ETHICAL INFLUENCERS: THE RIGHT PATH FOR DIGITAL INFLUENCERS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With the growth of the internet, consumers are using social media more for information and enlightenment on which to base their buying decisions about a particular product or service. Social networks, integrated into the daily habits of many of their users, provide the consumer access to information about both products and brands, influencing the consumer's decision process and, consequently, changing the way brands communicate with consumers (Castelo, 2020, pp. 32-33). For Castelo et al. (2020), social networking applications are applications that allow users to connect with each other by creating profiles of personal information and exchanging messages with each other, and to share photos, videos, and audio files. Also according to these scholars, (1) the possibility of connecting with other users and sharing information and opinions about products and brands has made these applications an effective vehicle for word of mouth, and (2) by allowing a constant exchange of information between users, social networks are seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for brands, and marketers are forced to explore the feasibility and possibility of integrating these applications into their strategies to communicate more effectively with their consumers and strengthen relationships with them.

It is predicted that mobile usage will grow globally with direct impact on content creation by digital influencers. In the influencer marketing industry, one can see the emergence of entrepreneurs who have turned their influence into a business by launching their own products. digital influencers in looking to partner with brands to invest in a long-term relationship as it not only builds trust but adds legitimacy, another trend that is growing over time is authenticity in media. Social media communication is no longer robust because of the great diversity of digital platforms, giving users the power to be active and present in the communication process with brands. With this, the main purpose of social networks is specifically to empower people to publish content on the internet, such as photos, posts, videos, among others, all over the world (Marques, 2022).

Influencers are referred to as opinion leaders, meaning that they are personalities with a large network of followers and fans, who have become dominant members of this online community (Casaló et al., 2020). In this perspective, digital influencers have been gaining the attention of brands due to (1) the increasing dissemination of their content (Kim & Park, 2023) and (2) the mitigation of risks associated with human error in marketing campaigns, as they are ageless, digital avatars with no offline existence that could potentially jeopardise their online persona (Kim & Wang, 2023).

It is therefore important to delimit the ethical issues associated with digital influencers, taking into account the potential for deception and issues linked to moral responsibility (Kim & Wang, 2023, p. 4), such as "Transparency about the identity of these influencers and their content

sources is paramount, underscoring the need for disclosure about those responsible for their creation and management.". Besides, it is also relevant to research how can digital influencers leverage, by the use of their social media networks, consumption-driven social change linked to ethical consumption (Aboelenien et al., 2023). Therefore, the concept of ethical influencer arose. Also according to these scholars, "legitimate their accounts via close-up of personal practices, as opposed to an articulated persona, and connect with divergent audiences to advocate for the need change." (p. 1).

For Lou and Yuan (2019), digital influencers are online personalities who have gained a large number of followers, through one or more social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, YouTube, or personal blogs), who have a great influence on their followers and unlike public figures, influencers are "regular people" who create content in specific areas such as healthy living, travel, food, lifestyle, beauty, or fashion. The strategy that influencers use to capture attention for a particular target is to convince them that what they believe, or think is based on false information or otherwise may convince them that what "other people" believe or think they know is based on false information, leading to a feeling of superiority. Which leads influencers to learn how to capitalize on the opportunities the Internet offers to shape a reality that is available to its users (Forest, 2021).

The consumer may turn to one source about fashion, while being inclined to look for another about cooking, and so on. For example, by following a nutritionist on Instagram, the consumer will be influenced, but only in the context of healthy eating and other topics related to active living, tips and eating. This means that certain figures are influential in their area of expertise. For Levin (2020), there are three levels of influence: (1) experience and credibility are at the first level, (2) on the second level is the strength of the relationship with the followers and the trust they have in the influencer they follow; the better an influencer knows his followers and the greater the trust, the more targeted and effective his content is and (3) the number of followers you can reach is the third level of influence; by reconciling and optimizing these three levels, an influencer will be able to produce quality content and effectively advertise any product or service.

Typically, influencers have the power to try new products or services according to their domain of interest earlier than most consumers, which gives them early insight into how these products and services fit into their lifestyles. Influencers leverage this early insight to review products, make recommendations, and offer tips to their followers, thus allowing them to build credibility and monetize their work through partnerships and campaigns they run. Followers perceive influencers to be popular personalities and more trustworthy than celebrities, as they create a connection with their followers (Wondwesen & Wood, 2021).

For Lou and Yuan (2019), social media influencers are online personalities with many followers, across one or more social media platforms, who have an influence on their followers. Contrary to celebrities who are well-known via traditional media, influencers are "regular people" who have become "online celebrities" by creating content on social media.

Influencers perform marketing activities through advertising. Influencers promote brands or products through their content. In short, influencers can successfully perform marketing activities by introducing the product as organic content versus commercial content. Social media users are more likely to be receptive to a promotional message when it is perceived as a genuine message from the influencer. With this, they concluded that, content that matches an

influencer's domain of interest, generates a more favorable evaluation of the products they sponsor (Kim, 2020).

Forest (2021) uses the term "digital influence warfare" to refer to a form of psychological persuasion whereby the influencer can manipulate the believes and behaviors of others. This can be with the use of persuasive tactics, like information and disinformation, provocation, identity deception, computer network hacking, altered videos and images.

Today, society is addicted to technology and social media, which is the dream of the younger generation that they want to be famous digital influencers. Digital influencers want to engage with customers in a more personal, mobile, and social way. As a result of that, brands trust more on digital influencers for continued sales growth and conversion rates (Teixeira, 2022). According to, Wang and Huang (2020) about 80% of marketers believe that digital influencers are powerful facilitators of consumer engagement and purchase. Digital influencers are individuals whose personal social media accounts have a stable and high number of followers. For example: a nano-influencer on Instagram has 1,000 to 5,000 followers, a micro-influencer has 5,000 to 20,000, a mid-level influencer has 20,000 to 100,000, a macro-influencer has 100,000 to a million, a mega-influencer has more than a million. Finally, 60% of brands focus on influencer strategies when increasing investments in social commerce.

With the growing relevance of digital influencers in peer-to-peer relationships and the potential adverse effects associated with idealised body representations, there are ethical implications about their use in influencer marketing that need to be investigated in the future (Kim & Wang, 2023). As brands and businesses optimise social spaces and networks, consumers must look beyond the interests and commitments of influencers, because ethical influencers do not accept sponsorship in order to preserve their legitimacy (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Schouten et al., 2020). The right path for digital influencers to satisfy consumer needs is by transforming them into ethical influencers.

KEYWORDS: Ethical influencers, digital influencers, social media, ethical consumption, moral responsibility.

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