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INFLUENCER MARKETING – PERSUASION OF THE FOLLOWERS

Review Article

Keywords
Advertising;
Influencer marketing;
Personal branding;
Persuasion;

JEL Classification
M31; M37

Abstract

The mechanism by which influencer marketing has emerged as a concept is far from new. In the world of advertising, where almost every minute the people are faced with an advertisement, people are becoming more immune to the traditional promotions. Influencer marketing is an excellent alternative for this issue, where the entities formulate and publish the message themselves. Due to the fact that opinion leaders may appear accessible in the eyes of followers, associating a brand with positively evaluated opinion leaders results a positive attitude toward the brand. There are factors which establish a fruitful cooperation between the parties, but they are hard to recognise, and even the researchers have different standpoint, for example with the number of the followers. However, a fallible image, the brand-influencer fit, attractiveness can surely strengthen the effectiveness. And surprisingly it does not necessarily lead to a negative perception of the opinion leader if followers recognize that their post contains advertisement.

INTRODUCTION

People like to believe that the tools and methods they use today are as modern as possible and they have only improved in everything compared to the past centuries. The same is true in the field of marketing, it is prefered to refer to the current concept or toolbox as „new, modern, advanced, up-to-date". However, this is by no means so black or white, as the story of Adam and Eve presents, where the people "fell into sin" because of persuasion, it can be easily recognized that word-of-mouth marketing is far from being the achievement of present times. The art of influencing has enjoyed unbroken success ever since, and stepping a bit in time to 2013, when superstar Beyoncé announced a new release - in an instagram post with a simple "Surprise" title and that post generated 800,000 copies sold in three days - it can be realized that the effect does not disappear now. And thanks to WOM (word of mouth), anyone can gain influential power. And all this is only exacerbated by the power of the internet and social media. As a result of skepticism about traditional marketing, it is becoming more and more common for consumers to turn to family, friends, co-workers, or strangers for advice, or to just enter their questions to a search engine and read online reviews (Weiss, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

As early as 2013, every fourth dollar spent on advertising was spent on digital advertising around the world, and yet: online content generated by brands is far from proving to be the most reliable investment. In the 1940s, there was a tendency for advertisements featuring celebrities to be considered the most enjoyable by consumers (Rudolph, 1947). Moreover, research on advertisements using opinion leaders and celebrities is not new in the literature (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; McCracken, 1989), as consumer decisions have long been strongly influenced by well - known individuals. In contrast, more than 84% of millennials and 70% of Baby Boomers reported being more influenced by user-generated content (e.g., online consumer reviews or content shared by influencers) in their purchases (Lithium, 2014). Nielsen's 2013 survey also showed that WOM is perceived by consumers as the most reliable source of information and they are most likely to act because of it (Nielsen, 2013). However, the emergence of social media has brought a paradigm shift in marketing communications, as consumers can no longer only interact with brands and other consumers, but also produce and distribute their own user generated content (UGC) (Christodoulides, 2009). Moreover, thanks to this, they can gain popularity and followers in the blink of an eye today. As visual UGC transcends cultural and linguistic differences as well, a platform like Instagram has further revolutionized this phenomenon.

However, influencer marketing is significantly different from traditional advertising and from WOM as well. On the one hand, this is already reflected in the motivation itself, since while traditional advertising can have several purposes, influencers must also remain loyal to their followers. On the other hand, in such advertisements, the opinion leader formulates and publishes the message, not the company. At the same time, this "tool" is also different from pure organic WOM, as the shared content and recommendations are sponsored by a given company.

Those content producers are called influencers, who build a solid following by blogging, vlogging, or just sharing short text content and images on various social media platforms. In this way, they give insight into their daily lives, share their experiences (Héder & Dajnoki, 2019) and opinions. Through various collaborations (eg giving a product for testing, organizing an event for opinion leaders, or just paying them for shared content), brands want to present their product and company (Héder, Szabó and Dajnoki, 2018; Nagy, Molnár and Szikszai-Németh, 2018), in a positive way to consumers. This is a practice that can be defined as influencer marketing (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). According to Abidin (2016), unlike celebrities, opinion leaders may appear accessible and credible in the eyes of followers because they allow insight into their daily lives, making it easier for people to identify with them Schemer, Matthes, Wirth and Textor (2008) found that associating a brand with positively evaluated opinion leaders results a positive attitude toward the brand. On the other hand, brands need to be careful during the selection process and make sure that the influencer has the right qualities, as this is the only way for the right associations to appear in the minds of consumers later on.

The research of Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack and Zahid (2018) starts from the suggestion that followers prefer to see their partner in the opinion leader they can trust, so it is especially worthwhile for brands to ally with them. This is because they can reach the followers of a particular influencer and take advantage of their close connection with their audience, which can increase the sales of the advertised product. Following this line of reasoning, they examined how the opinion leaders' influence is enhanced by their expertise, reliability, lovability, resemblance, and the fact that how well their audience knows them. The researchers found that reliability directly affects persuasiveness and

even reinforces perceptions of the other four characteristics.

However, the power of influencers rests on two seemingly opposite factors: connection and desire, namely the followers should be able to experience the particular life situations of the opinion leader, while also should be „longing" for the milieu he or she presents. Desire can develop in their audience primarily due to the expertise of the influencer. Based on Schaefer's (2012) theory, for example, the number of followers and economic and social rewards also serve as evidence of authority and competence. The appearances of the given opinion leader and the appearance of different brands in the posts confirm their status and testify to their taste and knowledge. If this taste is welcomed by their followers, it will only further increase the judgment of their expertise and ultimately the number of their followers. This kind of positive feedback loop over time will result in influencers being able to present a lifestyle that is no longer available to the average consumer. At the same time, however, they become even more experts in the field in the eyes of the followers. At the end of such a process, for example in the field of fashion, influencers can precieved as designers or magazine editors. In his research, Schaefer (2012) calls this "social evidence", when an ordinary consumer can become an expert in a given field due to certain characteristics.

On the other hand, "connection" is part of the power of influencers, based on the fact that they are also thought of as "ordinary consumers" at the same time. This trait further reinforces the sense of parasocial attachment, lovability, and perceived similarity in the eyes of followers. Thanks to the sharing of personal content, their audience can be informed about their lives to deeper levels. By being able to keep track of the everyday lives of opinion leaders, their followers can feel closer to them and also find them more trustworthy. Or, thanks to the sharing of simple, everyday moments, followers precieve them even more like themselves. As a result, they are more easily persuaded, for example to buy (Martensen et al., 2018).

An interesting finding in this regard was made by Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull and Howe-Walsh (2018), who examined the branding of female entrepreneurs. Their research revealed that the formation of a fallible image only makes the influencer even more authentic in the eyes of the followers, as this makes them feel closer to themselves. This kind of "brand building," meaning that one of their weaker sides is shown, encourages the audience to interact even more, thus building greater commitment.

De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017), and Ki and Kim (2019) also suggest, that brands should not start with a look at the number of the followers when searching for an influencer to work with, but rather at their shared content, because popularity not necessarily affects their impact on their followers. Lanz, Goldenberg, Shapira and Stahl (2019) were also able to confirm the standpoint of the researchers when they showed that it is especially worthwhile to establish cooperation with influencers with a smaller follower base in the case of emerging musicians. Their research looked at the return on unpaid appearances, where it was proven that ads with larger opinion leaders do not achieve the desired effect, they are more risky than having a cooperation with musicians with a smaller but more targeted audience.

In contrast, according to Martensen et al. (2018), it is worth starting from the number of followers when looking for the right influencer to advertise the products, as opinion leaders with a small number of followers can provide less access to partners. Next, it is worth looking at which influencer resemles most closely the target group. Third, how well that person could authentically integrate the ads into his or her feed and represent the brand.

Stubb, Nyström and Colliander (2019) also drew attention to the phenomenon that the recognition of sponsorship in posts increases commitment to opinion leaders. In the eyes of the followers, they thus seem authentic and honest, thanks to which they are also more positive about the advertisements that appear on their feed. Moreover, a broader rationale for the background of monetary compensation may even exacerbate this effect. Also, all of this is worth it for brands as well, as if they increase the perceived credibility of the opinion leader, sponsored content can also be more effective. It is even more positive if the brand itself reveals paid collaboration instead of the influencer. People who only follow the brand and not the opinion leader also attributed more credibility to the influencer when they saw the label of the sponsored content at the brand's posts.

De Jans, Cauberghe and Hudders (2018) also concluded that it does not necessarily lead to a negative perception of the opinion leader if followers recognize that their post contains advertisement. Moreover, young people (adolescents aged 11-14) lack critical reflection even after ad recognition, the reflection which would raise questions in them about the advertisement. However, the researchers found that if a vlog states in the form of a statement that it contained advertising, it can negatively affect the perception of the influencer among young people. As a result, they feel that the decision is getting out of their hands and they want to influence them in a targeted way. On the other hand, if the goals are properly communicated, the negative impact of advertising intentions can be reduced, and even young people can count them as a sign of honesty.

Torres, Augusto and Matos (2019) examined the issue from another aspect and why a brand-influencer collaboration is effective. After processing the literature on the influencing power of celebrities and comparing it to meaning transfer theory, they tested their own ideas that the two defining moments in the process are the appeal of opinion leader and brand-influencer fit. It was found that the latter characteristic has a significantly greater effect on followers' attitudes. However, interestingly, the attractiveness of the opinion leaders also influences the perceived fit, making it easier for "fans" to match a particular influencer with any brand because of their bias. Based on these, it can be said that both factors prove to be key in the process and influence the attitudes towards advertising, and thus the attitude towards the brand and the intention to buy.

Kapitan and Silvera (2016) suggest for the brands to choose the interface where they want to advertise to determine exactly to whom they want to sell their product. Furthermore, advertisements should be designed to steer consumers towards the desired mindset. A practical example is that an expensive speaker should be advertised at a platform favored by lovers of sound systems, while potential buyers of fashionable but underdeveloped smartphones should be encouraged to think superficially. The importance of the source and the message itself was also emphasized. For example, when advertising a shampoo, it is worth choosing an attractive person, who, however, does not need to be a recognized as a hair expert at all. However, in case of promoting a medication as the treatment of diabetes, convincing reasons are extremely important, while, for example, pleasant background music may not be needed for advertising.

SUMMARY

The mechanism by which influencer marketing has emerged as a concept is far from new. After all, who hasn't heard of word of mouth (WOM), or even the online version of it, eWOM. In the world of advertising, where almost every minute the people are faced with an advertisement on the streets, on TV, or even scrolling the phone, people are becoming more and more immune to the traditional promotions created by brands. They consciously avoid such interfaces, pay for ad-free content, or some people install ad-blocking softwares. The other trend, which has also been present in everyday life for a long time, is that people like to make decisions based on authentic information obtained from their peers. It started with visiting certain places on the recommendation of friends and family, or just choosing a particular service, and now it is there that before making any purchase decision, consumers first enter their

question into an online search engine. What they find is none other than the opinions and ratings of others about the product. And the world of social media has allowed the celebrities or the average ordinary consumers, to have their say, share their experiences about a place, a product, or a service. Having the opportunity for consumers to follow each other, and share their own content, a brand's reputation can grow even by relying solely on the power of social media.

Due to the fact that consumer decisions have long been strongly influenced by well - known individuals, research on advertisements using opinion leaders and celebrities is not new in the literature (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; McCracken, 1989). In contrast, more than 84% of millennials and 70% of Baby Boomers reported being more influenced by user-generated content (e.g., online consumer reviews or content shared by influencers) in their purchases (Lithium, 2014). Nielsen's 2013 survey also showed that WOM is perceived by consumers as the most reliable source of information and they are most likely to act because of it (Nielsen, 2013).

According to Abidin (2016) also, unlike celebrities, opinion leaders may appear accessible in the eyes of followers. Schemer et al. (2008) found that associating a brand with positively evaluated opinion leaders results a positive attitude toward the brand. Martensen et al. (2018) also strengthens that followers prefer to see their partner in the opinion leader they can trust, so it is especially worthwhile for brands to ally with them. However, the power of influencers rests on two seemingly opposite factors: connection and desire, namely the followers should be able to experience the particular life situations of the opinion leader, while also should be „longing" for the milieu he or she presents (Schaefer, 2012). Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2018) for example revealed that the formation of a fallible image of female entrepreneurs only makes the influencer even more authentic in the eyes of the followers.

But De Veirman et al. (2017) and Ki and Kim (2019) also suggest, that brands should not start with a look at the number of the followers when searching for an influencer to work with, but rather at their shared content, because popularity not necessarily affects their impact on their followers. Martensen et al. (2018), says otherwise, as opinion leaders with a small number of followers can provide less access to partners.

Stubb et al. (2019) drew attention to the phenomenon that the recognition of sponsorship in posts increases commitment to opinion leaders. De Jans et al. (2018) also concluded that it does not necessarily lead to a negative perception of the opinion leader if followers recognize that their post contains advertisement, if the goals are properly communicated.

Torres et al. (2019) examined the issue from another aspect and why a brand-influencer collaboration is effective. It was found that the brand-influencer fit has a significantly greater effect on followers' attitudes, than the influencers' appeal. However, interestingly, the attractiveness of the opinion leaders also influences the perceived fit, making it easier for "fans" to match a particular influencer with any brand because of their bias. Kapitan and Silvera (2016) suggest that the brands should choose the interface where they want to advertise to determine exactly to whom they want to sell their product. Furthermore, advertisements should be designed to steer consumers towards the desired mindset.

The results of the researchers also show that when building a marketing strategy, it is almost inevitable for decision makers to think about with whom it would be worthwhile to advertise their goods. However, as the current form of influencer marketing itself is relatively new, there is not yet a well-established and good practice on the basis of which the influencers can be selected and with whom the brand can expect a return on cooperation. Nor are there any common agreements on the nature of the contracts with the influencers themselves, and there are even those who are completely unaware of what compensation they can expect when cooperating with brands. This is why further research would be helpful for brands, influencers and, last but not least, researchers by creating a model / index that would identify the right influencers and make their influential power measurable. This would be forward-looking in terms of expanding the literature and practical usefulness.

Acknowledgements

Biographical sketch

Ketrin Szikszai-Németh is an economist in International Business (BSc) and in Management and Leadership (MSc). She graduated at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. She is a PhD student at Károly Ihrig Doctoral School of Management and Business, University of Debrecen, Hungary. Her main research topics are self- and personal branding and influencer marketing. As a PhD student she teaches Media Management. She has several publications in her research area both in English and Hungarian and she also participates in domestic and international conferences. She has been awarded with the New National Excellence Program Grant in the academic year of 2019/2020.

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