INFLUENCE DECODED: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING RESEARCH

DEŠIFRIRANJE UTJECAJA: IZAZOVI I PRILIKE KOJI OBLIKUJU BUDUĆNOST ISTRAŽIVANJA U PODRUČJU MARKETINGA UTJECAJNIH OSOBA

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents a comprehensive exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of influencer marketing, with a particular emphasis on identifying and elaborating on key research opportunities in the field. As influencer marketing continues to evolve, understanding these critical research areas becomes imperative for scholars and practitioners alike.

Design / Methodology / Approach – Utilizing a synthesis of existing literature, critical and in-depth analysis, this paper examines seven distinct research opportunities within influencer marketing. These opportunities address pressing questions surrounding the measurement of influencer impact, content strategy formulation, platform selection, personal brand alignment, AI integration, influencer-content creator distinctions, and considerations of cultural and generational differences.

Findings and Implications – The research uncovers critical insights into the evolving landscape of influencer marketing, applying qualitative research in order to advance theory and unravel intricate relationships in this field. It

Sažetak

Svrha – Rad predstavlja sveobuhvatno istraživanje teorijskih osnova marketinga utjecajnih osoba (engl. *influencer marketing*) s posebnim naglaskom na identifikaciju i analizu ključnih istraživačkih prilika u ovom području. Kako se marketing utjecajnih osoba neprestano razvija, razumijevanje ovih istraživačkih izazova postaje imperativ za marketinške stručnjake, ali i znanstvenike.

Metodološki pristup – Sintezom postojeće literature te njene kritičke i dubinske analize, rad ispituje sedam istraživačkih prilika unutar marketinga utjecajnih osoba. Navedene prilike propituju kritična pitanja vezana uz mjerenje utjecaja utjecajnih osoba, sastavljanje strategije digitalnog sadržaja, adekvatan odabir digitalnih platformi, usklađivanje marke osobe s postojećom praksom, integraciju umjetne inteligencije, problematiku sve kompleksnije nomenklature te razmatranja kulturnih i generacijskih razlika.

Rezultati i implikacije – Istraživanje otkriva ključne uvide u brzorastuće područje marketinga utjecajnih osoba primjenjujući kvalitativni pristup istraživanju kako bi se unaprijedilo teoriju i pojasnilo kompleksne odnose u ovoj do-

highlights the need for nuanced measurement metrics beyond mere follower counts, underscoring the importance of influencer-consumer alignment. Additionally, the study emphasizes the critical role of authentic content narratives and platform-specific strategies. The integration of AI and the emergence of AI-powered influencers present a transformative shift, necessitating further investigation.

Limitations – As a qualitative research endeavor, this paper acknowledges the constraints of limited generalizability inherent in this methodology. The findings may be contextually bound, and further empirical studies may be necessary for broader applicability. The qualitative nature of this research may provide rich insights, but lacks the statistical robustness associated with quantitative approaches.

Originality – This paper stands out by placing the spotlight on seven vital research opportunities within the domain of influencer marketing. It recognizes these opportunities as the crux of the field's evolution, offering valuable insights for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Keywords – influencer marketing, social media metrics, content strategy, AI integration, digital marketing

meni. Naglašava se potreba za preciznijim mjerama, izvan onih klasičnih poput broja pratitelja. Ističe se i važna uloga strategije digitalnog sadržaja, kao i autentičnosti pri izgradnji narativa ili marke osobe, a kako bi se postigla adekvatna razina usklađenosti s ciljnom publikom i digitalnom platformom. Integracija umjetne inteligencije i pojava utjecajnih osoba pogonjenih umjetnom inteligencijom predstavljaju transformacijski pomak koji također zahtijeva daljnje istraživanje.

Ograničenja – S obzirom na kvalitativni karakter istraživanja, ograničena je mogućnost generaliziranja pa su za širu primjenu potrebna daljnja empirijska istraživanja. Kvalitativna priroda ovoga istraživanja može pružiti duboke uvide, ali ne pruža statističku robustnost povezanu s kvantitativnim pristupima.

Originalnost – Rad ističe sedam značajnih istraživačkih prilika unutar domene marketinga utjecajnih osoba. Spomenute istraživačke prilike predlažu se kao srž evolucije područja marketinga utjecajnih osoba pružajući korisne uvide iz perspektive znanstvenog istraživanja, ali i same prakse.

Ključne riječi – marketing utjecajnih osoba, metrike društvenih medija, strategija digitalnog sadržaja, integracija umjetne inteligencije, digitalni marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the popularity of social media influencers has experienced exponential growth. That market, valued at only half a million US dollars in 2015, reached a value of 15 billion US dollars in 2022, placing influencer marketing among the predominant social media marketing strategies used by companies (Kim & Kim, 2021). Nevertheless, despite the general interest of researchers and experts, scientific papers investigating influencer marketing remain imprecise, incomplete, and fragmented (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi & Thrassou, 2021).

Influencers on social media are individuals who have built a large social following on one or more social platforms (Pick, 2020). They are also defined as social media users with the potential to create engagement, stimulate conversations, and promote products or services to a target consumer segment (Kim & Kim, 2021). They represent a new category of opinion leaders emerging from the democratization of communication opportunities on social media, a consequence of the transformation of traditional communication models that mainly operated through a trickle-down effect, resulting in the megaphone effect when individuals without professional experience or institutional positions publish content on the web and gain a mass audience (Mcquarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013).

As influencer marketing has gained widespread popularity and application, it has become increasingly evident that a solid understanding of this marketing strategy is crucial for its effective implementation in marketing campaigns (Jun & Yi, 2020). The concern has grown regarding the need to identify appropriate methods for measuring the success of influencer marketing and selecting or creating the right metrics for this purpose (Backaler, 2018; Farivar & Wang, 2022). Given the close association of influencer marketing with social media, there is an inevitable question of how to develop an optimal content strategy. Unlike traditional media, there is no

'one-size-fits-all' solution; thus, influencer content must be thoughtfully aligned with the audience's needs and platform-specific tactics to increase the likelihood of success (Pelletier, Krallman, Adams & Hancock, 2020). In addition to the challenges associated with managing and measuring content and its performance, current literature emphasizes the critical importance of understanding ongoing trends and changes in the marketing, cultural, and technological environment. These include factors such as generational shifts, globalization, the advent of artificial intelligence, and various micro-trends in the digital realm, including adapting to new nomenclatures (Backaler, 2018; Duffy, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Trivedi, 2018).

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current climate in influencer marketing, addressing its theoretical underpinnings while also highlighting key research opportunities within the domain. The theoretical background will be provided in order to establish a foundation for subsequent exploration; however, the central focus of the study lies in the identification of critical areas warranting further investigation. These include assessing the problems of influencers' true impact and its measurement, discerning optimal content strategies, understanding the evolving dynamics with the advent of Artificial Intelligence and its transformative power, distinctions under the crowded nomenclature in the field, as well as consideration of cultural and generational differences in content strategies. Ultimately, this research endeavor aspires to offer valuable insights for marketers, scholars, and practitioners alike, fostering a deeper understanding of how influencer marketing influences consumer behavior and shapes brand perception in the digital era.

Following this introduction, the study will cover theoretical background and roots of influencer marketing, outlined in part two. Then, within the scope of part three, the focus will shift onto the current state of influencer marketing research and, by analyzing the existing literature

and practice, seven key research opportunities will be highlighted. Finally, part three will present the study's key implications, as well as the conclusion, which will be followed by the list of references used in the research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ROOTS OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

In the broadest sense, influencer marketing is defined as the sponsorship or positioning of products by influential individuals or organizations in the social media environment. It is also described as a long-term marketing strategy in which individuals popular on social media are selected to promote brands or products (Bu, Parkinson & Thaichon, 2022). Accordingly, influencer marketing is a type of marketing that uses product or service recommendations from influencers to drive sales, attract the attention of new consumer segments, generate word-of-mouth marketing, and increase engagement with the product or brand (Kim & Kim, 2021).

It is worth noting that the concept of influencers existed earlier in the form of market influencers, individuals with influence on the market. According to Feick and Price (1987, as cited in Aljukhadar, Sénécal & Bériault Poirier, 2019), these are individuals who possess information about various products, sales locations, and other market-relevant factors, initiating dialogue with consumers and providing them with requested information (Aljukhadar, Sénécal & Bériault Poirier, 2019). This theory essentially begins with the theory of opinion leaders, according to Corey (1971, as cited in Trivedi, 2018), who are reliable, informed individuals existing in all primary groups, while Roger defines such leadership as the degree to which an individual can informally and in the desired way influence the behavior of others (Roger, 1983, as cited in Trivedi, 2018). The science of opinion leadership can even be taken to the "two step flow" model presented by Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955, as cited in Hund, 2023), in which certain people act as opinion leaders by filtering information from mass media to their family, friends, and neighbors (Hund, 2023).

The methods employed by influencers can also be found in the idea of "selling oneself," rooted in the blurring of boundaries between market and self, powered by the digital environment. If branding in a traditional sense represents a process of linking cultural meanings with products and services, self-branding scales that process down to the individual level (Whitmer, 2021). Bishop (2022) describes the job of an influencer as learning how to constantly accommodate oneself to the means of establishing and maintaining visibility, which is based in the three critical roots. The first of these is self-branding, the second is self-optimization for algorithms, and the third one is commitment to selling authenticity. Self-branding is therefore a distinct form of labor, defined as self-conscious construction of narratives and images of self through the use of cultural meanings and images; self-optimization is based around content-planning in line with platform and algorithm rules; and, finally, authenticity is perceived in leaving an impression of being real and relatable while engaging in the two aforementioned actions in order to capitalize on them in pursuit of economic opportunity (Bishop, 2022; Hearn, 2008; Whitmer, 2021). Hund (2023) implies that the core business of today's influencer industry is constant reassessing, redefining, and revaluing authenticity.

In essence, influencer marketing on social media is very similar to the classic use of celebrity endorsement in marketing communication and in the context of creating parasocial relationships (PSR), a phenomenon where feelings of friendship or attraction are developed, despite the absence of physical social interactions (Masuda, Han & Lee, 2022). The essential functions of PSR are companionship and personal identity, where companionship is sourced from an individual's "deficiencies" in social life and dependency on the media. In the case of influencers, this interaction is unique, as followers have the opportunity to react to the content, but the

character of the communication remains limit-ed, thus making the relationship between fol-lowers and influencers a special branch of PSR (Masuda et al. 2022; Giles, 2002).

Influencers position themselves at the intersec-tion of celebrities and friends or as self-made micro-celebrities (Wang, 2021). The fundamen-tal difference between regular celebrities and influencers is that celebrities are typically fa-mous for what they do outside of social media whereas influencers are created, or become fa-mous, through social media. In other words, an influencer's reputation is based solely on their content and activities on social media, and in-teractions are primarily driven by content (Ma-suda et al., 2022).

Influencers share interests with their audience and, therefore, appear more credible. As a result, they have the capacity for a higher level of in-teractivity with followers and potential consum-ers. Their content establishes them as experts, aiming at changing their audience's attitude, opinion, and behavior in order to provoke pur-chasing decisions, often in fields requiring mini-mal expertise, such as fashion (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Farivar, Wang & Yuan, 2021). However, there are also situations in which traditional media affirmed influencers as an important voice in disseminating critical in-formation during crisis, such as in Finland where the government openly called on influencers to spread the information about COVID-19 among younger generations (Heikkilä, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that influencers, thanks to their dual role as content creators and brand spokespeople, open the door to entirely new ways of building brand awareness, accelerating the creation of its image in the desired direc-tion. In this case, influencer marketing functions as a channel for open, interactive communica-tion and the creation of authentic relationships between consumers and brands. One of the strengths of this approach is that it does not rely on mass communication but, instead, targets precisely the existing core of followers within

the influencer's community in order to influ-ence their purchase intentions and potentially redirect traffic toward the brand (Bu et al., 2022). In this sense, PSR and opinion leadership are not mutually exclusive processes; rather, they seem to be complementary features necessary in influencer marketing. Influencers' audiences seek both valuable information and meaningful connection (Farivar et al., 2021), contrasting with obvious persuasion attempts highlighted in the Persuasion-Knowledge model by Friestad and Wright (1994, as cited in Burns, 2021) and Reac-tance theory by Brehm and Brehm (1981, as cit-ed in Burns, 2021).

Accordingly, research indicates that tradition-al celebrity marketing leads to a broader user reach, while influencer marketing results in a higher return on investment (ROI). This is pri-marily due to the perception of greater creative control over their own content, ultimately lead-ing to a higher perceived authenticity of the sponsorship itself. One reason influencers have disrupted the marketing mix is the illusion (per-ception) of intrinsic rather than market-driven catalysts in their interactions with brands (Kapi-tan, van Esch, Soma & Kietzmann, 2021).

In summary, influencer marketing has become mainstream, predicted by US marketers to reach an 86% adoption rate in 2025 (Insider Intelli-gence, 2021), and is currently considered one of the most complex marketing tactics. Therefore, it is essential to have a basic understanding of personal brands of influencers, i.e., influencers as human brands, before embarking on the de-sign of a marketing campaign based on influ-encers (Jun & Yi, 2020).

3. CURRENT STATE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING RESEARCH AND KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Vrontis et al. (2021) recognize that the most re-cent research on social media influencers is em-

pirical in nature, with a prevailing use of quantitative methods. Therefore, to enhance theory development and deepen the understanding of complex relationships within this field, they propose a greater prevalence of qualitative research (Vrontis et al., 2021). Qualitative research allows for a higher level of detail and, consequently, the generation of new and diverse insights and perspectives (Chetioui, Benlafqih & Lebdaoui, 2020; Feng, Chen & Kong, 2021).

Following the identification of research gaps and future research implications in the existing scholarly literature, a keyword-based research approach was undertaken to offer a more comprehensive context and enhance understanding of current issues within the realm of influencer marketing. While influencer marketing has become widespread among marketers due to the increasing use of digital media, its characteristics have evolved. It has shifted from being predominantly centered on "communication management" and "viral marketing" to encompass such phenomena as parasocial interaction, brand awareness, as well as the significant role of followers and their behavioral evolution through years. The progression of these aspects, among others, still remains underrepresented in the literature (Joshi, Lim, Jagani & Kumar, 2023). Based on the aforementioned methods, this paper highlights seven research opportunities in the field of influencer marketing that require further theoretical development to deepen understanding of the mechanisms within this domain.

3.1. Challenge of aligning with the right influencer and measuring success of influencer marketing

In the research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute for the period 2020-2022, one critical area in the category of brand value definition and communication message is the issue of measuring the value of influencers' impact on social media (Marketing Science Institute, 2020). Brands face challenges such as the presence of "fake" followers, making it difficult to verify the

real segment of users reached by the communication message. Some influencers also dilute their own channels by promoting too many different brands, leading to regulatory issues (Taylor, 2020).

From this it appears clear that, when marketing managers decide to collaborate with influencers, they should not limit themselves solely to measures such as the number of followers but also focus on the influencer's alignment with potential consumers (Belanche et al., 2021). A larger number of followers does not necessarily mean more interaction with content, and it's sometimes essential to consider the number of people the influencer follows, as a smaller number can send negative signals (Ye, Hudders, De Jans & de Veirman, 2021). Selecting influencers with different interests or, in the context of fashion, styles in relation to the promoted product can be a wrong direction, regardless of the influencer's popularity. From another perspective, it is argued that influencers should also reject collaborations with brands that do not align with their image, as the opposite choice can lead to ineffective outcomes or even damage to reputation (Belanche et al., 2021).

In a similar tone, Chopra, Avhad, and Jaju (2021) emphasize that brands which do not ensure their alignment with the influencer risk appearing inauthentic to consumers. Quantitative measures should not be the sole framework for evaluating the selection and success of influencers; moreover, there is a need for the development of theory that delves into content-based metrics such as content quality or value, sentiment, and topic relevance, as well as for more sophisticated and more efficient tracking technologies and metrics (Backaler, 2018; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ye et al., 2021). In MSI's research priorities for the period 2022-2024, it is highlighted that engagement and attention metrics need to be developed further, but there is also a need for discussion about developing a metric which would adequately measure customer experience, as well as socially constructed nature of brands and influencers (Marketing Science Institute, 2022).

This is in line with early warnings by Baym (2013, as cited in Duffy, Pinch, Sannon & Sawey, 2021), according to which legitimacy, credibility, and likability all must be measured so that their effect and ability to be converted into economic capital can be quantified (Duffy, Pinch, Sannon & Sawey, 2021). In the wake of the depreciation of trust in the online realm, social media influencers should predominantly depend on their credibility and ethos (Suciu, 2021). This cautionary advice can also extend to the authenticity of an influencer's personal brand, perceived as the most valuable resource in an increasingly transparent world (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2016). Based on the presented insights, a new research opportunity is suggested:

Research Opportunity #1: What should brand managers look for specifically when choosing the adequate influencer and what is the optimal way to measure the value and success of influencers' impact on social media?

3.2. Challenge of building authentic narratives through content strategy

Influencers who promote a larger number of different brands often dilute the credibility of their content in the eyes of consumers. On the other hand, some research studies argue that transparency regarding paid promotion of various brands and products actually increases the authenticity of the influencer. The outcome primarily depends on the narrative (Zhou, Blazquez, McCormick & Barnes, 2021). A narrative is a sequential series of episodes in which an individual (or "character") takes actions to achieve a specific goal (Feng et al., 2021). Digital narratives are a set of communication techniques arranged in a digital context with different intentions depending on the creator (Castillo-Abdul, Pérez-Escoda & Núñez-Barriopedro, 2022).

The application of an appropriate narrative depends on whether it is paid or earned promotion, with the former often characterized by storytelling and the latter by storygiving (Zhou et al., 2021). While storytelling has proven to be an effective communication strategy, especially in the luxury brand segment, in this case, the narrative is exclusively created from the brand's perspective. Storygiving, on the other hand, represents a narrative from the consumer's perspective (Hughes, Bendoni & Pehlivan, 2016).

Feng et al. (2021) argue that measures need to be developed to observe the transfer of narratives from influencers to followers. However, prior to this, it is necessary to conduct specific qualitative research on the content strategies of influencers, their strategic intentions, and narrative creation techniques to gain a more comprehensive perspective for further research (Feng et al., 2021). Based on the research conducted in France by Valentina Dencheva, content production emerged as the most favored form of partnership desired by marketers collaborating with influencers (Statista, 2021). Furthermore, managing brand's authenticity has been cited as the primary driver of economic value creation, with authenticity itself remaining a crucial determinant in holistic marketing and a key trigger in the consumer decision-making process (Choi, Ko, Kim & Mattila, 2015.). Pairing these findings and ideas together, the inevitable and pivotal role of content in crafting potentially authentic narratives is underscored even further. It is also crucial to understanding that overt control and oversight by the brand can have a negative impact on brand perception. Therefore, it is essential to allow influencers the freedom to express themselves freely and naturally during promotions (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández Giordano & Lopez-Lopez, 2020), as they not only know their audience best (Ye et al., 2021) but also have the ability to build a brand narrative that intimately resonates with their followers (Chopra et al., 2021). Accordingly, a new research opportunity emerges:

Research Opportunity #2: How is a quality influencer-related content strategy formed, and how do various narratives emerge from it? Are there universal narratives applicable to multiple brands?

3.3. Challenge of tailoring influencer – related content strategy for the right channel and aligning it with specific goals

Among the research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute, there is also a question of how to align an appropriate channel with the nature of the content and the timing of publication to optimize reaching end-users (MSI, 2020). The issue arises from the fact that market segmentation has been a reality in marketing since the 1960s, and social media is no exception to that rule. On the contrary, not everything revolves around the demographic characteristics of the target audience any longer. Each social platform has its own culture, language, and style that must be reflected through digital content (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen & Welte, 2020). Consequently, the question of effective multichannel communication and activities has become one of the most significant challenges in the field of digital marketing (Wang, 2021). Deciphering the specificities and success factors on different platforms is a research priority (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Martínez-López et al. (2020) argue that communication messages must align with the tone and format of the medium or platform on which they are published. Haenlein et al. (2020) believe that brands should not rush into content creation; rather, they should start with influencers who can better guide them on the mechanics of desired social platforms, as these platforms do not function on a "one size fits all" principle. In this case, brand management would serve as a form of supervision that sets permissible boundaries. On the other hand, due to algorithms determining which content will ultimately be visible to consumers, it is believed that influencers themselves should use multiple platforms, primarily focusing on one and using others as complementary. Adequate integration between different environments and platforms is seen as a critical issue in influencer marketing, as well as in digital marketing in general (Haenlein et al., 2020, Martínez-López et al., 2020). Such issues yield yet another research opportunity in the field of influencer marketing:

Research Opportunity #3: **Is there an optimal influencer-related content strategy concerning the specific type of content, channel, timing, and place of publication? Does reaching a larger number of users imply using various platforms?**

3.4. Challenge of building an authentic influencer's personal brand in order to build meaningful relationship with the audience

Through active interaction, followers can get the impression that influencers perceive them as unique individuals, not just anonymous members of a large group of followers. Such interactivity strengthens followers' emotional attachment to the influencer, which further necessitates self-connection with the influencer's personal brand (Jun & Yi, 2020). The issue concerns the exact level of connection and alignment that followers or influencers themselves are willing to accept. Belanche et al. (2021) refer to McCracken's (1986) model of meaning transfer, where followers would be willing to buy or recommend a product sponsored in an influencer marketing campaign simply because they want to transfer its meaning onto themselves. Therefore, authors believe that further expansion of the theory regarding the determination of the potential effect of influencers on followers' behavioral intentions (Belanche et al., 2021), such as purchase intention (Masuda et al., 2022) or positive word-of-mouth marketing (Kapitan et al., 2021), may be necessary.

In contrast to the rest of the literature, the insights from Jin and Muqaddam (2021) go in the opposite direction. Based on their research, the authors argue that a high level of discrepancy between a consumer's actual and ideal "self", as opposed to a low level of alignment, has a negative impact on purchase intention. However, purchase intention is significantly stronger

when exposed to content from micro-known individuals, i.e., influencers, compared to content from traditional celebrities (Jin & Muqaddam, 2021). This is also evident in the research by Martínez-López et al. (2020), which emphasizes that the level of fame of an individual is secondary to the perceived alignment with the promoted product (Martínez-López et al., 2020). In contrast to the predictions, Lou and Yuan (2019) found the level of trust in the influencer to have a positive impact on content credibility and promotional messages but a negative impact on brand awareness and purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019); this is diametrically opposite to the conclusion about their positive correlation in the study by Nafees, Cook, Nikolov & Stoddard (2021).

Given the overall complexity and contradictions in research results and relationships among variables, Ye et al. (2021), in line with these insights, call for further research into the mechanisms of follower-influencer connectivity (such as perceived credibility, adoration, parasocial interaction, perceived similarity, a sense of belonging, and intimacy), as well as into how these mechanisms are intertwined, and ultimately, how they truly affect the effectiveness of influencer marketing through the lens of their impact on consumer behavioral intentions (Ye et al., 2021). Similarly, Kapitan et al. (2021) call for an evaluation of the impact of influencer personal brand capital development on the nature of activities and impact, or attempts to influence, consumer behavior (Kapitan et al., 2021). Joshi et al. (2023) advocate for conducting research aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of strategies for effectively communicating and reinforcing a sense of authenticity. Additionally, they suggest investigating the factors that contribute to the longevity and gratification of parasocial relationships (Joshi et al., 2023). Finally, in MSI's research priorities there is a question of adequately communicating brand purpose without alienating consumers who may not feel aligned with the message (MSI, 2022). Derived from the insights provided, another research opportunity is brought into focus:

Research Opportunity #4: What is the relationship between an influencer's personal brand capital, a consumer's homophily tendencies, alignment, and connection with the influencer's personal brand, and the consumer's behavioral intentions towards the promoted brand?

3.5. Challenge of understanding AI's growing role in influencer marketing

Artificial Intelligence has been perceived as a transformational tool in marketing and influencer marketing is not an exception to its effect. It is believed that AI, with the help of Natural Language Processing and Sentiment Analysis tools, could have a strong impact on powering algorithms which would recognize the authenticity of influencers' content or strengthen the precision of audience targeting, as well as – due to automation – provide experts with more time to study human element of the influencers. However, there are still questions of ethical nature, raised by the unknowns of AI bias and transparency, as well as its reliance on data availability (Backaler, 2018; Mursalin, Purbaningsih, Boediman, Siagawati & Sitaniapessy, 2023).

There is also an emerging phenomenon of virtual influencers powered by Artificial Intelligence, containing distinctive human traits, characteristics, aesthetics, and personalities. These AI influencers have already been adopted as a practice for both brands and institutions, ranging from fashion (e.g., Balmain, Nike, and LVMH, among others) to health (World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic) industries, seeming as an innovative tactic designed to keep reputational safety thanks to its immunity to transgressive behavior characteristic of humans (Sands, Ferraro, Demsar & Chandler, 2022). There is still a lot of research to be done across a variety of different product and experience categories in order to reach proper conclusions on how AI influencers perform on different social media platforms, how authentic they are perceived to be, what factors draw

consumers towards AI influencers, as well as antecedents to those factors and, finally, what type of relationship consumers can build with them across different industries (Jhawar, Kumar & Varshney, 2023; Kim, Kim, Zihang & Shoenberger, 2023; Sands, Campbell, Plangger & Ferraro, 2022). There is also an important question of how a consumer's knowledge of whether the influencer is virtual or not could affect their trust or perception of the service in comparison to the human influencer from the same category (Böhndel, Jastorff & Rudeloff, 2023). For example, it is expected that virtual, AI influencers may be more suitable for stigmatized product categories where consumers feel shame or fear when it comes to asking more details about the product (Sands et al., 2022b).

It is believed that AI can power up influencer marketing, and AI influencers can impact consumers' purchase intentions. Further research on credibility, authenticity, trust, ethics, interaction styles, and the character of relationships (including the development of parasocial relationships) is encouraged. This would provide more insight necessary to help develop generalizations on enhancing influencer marketing with AI, as well as consumers' connection with AI influencers (Gerlich, 2023; Gerlich, Elsayed & Sokolovskiy, 2023; Sands et al., 2022b). Built upon these insights, a new research opportunity is proposed:

Research Opportunity #5: How is AI changing the landscape of influencer marketing?

3.6. Challenge of understanding difference between influencers, content creators, curators, and other individuals applying self-branding in the digital realm

Since social media promotionalism tends to be imposed on today's ongoing, a self-branding culture – typical of the rise of influencers – has invaded all pores of society, such as law, medicine and academia among others (Duffy & Pooley, 2017a), with the rising prevalence of user-gener-

ated content and individuals' expanded skills in building it only serving to catalyze the process (Audrezet, De Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). We have reached a point at which artists have to spend as much time maintaining their social media visibility as they do crafting the artwork (Bishop, 2022). Meanwhile, academic authors feel the pressure to constantly remain visible, so in some sense they are fighting the same battle as influencers working around algorithms, ending up as the target for equal amounts of criticism and harassment (Duffy, 2022). In this sense, platforms such as Academia.edu and Research Gate seem like a scholarly analogue to Facebook and Instagram, encouraging the similar logic of self-promotion and image-building (Duffy and Pooley, 2017a).

There is also a notable emergence of curators and creators; Andjelic (2020) highlights how today's culture is not necessarily about having money to buy things but having taste to know what to buy and how to gain social following through that type of human curation, with the help of knowledge and taste, which take time and effort to develop (Andjelic, 2020). The term "creator", on the other hand, was initially formed in order to resolve the problem of influencers' growing roles and responsibilities, but eventually ended up being ambiguous since virtually anyone can create content but not everyone can influence others with a proof (Hund, 2023). Between content creators, (micro, nano, mega) influencers, curators, artists, academics, and other parties only algorithm treatment is different; however, there are also platforms, ranging from consumer-oriented to those producer-oriented, so it is crucial to make professional organization and clear distinctions between the individuals' purposes, intentions, and goals of self-branding on different social media platforms before any generalizations can be made (Audrezet et al., 2020; Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Hund, 2023). Summarizing what has been said, a new research opportunity is to be considered:

Research Opportunity #6: What is the exact distinction between influencers and other content creators? What is the line which separates influencers from people adapting self-branding techniques in order to broaden their digital visibility?

3.7. Challenge of understanding cultural and generational differences in one's audience

One of the primary limitations regularly emphasized in articles in the field of influencer marketing is the focus on only one country, completely disregarding nationality and cultural belonging. Authors consistently warn that the same "laws" of content do not apply equally in different countries and cultures (Aljukhadar et al., 2019; Belanche et al., 2021; Bu et al., 2022; Chetioui et al., 2020; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Jin & Muqaddam, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Mcquarrie et al., 2013; Pick, 2020; Trivedi, 2018; Vrontis et al., 2021). Also, as generational differences are not taken into account either (Backaler, 2018; Chopra et al., 2021; Feng et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2023; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Pick, 2020; Trivedi, 2018), that provides a research opportunity which could hold extra weight in the context of interaction with AI-powered influencers, who could be perceived to be more credible to younger generations (Kim et al., 2023; Rossi & Rivetti, 2023). That oversight, therefore, becomes another research priority:

Research Opportunity #7: How can awareness of potential cultural and generational differences among followers be implemented in an influencer's content strategy?

4. CONCLUSION AND KEY IMPLICATIONS

In recent years, influencer marketing has risen to the forefront of marketing, becoming one of the most common digital marketing strategies in the industry (Kim & Kim, 2021). However, the academic understanding of this phenomenon remains fragmented and imprecise, despite its exponential growth in popularity and economic significance (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Influencers, individuals who have garnered substantial followings on one or more social media platforms, have emerged as a distinct category of opinion leaders. Their influence stems from the democratization of communication on social media, challenging traditional models of information dissemination (Mcquarrie et al., 2013; Pick, 2020). An influencer's role is multi-faceted, involving self-branding, content optimization for algorithms, and a commitment to authenticity in order to drive sales, attract new consumer segments, foster brand engagement, and gain economic profit (Bishop, 2022; Bu et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; Whitmer, 2021).

One of the paramount research opportunities in influencer marketing lies in refining methods to measure the value and impact of influencers on social media (MSI, 2020). This necessitates a departure from simplistic metrics such as follower counts and a deeper examination of factors such as content quality, sentiment, credibility, and alignment with target audiences (Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ye et al., 2021).

Another critical area of research pertains to the formulation of effective content strategies. This includes understanding how narratives emerge from content and whether universal narratives are applicable to multiple brands in view of the fact that transparency regarding paid promotion and the impact on influencer authenticity is also an ongoing area of inquiry (Choi et al., 2015; Feng et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). Furthermore, aligning the appropriate channel with the nature of the content and the timing of publication to optimize reaching end-users is a significant challenge given that the unique characteristics of each social media platform necessitate tailored content strategies, with effective multichannel communication presenting a critical aspect of digital marketing (Martínez-López et al., 2020; MSI, 2020; Wang, 2021).

In accordance with the highlighted importance of authenticity and credibility, as well as influencer marketing's roots in parasocial relationship theory, there is a need for deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between an influencer's personal brand capital, a consumer's homophily tendencies, alignment with the influencer's personal brand, and the consumer's behavioral intentions towards the promoted brand that merit extensive investigation (Belanche et al., 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2020). Follower-influencer connectivity, encompassing perceived credibility, adoration, parasocial interaction, perceived similarity, a sense of belonging, and intimacy, also demands deeper exploration (Joshi et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2021).

The transformative impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on influencer marketing is an emerging area of interest (Mursalin et al., 2023). AI, particularly through Natural Language Processing and Sentiment Analysis tools, holds the potential to enhance the authenticity of influencer content and refine audience targeting. However, ethical concerns surrounding AI bias and transparency, as well as data availability, remain critical considerations (Backaler, 2018; Mursalin et al., 2023). The advent of AI-powered virtual influencers introduces a new dimension to the field, necessitating comprehensive research of their performance, authenticity, consumer perception, and comparison to human influencers (Böhndel et al., 2023; Jhawar et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022a).

Moreover, the distinction between influencers, curators, artists, and content creators, as well as the broader landscape of self-branding for digital visibility, requires further clarity (Andjelic, 2020; Duffy & Pooley, 2017b). This is particularly relevant in domains such as law, medicine, and academia, where self-promotion has become increasingly prevalent (Duffy, 2022). Differentiating between various individuals' purposes, intentions, and goals in self-branding on social media is an essential area of study (Audrezet et al., 2020; Backaler, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Hund, 2023).

Lastly, the influence of cultural and generational differences among followers on content strategy remains an often overlooked but crucial aspect because neglecting these factors may lead to ineffective marketing strategies, highlighting the need for research that delves into the impact of cultural and generational nuances on influencer marketing effectiveness (Aljukhadar et al., 2019; Belanche et al., 2021; Bu et al., 2022; Chetioui et al., 2020; Chopra et al., 2021; Feng et al., 2021; Jin & Muqaddam, 2021; Joshi et al., 2023; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Mcquarrie et al., 2013; Pick, 2020; Trivedi, 2018; Vrontis et al., 2021).

In conclusion, influencer marketing stands as a powerful and ever-evolving marketing strategy. The identified research opportunities span a wide array of critical aspects, from measuring influencer impact to understanding the nuanced dynamics of content creation, and the evolving role of AI in this landscape. Addressing these research gaps will undoubtedly contribute to a more comprehensive and effective understanding of influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behavior and brand perception. It is imperative that future research embrace these opportunities so as to further advance the field and refine marketing practices in the age of social media and digital influence.

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