# CATEGORISATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND DETERMINANTS OF THEIR ENGAGEMENT EFFECTIVENESS

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## ABSTRACT

Social media influencers have been a topic of interest for both practitioners and scientific community in recent years. Understanding their importance and explaining the mechanisms contributing to their success requires a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from the fields of psychology, media, and economics. This paper explores the current classification of social media influencers based on various relevant criteria as content type, influence type, and followers' count. Furthermore, this study aims to provide a synthesis of the fragmented findings related to the key determinants of their engagement effectiveness in order to understand the complexity of influencer culture and its implications for marketing science and consumer behavior.

**KEY WORDS:** social media influencer, influencer marketing, perceived characteristics, source credibility, source attractiveness, match-up hypothesis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Influential people or opinion leaders have been a part of every community since the beginning of civilization and have had an immense impact on determining the direction of community development and decision making. They were mainly visionaries, passionate about their goals, motivating, and inspiring, and that is why people trusted them and followed them. Today, they are also present in different areas of everyday life, and their reach has increased due to the development of mass media and the internet. Currently, 64% of the whole world population uses internet and spends more than 6 hours daily on average browsing (Digital, 2023). Furthermore, there are now more than 5 billion active social media user identities on a global level (Digital, 2023) which explains the importance of social media networks as main channels for information search and dissemination. Consequently, influential individuals have also established their presence on social media networks, under the name of social media influencers (*influencers*).

Khamis at al. (2016, pp. 3-4) define influencers as human brands, as they are subjects of marketing communication efforts through self-branding. However, what distinguishes influencers from other famous people or celebrities is the fact that they have created their profiles from scratch, not being famous for a specific activity such as acting, music, sports, politics, or similar. They are so called ordinary people who created their audience base by posting stories and events from their everyday life or continuously talking about a specific topic of their interest. From a practical perspective, influencers are defined as "people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic, make regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels, and generate large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views" (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

Noticing their importance, companies and brands also started working together with influencers, creating the field of influencer marketing. Campbell and Farrell (2020, p. 469) define influencer marketing as "the practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media." The phenomenon has now become one of the most popular and very effective forms of online marketing, with a global influencer marketing market value of 21.1 billion US dollars in 2023, having more than tripled since 2019 (Statista, 2024).

Even though influencers have been around for a while, scientific literature and studies related to their specificities started developing widely only a couple of years ago. With their numbers growing and their engagement becoming a more important part of marketing communication, it's crucial to understand how to classify them, what are similarities and differences between different groups of influencers, what are their main activities and how to assess the effectiveness of communication delivered by influencers.

## 2. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS FRAMEWORK

The concept of influencing consumers' decisions through opinion leaders stems from the mid-20th century, with Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) developing the theory of two-step information flow, which asserted that consumers' reactions to messages delivered through mass media are influenced by opinion leaders, who pass on their own understanding of information through numerous group interactions. Consequently, consumers' ultimate purchasing decisions result from a blend of these two influences, where interpersonal communication appears to have a stronger impact on decision-making processes and behavior compared with mass media (Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 618).

Social media influencer marketing space has been expanding; therefore, various criteria can be used when attempting to classify influencers into distinct and coherent groups. Among the most common classification methods are assessments based on follower count, the nature of the content they share on their social media accounts, and their level of influence, as shown in the Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Classification of social media influencers
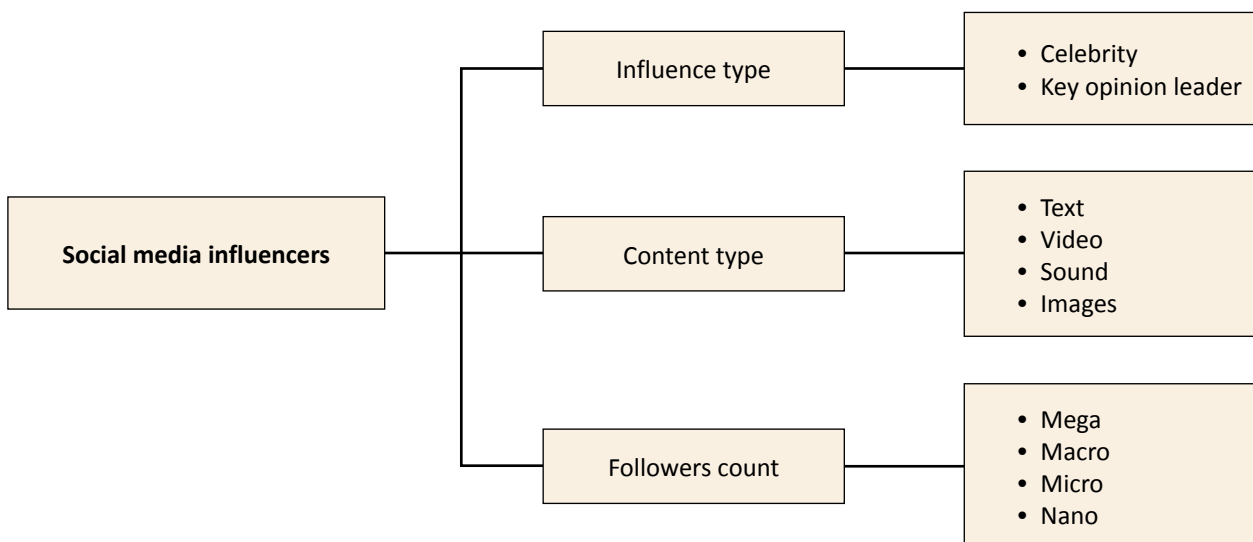


Source: author's adaptation based on Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024

Celebrities were the first influencers, and, even though they still have a role, their importance is diminishing due to the fact that they are extremely expensive to engage and not always a good fit for brands that want to promote a specific or niche product. In those situations, industry experts and thought leaders appear more trustworthy and are more likely to influence consumer opinions (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Influencers like to express themselves in different ways and formats, mainly depending on which social media network site they operate on the majority of the time. Some of them are more oriented towards text, as in different types of blogs; some of them are rather focused on images, as on Instagram; or finally videos, as on YouTube or TikTok. The most important and most addressed classification in literature is based on followers count (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Jannsen et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021). The majority of authors classify influencers into four groups, starting with mega influencers, followed by macro and micro influencers, and ending with nano influencers. However, some of them have slightly different approaches. Schouten et al. (2019) and De Veirman et al. (2017) distinguish only between two categories, macro and micro influencers, whereas Jannsen et al. (2021) add one extra category between macro and micro influencers, called meso influencers. Each of the categories will be briefly explained.

Mega influencers are people with a very wide network of followers. According to Campbell and Farell (2020), mega influencers have more than a million followers on one social media platform. Sometimes, celebrities are also classified in the same category, even though they were famous even before they started social media activities. Based on Influencer

Marketing Hub data (2024), mega influencers are very expensive to collaborate with, and mainly have their personal agents setting up the deals in their name, with a high price tag starting from 10 thousand dollars, up to a million dollars per post.

Macro influencers typically consist of secondary-tier celebrities or experts on specific domain topics who have succeeded in cultivating a larger audience. They tend to be more approachable for collaborations, with a significant and diverse follower base, while seeking less compensation for promotional posts (Conde & Casais, 2023). Their follower base ranges from 100 thousand to 1 million followers.

Micro influencers are often ordinary everyday people who have gained recognition based on their knowledge of specific market niches. Even though there is a lack of consensus on exact numbers, micro influencers mainly have between 10 and 100 thousand followers. What makes them extremely interesting for marketers is not the size of their follower's base but rather the quality of relationships and engagement that micro influencer fosters with their audience (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). They are often perceived as highly credible as they choose their collaborations carefully, ensuring they fit adequately into their scope of activity (Conde & Casais, 2023).

The last but not least important category is nano influencers, with 1 to 10 thousand followers. These individuals might have a modest following base but they are often experts in highly specialized areas and possess very particular knowledge (Janssen et al., 2021). While some brands might overlook nano-influencers, they hold significant value for companies specializing in niche products.

In addition to classification based on the number of followers, there are many additional ideas on how to group different types of influencers based on the source or motivation of their social media presence. According to Ruiz-Gomez (2019), there are accidental internet celebrities who became popular due to viral content, satellite or parasite social media celebrities who owe their fame to a relationship with someone famous, and wannabe influencers who try to copy the practices of successful influencers in their search for attention. Furthermore, each industry where influencers are present requires a specific categorization to indicate their area of expertise or content style to their followers.

## 3. DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS' ENGAGEMENT EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of influencer endorsements in marketing is a multidisciplinary field of study, combining roots in psychology for a better understanding of the mechanisms of source characteristics affecting the recipients of the message as well as assessing the impact on consumer behavior and marketing outcomes. The first scientific studies in the field were related to advertising through traditional channels, leveraging celebrity endorsement opportunities, and were called source models (Erdogan, 1999; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McGuire, 1985; Ohanian, 1990). The models addressed specific source characteristics to determine their impact on the effectiveness of communication. Given the new landscape of the internet and social media, there is an imperative need to extend research based on models originally developed for celebrities and apply them to influencers (Schouten et al., 2019).

### 3.1. Source credibility and attractiveness

Source credibility was first mentioned in scientific research in the mid-20th century (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and further developed by Ohanian (1990, p. 41), who defined it as "a term commonly used to imply a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of the message" and found it consisted of trustworthiness and expertise. Except for non-physical source characteristics, attractiveness was highlighted as an additional factor determining the success of communication during the same period (McGuire, 1985; Ohanian, 1990). More recently, the validity of theories has been explored in the case of influencers within the context of social media, where the effects on consumer outcomes were assessed. Reinikainen et al. (2021) confirmed the positive effects of influencers' credibility on brand trust. Trivedi and Sama (2020) included both celebrities and influencers in their research and concluded that both groups had an impact on consumer attitudes towards brands but influencers' impact was more pronounced, which is in line with the research conducted by Schouten et al. (2019, p. 19). Furthermore, Torres et al. (2019) concluded that influencers perceived as more physically attractive had a positive impact on brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This finding was further confirmed by Joshi et al. (2023), who identify attractiveness as one of the key predictors of consumer behavior in the context of social media networks.

## 3.2. Match-up hypothesis

Kamins (1990) approaches studying communication effectiveness from a slightly different angle and focuses on the congruence between the source and message receiver, which led to the development of the match-up hypothesis. Later on, congruence between the source, in this case, the influencer and the product or brand promoted, but also the brand and follower proves to have an impact on consumer attitudes and purchase intention. Several authors further investigated the impact of perceived congruence between social media influencers, brands, and followers (Breves et al., 2019; Choi & Rifon, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2021) and attempted to establish the relationship between various congruence dimensions and consumer behavior. Schouten et al. (2019, p. 19) confirmed the importance of similarity between the influencer and the followers, which was mediated by true aspiration.

## 3.3. Other source characteristics

The theories previously explained were initially developed for celebrity endorsements in traditional advertising channels. However, while they still appear to be very accurate, in the context of social media networks, some new source characteristics have gained prominence. For example, a few authors have been researching influencers' authenticity, as consumers tend to believe company sources less and consider them less authentic (Peltier et al., 2020). Moulard et al. (2016, p. 422) define authenticity as "being true to oneself, that for a person to be real, one's behavior should be motivated by one's actual thoughts and feelings." In the realm of influencers, there is a considerable amount of fraud and activities motivated solely by money; therefore, it's very important for followers to perceive influencers as authentic in order to believe in what they post and share on their profiles.

Next to that, a specific characteristic of using social media networks for advertising lies in the concept of two-way communication. In the pre-internet era, advertising was exclusively one-sided, with companies sharing key messages and consumers being on the receiving side. With the rise of internet and social media networks, the opportunity has developed to interact with other consumers and sources of product information, positioning interactivity as one of the key characteristics of influencers. Jun and Yi (2020) noticed that followers feel their needs are better heard, understood, and addressed since influencers have the ability to react to their comments. This, in return, creates deeper bonds between influencers and followers. Additionally, they discovered that influencers' interactivity has positive effects on brand trust and emotional attachment. The effects of authenticity and interactivity on brand related outcomes such as brand attitude, brand image and similar still needs to be further explored.

Barta et al. (2023) have found two additional characteristics important for the level of influencing capacity – originality and humor. Originality is sometimes very closely defined as authenticity or, comparably, as uniqueness, serving as a foundational aspect of authenticity (Lee & Eastin, 2021). It plays a pivotal role in driving the intention to follow influencers and to listen to their advice, driven by the hedonic experience followers are having while absorbing the content. Similarly, humor also contributes to a more positive hedonic experience and therefore translates into higher influencing capacity, which increases the intention to follow influencers' advice (Barta et al., 2023).

## 3.4. Theories not related to source characteristics

According to Tanwar et al. (2022), there are additional theories and models not directly related to the source characteristics which have been identified in scientific literature and used as a benchmark in influencer marketing research. Among the most mentioned ones are the uses gratification theory (UGT) and technology acceptance model (TAM). According to uses and gratification theory, developed by Blumler and Katz in the second half of 20th century, audiences are proactive participants driven by a continuous need for satisfaction (Habes et al., 2022). This theory posits that people intentionally seek and choose media to fulfill their specific needs and motivations. Similar behavior extends to social media platforms as well, where followers seek information from influencers through motivations such as social interaction, convenience, and entertainment (Hoque & Hossain, 2023). The technology acceptance model is based on user sentiment, aiming to explain behaviors towards new technology through behavioral intentions, attitude, perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use (Musa et al., 2024). In the context of social media networks and influencers, it not only explains who is open to adopting influencer-following trends but also identifies the underlying motivations. This understanding helps in making influencer profiles more attractive to the audience and increasing their effectiveness.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Social media influencers have become a very important part of consumers' everyday lives in different stages of the decision-making process (Mesarić & Gregurec, 2021). They look up the information on their favorite influencer's accounts and search for recommendations for products and brands they are considering buying. Companies have quickly recognized the potential of including them in their marketing strategies and leveraging their popularity or knowledge to get to their target audiences. The main categorization of influencers is based on the follower count, but they can also be observed in light of the different platforms where they're present and various types of content that they publish on their social media network accounts. Scientific research is catching up on understanding the underlying mechanisms that make influencers successful in channeling consumer behavior. So far, in the literature, the majority of attention has been devoted to personal characteristics of influencers, which might have an impact on the acceptance of their messages by their followers and the congruence on the relation influencer – brand – follower. However, there are more factors that impact consumer outcomes and need to be further understood, as, for example, psychological-related influential factors take into consideration consumers' deeper psychological processes when exposed to influencers, content attributes, or sponsorship disclosure (Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 625). Furthermore, a strategic assessment of influencers as a marketing tool and the impact of their engagement on companies' profitability still needs to yield more concrete conclusions.

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# KATEGORIZACIJA UTJECAJA INFLUENCERA NA DRUŠTVENIM MEDIJIMA I ODREDNICE UČINKOVITOSTI NJIHOVOG ANGAŽMANA

## SAŽETAK

Utjecajne osobe na društvenim mrežama posljednjih su godina predmet interesa i za praktičare i za znanstvenu zajednicu. Razumijevanje njihove važnosti i mehanizama koji pridonose njihovom uspjehu zahtijeva multidisciplinarni pristup, koji uključuje uvide iz područja psihologije, medija i ekonomije. Ovaj rad istražuje postojeće klasifikacije utjecajnih osoba na društvenim mrežama na temelju različitih relevantnih kriterija kao što su vrsta sadržaja, vrsta utjecaja i broj pratitelja. Nadalje, cilj ovog rada jest pružiti sintezu fragmentiranih nalaza o ključnim odrednicama učinkovitosti angažmana utjecajnih osoba na društvenim mrežama kako bi se bolje razumjela kompleksnost koncepta utjecaja te implikacija na marketinšku znanost i na ponašanje potrošača.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** utjecajne osobe na društvenim mrežama, utjecajni marketing, percipirane karakteristike, vjerodostojnost izvora, privlačnost izvora, hipoteza podudaranja