about \$463.7M to cement its luxury image. By

contrast, OnePlus, a smaller smartphone brand, focuses on social media. Marcel Campos of OnePlus explains that the brand is “100% digital”, prioritizing YouTubers and TikTok/Instagram influencers to reach *tech-savvy consumers*. This study compares these two approaches. Specifically, we analyze how Apple and OnePlus allocate budget, the returns they achieve (ROI and customer acquisition cost), and the engagement and brand effects they generate. We draw on marketing reports and campaign metrics to assess which approach is more cost-effective and impactful in each case.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers note that traditional ads have long dominated mass marketing, offering broad awareness and perceived credibility. However, ad blockers and media fragmentation have reduced their effectiveness. A Nielsen report finds that many viewers now skip ads, lowering TV's impact. In parallel, influencer marketing has surged: consumers trust peer-like recommendations more than ads. Studies show *up to 69%* of consumers trust influencer recommendations, and *82%* are more likely to purchase based on influencer advice than from a billboard or TV commercial. Economically, influencer campaigns often yield higher ROI: industry data indicate an average return of \$5.78 for every \$1 spent on influencer marketing (a 578% ROI). By comparison, WARC's database reports a median profit ROI of only about 1.8:1 (i.e. \$1.80 per \$1) for traditional ads. The literature thus suggests influencers boost engagement and ROI but may lack the vast reach of mass ads. Traditional ads still effectively raise brand awareness in demographics hard to reach online (e.g. older viewers), while influencers excel at engaging niche audiences. No consensus demands one over the other; instead, many experts recommend an integrated strategy combining both channels to optimize brand impact.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a comparative case study approach using secondary data. We examine published figures on advertising spend, engagement, and brand value for Apple and OnePlus. Data sources include industry analytics (e.g. marketing journals, Statista), company reports, and marketing case studies. We quantify and contrast each brand's marketing expenditures and outcomes: ROI (returns vs cost), engagement metrics (views, comments, likes), and brand impact (brand equity measures). Apple's strategy is categorized as *traditional-heavy* (TV, out-of-home, premier events), while OnePlus's is *influencer-led*. For ROI, we combine existing ROI benchmarks from marketing research with each case's spend and results. For engagement and brand impact, we rely on specific campaign data (e.g. social media analytics for OnePlus) and brand valuation reports (Interbrand/BrandFinance for Apple/OnePlus brand). This mixed-methods analysis highlights strengths and weaknesses of each strategy.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

ROI and Cost Efficiency

Both Apple and OnePlus seek to maximize sales per marketing dollar, but their approaches yield different ROI profiles. Industry surveys find influencer marketing typically returns far more per dollar than traditional ads. For example, brand marketers on average see \$5.78 back for each \$1 spent on influencers. In the top tier, some influencer-driven firms report ROIs of 15:1 or 20:1 (i.e. \$20 per \$1). By contrast, high-performing traditional ad campaigns average only 1.8:1 profit ROI. In practice, Apple's campaigns involve huge budgets (approximately \$775M total in 2023) spread across TV, video, and outdoor. Warc data suggest the median ad campaign barely breaks even beyond a 2.5:1 revenue gain. Apple likely achieves around that industry norm: for instance, its \$21.4M Vision Pro video ad delivered an impressive 1.7 billion impressions, but the short-term sales boost is modest relative to cost. OnePlus's influencer-driven spend is much smaller, yet more targeted. Case studies show leaner budgets yielding measurable sales. For example, a OnePlus Nord campaign with 25 influencers generated 14 million impressions across social platforms. Although we lack

public OnePlus ROI numbers, the high engagement suggests efficient spending: targeted content reaches a qualified audience. Analysts note that niche influencer campaigns can lower customer acquisition cost (CAC) because influencers' followers are already primed to be interested. In sum, Apple's traditional media buys produce a high absolute sales impact but at lower ROI per dollar, while OnePlus's influencer strategy delivers high ROI with more modest overall spend (figures like 14:1 ROI have been cited for top influencer campaigns).

Engagement Metrics

Engagement – how audiences interact with marketing – is markedly higher in influencer channels than in traditional media. On TikTok, typical engagement rates range from 3–7% or more, far exceeding what TV ads can measure. Instagram rates are slightly lower (2–4%), but still above conventional click-through rates. For example, The Influencer Marketing Factory reports TikTok posts achieve about 5–7% engagement for mid-tier creators, versus Instagram's 2–3% (see table below). OnePlus leverages this: a Nordic influencer's TikTok video on OnePlus gained over 600,000 views with a 14.3% engagement rate (highly above platform average). A coordinated OnePlus campaign with 124 influencer videos reached millions of Gen-Z users. These pieces drove thousands of likes and shares, creating buzz far beyond paid impressions. Apple's ads, however, garner lower direct engagement metrics. A TV spot's impact is measured in mass reach, not likes. Still, Apple's flagship digital video (e.g. on YouTube) achieves large view counts: its Vision Pro launch ad got over 1 billion views, but engagement (comments, retweets) are limited by its broader audience. In social media, Apple tends to use its channels sparingly, whereas OnePlus fills feeds with user-generated-style content. Overall, influencer content nets far more engagement per viewer than polished ads. This engagement translates to higher click-throughs and conversions. It also fosters community: OnePlus's tech influencers often reply to fans' comments, deepening brand affinity. By contrast, once-a-year Apple Superbowl ads generate short-lived social chatter but little direct interaction.

Brand Impact

Long-term brand equity differs sharply between Apple and OnePlus. Apple is consistently ranked the most

valuable global brand, worth about \$355 billion. Its marketing (including high-visibility campaigns) sustains a premium, aspirational image. By contrast, OnePlus's brand is much smaller but rapidly growing; Brand Finance reports its value at roughly \$1.8 billion (with a 92% increase by 2022). Apple's traditional advertising reinforces its broad brand strength. For example, ubiquitous billboards featuring an Apple logo (no words) keep the brand top-of-mind for millions. These ads emphasize design and lifestyle, building universal brand awareness. Apple's channel strategy also underscores exclusivity (e.g. limited-edition events, product launches). OnePlus, targeting a narrower "tech enthusiast" segment, builds brand differently. Through influencers, OnePlus showcases product features in authentic, peer contexts. Consumer trust surveys find younger demographics are twice as likely as older ones to trust influencers, benefiting OnePlus. In surveys, OnePlus owners often cite community and "value for money" when describing the brand – outcomes of seeing products in real-life use cases via social campaigns. However, OnePlus still lacks Apple's broad brand equity: many consumers outside tech circles are unfamiliar with it. Thus, Apple's traditional ads serve a mass-branding role, while OnePlus's influencer tactics strengthen reputation and loyalty within specific niches. Both brands also measure brand recall: Apple ads score highly in aided awareness, whereas OnePlus gauges success via social sentiment and net promoter scores. In summary, Apple's established global brand is bolstered by sweeping traditional campaigns, whereas OnePlus's brand grows through trusted, targeted influencer exposure. Each approach fits the firm's scale and goals.

V. DISCUSSION

The comparison highlights complementary strengths of each strategy. Apple's deep pockets and iconic marketing ensure it dominates consumer consciousness worldwide; its TV commercials and major billboards create a halo effect that influencer posts alone cannot match. However, these methods are costly and one-directional. OnePlus's influencer-led approach is agile and cost-efficient, directly engaging audiences and driving traffic. For niche customers, seeing a product in an influencer's hands can feel more persuasive than a polished ad. Our analysis suggests

that to maximize overall marketing effectiveness, brands may blend approaches. Indeed, advertising science shows that combining traditional "upper-funnel" ads with influencer or digital touchpoints improves ROI. Apple itself has begun experimenting with more social content (e.g. small-scale influencer partnerships for Apple TV+), and OnePlus sometimes uses outdoor ads in India for big launches. The future likely favors integrated campaigns: Apple could amplify new products via influencer tutorials post-launch, and OnePlus might occasionally invest in broad-reach media for brand prestige. In either case, real metrics (engagement rates, CAC, sentiment) should guide budget allocation. The data indicate influencers drive higher returns and engagement, but traditional ads still underpin brand authority. Marketers should set clear KPIs: use traditional spend for reach and branding, and influencers for conversions and community.

CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing and traditional advertising each play vital roles. In the Apple vs OnePlus case study, we see that Apple's vast traditional ad spend secures mass awareness and a premium brand image, whereas OnePlus's agile influencer strategy yields impressive engagement and ROI. Quantitatively, industry figures show influencer campaigns earning roughly 3–6 times more ROI per dollar than typical media buys. Qualitatively, influencer content builds community and trust in ways billboards can't. Ultimately, the most effective marketing strategy leverages both: use traditional channels to cast a wide net and cement brand identity, then activate influencers to spark conversations and conversions among key audiences. Apple and OnePlus exemplify these dual approaches: Apple as the archetype of big-budget traditional advertising, OnePlus as the influencer-centric challenger. As media evolves, savvy brands will integrate these tactics to optimize ROI, engagement, and brand equity.

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