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SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

MASTER'S THESIS

**THE DARK SIDE OF THE INFLUENCER
MARKETING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE
BRAND**

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AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

POEM – Paid, owned and earned media

PESO – Paid, earned, shared, owned media

1 INTRODUCTION

Our lives have been socially and digitally upgraded through the last decades. Each daily task we have can be accomplished online virtually, starting from reading the news, requesting a taxi, ordering food from restaurants or just groceries from the market in contrast to the offline world. We are witnessing an extensive spin as the loss of interest in printed media and television is increasing, while the popularity is falling for new platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime (Stubb et al., 2019). As Kastenholz (2021) once said, we are now living in a new epoch of democratic media utilisation where consumers choose what they listen to and who they trust. Nowadays, the daily struggle of marketers despite utilising all the new available tools and incorporating social media in their campaigns, is to be spotted by the ever-distracted consumer (Kastenholz, 2021).

Brand awareness can be explained as the effect of the perceptive domain, where the client is capable of distinguishing the brand from memory because of the publicity (Cianfrone, 2018). This is important as it needs to grow its presence in the minds of the consumers. It has been proven that brand awareness is measured by brand recognition or brand recall (Dotson et al., 2017). If at the moment of purchase, from the numerous brands, the client is searching for a particular brand, suggests to another person the brand, or comments positively about it, it means that the brand has done a good job enhancing itself between their audience.

Another fight that marketers are wrestling with is the ad blockers. Studies are showing how ad blockers challenge the specific way of working of the websites and how their solution is helping the consumers to skip online advertisements (Shiller et al., 2018). Overall, in the last decade, as the consumer's focus is dragged by numerous screens begging for attention, brands are part of a big challenge to leap forward and be perceived (Dabić et al., 2023).

Following the development of the digital world, a brand-new shape of marketing has appeared. Influencer marketing alludes to a brand's procedure of recognizing and initiating people who have a big impact on a specific target audience, to create an individual part of a project in the vicinity of expanded reach, selling, or engagement (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Nowadays, one of the most famous ways of selling online which is breaking boundaries on the route, is influencer marketing. As an influencer, besides other things, these individuals who use their social media profiles are showing new products through entertaining content so they can motivate their followers to expand their interactivity with their accounts and users' interest in the promoted products (Belanche et al., 2020). The end clients engage with influencers of their own free will, however, they are unaware that simultaneously, they are subjected to marketing that depends on parasocial relationships between the consumer and the influencer. Parasocial relationships are explained as long-term results that progress during media utilization and after the initial consumption (Brown, 2015). It is slowly becoming unbelievable to

stick out amidst the mass of advertisers, which is why a significant number are becoming influencers (Newman, 2015). We are exposed daily to influencer marketing due to digitalization, whether we are aware of it or not. Influencer marketing is an interesting phenomenon and a very dominant and persuasive instrument to utilize when advertising any service or product (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018).

Influencer marketing in the last few years, has become one of the biggest keywords when discussing new methods to both promote and vending products and services in the online world. According to the Google Trend report (2019), it is known that from 2017 “influencer marketing” had a swift elevation in searched words. Forbes magazine (2018) considers influencer marketing as one of the twelve biggest trends for businesses to take advantage of in the future, and the majority of marketers who have used influencer marketing when promoting products claim it to be effective. Nevertheless, they can get the recognition and exposure they wish in the short term, with the use of a popular influencer, however, many companies are oblivious to the devastating effect these individuals can have in the long term. Influencers can be considered a double-sided sword that can turn around at any time and provoke serious injury to the business’s image.

Each brand needs to be conscious of the probable reputational and lawful threats, when an influencer’s action goes contrary to the values of the cooperating brand (Backaler, 2018). According to Backaler (2018), there is a dark side of influencer marketing and there should be sets of serious pre-checks before deciding on which influencer a company will give its trust and a new campaign. Destructive acts start with personal scandals, inappropriate actions, possibly politically sensitive statements, all the way to bigger issues like accidental racism acts. This is why the purpose of this search is to identify the main negative aspects of influencer marketing, with an emphasis on the brand. The empirical and theoretical research at the end, will show if the end users are aware of this dark side and how it affects the brand who works with the influencers. After it is shown that there can be indeed a negative impact on the brand, the outcome will display, if the brand itself knows how to present a smart defence strategy in practice. The focal research question is to what extent are companies aware of the negative side of influencer marketing and their impact on the brand, as well as how the consumers see the negative side, together with the media and the partners.

The first theoretical chapter of the thesis will start with some historical and written facts from the literature where it will be explained briefly how the influencer trend has started, all through the importance of word of mouth, the different types of influencers and how they present their channels to the audience. The main focus will be on the negative side, showing the competitive risks, the extreme importance of the content – whether it is sponsored or not, the brand equity and the legal side of it. The purpose of this study is to identify the perception of the negative sides of influencer marketing from the perspective of influencers, brands, and social media users. Besides all the literature background, the primary data consists of interviews with the main actors – three influencers, the

individuals who are listed as the victims afterwards – three brands’ representatives, and five daily consumers of social media. Through the interviews with a set of different stakeholders, the findings will be given from a diverse perspective. The concluding chapter will provide a critical review of the findings.

2 INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing has been the crucial method for advertising in the last decade because is impacting consumers’ brand perception and their purchase decisions. The word “influence” can be generally described as the ability to impact an individual, object, or any course of events (Litterio et al., 2017). Brown and Hayes (2008, p.50) define an influencer as “a third party who significantly shapes the consumer’s purchasing decision but may ever be accountable for it.” Influencers are individuals who have the power to determine the buying conclusions of others because of their authority, skills, rank, or relationship (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). In other words, social influencers are everyday people who influence consumers into their buying making purchasing determination. Each person is suitable to become an influencer, making an impact on people’s decisions to buy the preferred brand (Spears & Singh, 2004).

The faith that we place in people we know and trust is another reason why influencer marketing has such an impact on our purchasing decisions. In general, people are more trusting in their own and their friends' experiences than they are of statistical proof (Baccarella et al., 2018). However, Edelman's trust barometer (2018) shows an all-time low for trust in "persons like yourself" when they provide us with information about firms (Edelman, 2018). For reference, Edelman’s barometer in 2023, states that personal and societal threats have led to more discerning consumers. Influencer marketing is likely to be the cause of such shifts.

When an influencer promotes a brand without having any contact with the firm, it is called an earned collaboration. Companies that sponsor or pay influencers to promote their products and services are considered paid, as opposed to unpaid (Gupta, 2006). Even though influencers frequently declare that they prioritize the brand's values over financial compensation in influencer marketing, it appears that they are primarily motivated by monetary compensation (Weinswig, 2016).

All companies are relying on their reputation which should be monitored as it is one of the most important merits for future success on the market. Being involved in actions which will damage their status can affect the company’s funds, especially now that everybody can express their opinion online and has an army of trusting individuals behind them.

Since influencers have begun to recognize their real value, their rates have climbed sharply. According to Holt, (2002), this is the first clue that this strategy is beginning to

be abused, and as a result, the effects of raising the brand to a higher level and advertising the product/service proficiently will begin to diminish (Holt, 2002). Since the audience now knows that online peers may collaborate with firms, they believe that influencer marketing has played a large role in this drop.

2.1 History and definition of Influencer Marketing

Influencers appeared far before the start of cyberspace. Some unauthorized facts state influencer marketing has shown in modern life since 1930, however essentially, if we go back to the Roman empire, there were the gladiators who were recommending products like olive oil and wine, which in fact can be named as the first-ever influencers who existed. Surely people have seriously thought about business and brands since that time and tried to reach their target consumers. The paintings on the Roman walls can be compared to the sponsored ads of today's reality. Nowadays, collaborations between the influencer and the brand are very common. There is also a fairly known first collaboration in 1765, when a British entrepreneur made a tea seat for Queen Charlotte, becoming a gigantic thing back in that time. After the noble approval, his income rapidly increased, and Wedgwood became the most important name for fine serveware among all the social circles. Now in 2025, the brand is still well known as the finest English bone fine china. One of the best marketing players and a well-known brand like Coca-Cola made up a great advertisement in 1932, with Santa Claus as the main star, which drove the sales of the beverage way up high. Today, the portrait of this Santa is considered a fictional influencer. Another phase that started and is still ongoing, is the one with celebrity endorsements. Starting from Coco Chanel in 1910, as the first fashion influencer, coming to 2025 reality stars like Kim Kardashian are guiding beauty and style trends.

Despite all the historical moments happening in the meantime, the word influencer itself has been in the lexicon for a decade, and in the official English dictionary only for the last 6 years. The world needed quite some time to recognize and explain this new way of marketing in the past.

If brands want to construct a valuable and stable relationship with their consumers, most marketers are using influencers. There are also celebrities used for many campaigns instead of influencers, as celebrities are described as individuals who have become significantly recognizable thanks to the mass media channels (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018 p. 92).

The network theory can be used to understand the impact of influencer marketing. According to this theory, individuals in the world are connected by relationships with each other, creating links (Dijk, 2012). Traditional marketing channels are no longer able to reach us since the internet has grown on such a large scale. As people have limited attention spans, it is impossible to consume all the information that is out there. Brands employ influencers to reach new clusters of potential consumers that are outside of their

clusters, therefore expanding their consumer base (Chou, 2020). A company's use of influencer marketing allows it to contact more people with whom its intermediaries have more personal connections (Verhoef, 2009).

There are many definitions, but one of the broad ones is from Brown & Hayes (2008) who understand influencer marketing, as a type of action in which an external person is affecting the consumer's purchase options. The individuals, called influencers, can be athletes, chefs, artists or just any occupation in general, just so they have their online community which will be followed by a significant number of audiences. The form in which the content is presented can be a picture, reel, video, vlog etc.

Influencer marketing is the process through which brands and products seek out and use influencers who can help them reach their target audience (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Influencers are individuals with significant followers on social media who are paid by the brands to promote the products via free tryouts, trips and/or cash payments per promotional post (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). Brown and Hayes (2008) defined influencer marketing as the identification and use of important persons who hold influence over potential consumers of a brand or product to aid in the marketing operations of the brand. Individuals with large social circles have the potential to influence the purchasing decisions of others. Increased revenue and consumer retention are seen as a result of this specific marketing strategy (Kumar et al., 2010). In addition, influencers have proven to be quite effective in terms of sales, retention, and consumer satisfaction and there appears to be a strong financial incentive for sponsored influencer marketing (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018).

2.2 Types and Characteristics of Influencers

As the trend of influencer marketing is uprising, it is becoming a standard selection for advertising of the brands' services or products (Gürkaynak et al., 2018). The most useful platforms that are exploited by the influencers are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). The situation remains the same up until 2023 whereas Facebook and Instagram seem to compete between themselves being in the top two most used platforms worldwide.

Famous people like movie stars, music performers, Michelin chefs and many more so-called celebrities do fall into the category of influencers, nonetheless, not all influencers fall into the category of celebrities (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). If we go back to an old classification by Friedman et al. (1976) there are four general categories of influencers that are used in endorsement advertising: celebrities, typical consumers, professional experts and company presidents (Friedman et al., 1976, p. 22). These categories are considered to be valid still today, however, the influencers can be an additional group between the celebrities and typical consumers.

If we categorize the influencers by numbers, the range goes from thousands to hundreds of millions of followers. As suggested, there are four groups of influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020):

- Nano-influencers (10.000 or less)
- Micro-influencers (10.000 -100.000 followers)
- Macro-influencers (100.000 – 1 million)
- Mega-influencers (more than 1 million)

As nano-influencers own fewer followers, as newcomers, they need to settle for unpaid cooperation in exchange for publicity and social network opportunities (Hudders et al., 2021). The micro-influencers are significantly more efficient when the brand is interested in a niche audience. That is happening as a result of the fact that the audience prefers the influencers sharing their honest critiques and opinions on the product that they use, instead of a celebrity who is paid to promote the product. Influencers post daily their lives online, and they show their interest, answer comments on their posts, and interact with their followers, therefore they are more emotionally connected to the audience which makes them very relatable to the audience. They are also the most cost-effective group to approach. The larger the number does not mean the better for the brand, as it might give a false sign for the campaign. This is a common fault that marketers make. In comparison, brands have a precise budget for their campaigns, so for example in the beauty field, it is either one celebrity like Jennifer Lopez or several influencers who are significantly more targeted beauty sector in this case. The brand might now reach as many consumers as using a superstar like Lopez but could reach the exact audience that is prospective to purchase the merchandise.

Some believe that influencers are more dominant, reliable and relevant than well-known superstar figures in the young community (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). On the other side, we have the other group of brands that prefer to argue that influencer marketing is not doing the work as well as the traditional celebrities. Influencer marketing and celebrity validation are very comparable and can intersect, but they have essential distinctions.

If we look at the influencer's attributes, there are four classified: activeness, clout, talkativeness (of the receiver) and like-mindedness. Activeness is specified as how much the influencer is active or in other words how much he communicates and spreads the message. Clout is the influencer's power or the number of followers. Talkativeness refers to the power of the audience, meaning how much they propagate the data that the influencer is spreading (retweet, tag, share). Lastly, like-mindedness is considered the field of matching interests and resemblances between the influencers and their followers (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018).

2.3 Paid, Owned and Earned Media Channels

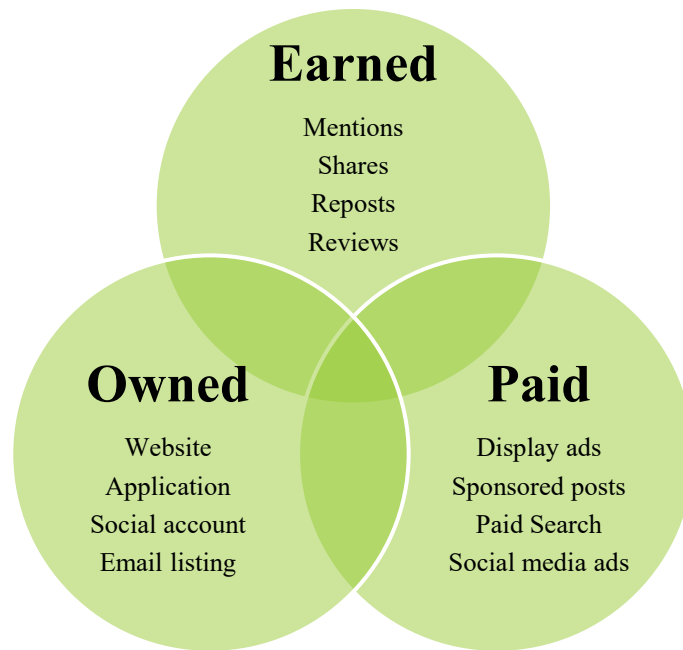
The evolution of the Internet is followed by updates in the brand communication world. As the conventional way of marketing and information sharing is going out of style, since it is a one-way relationship where the end-users are very passive, digitalization is engaging the consumers to be as loud as possible. The affiliation between the company's advertising forces and its election of media is linked with the longstanding selling expansion (Jayson et al., 2018). The main goal of social media is making campaigns or movements to appeal to followers while at the same time inspiring contribution and commitment (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). It is a way of relating with cyber audiences by using the platforms to construct brand appearance and raise traffic and sales. Furthermore, that is why the influencers need to use media channels which can be categorized as paid, owned, or earned models (abbrev. POEM).

Paid media is a type of funding to advertise on platforms, encouraging brand awareness and inspiring the potential audience from other online platforms where they were not populated earlier (Lovett & Staelin, 2016). Some practical examples of paid media are display ads, sponsored posts, to show up higher in the search bar etc. Paid media do give more spotlight while having a bigger effect on expenditure (Lovett & Staelin, 2016). As it is believed to be a significant instrument of the advertising tactic (Corcoran, 2009), it still does need an extensive budget to accomplish it.

Owned media are all the platforms that the company has leverage and control over (Wan, 2019). It can be a website, application, social account or email listing. It is a media that has only information that is instructed by the brand (Macnamara et al., 2016). Typically, it has narrative information concerning services or products that the consumers are interested in (Goh et al., 2013).

Earned media is the motion when a third party shares the company's profile, brand or service so the company receives a new audience via it (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). The practical cases are simple: reposting, recommending, and reviewing on popular channels like Google or Yelp. This is a pure form of media channel as it gives a chance to reflect on the work that is done and gives organic shares. The main difference between paid and earned media is that for the paid the company shapes the consumer's conduct directly, while earned media is given by the audience without even looking for it from third parties like outreach, word-of-mouth and web (Stephen & Galak, 2012). The three types of media channels are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Types of Media Channels POEM

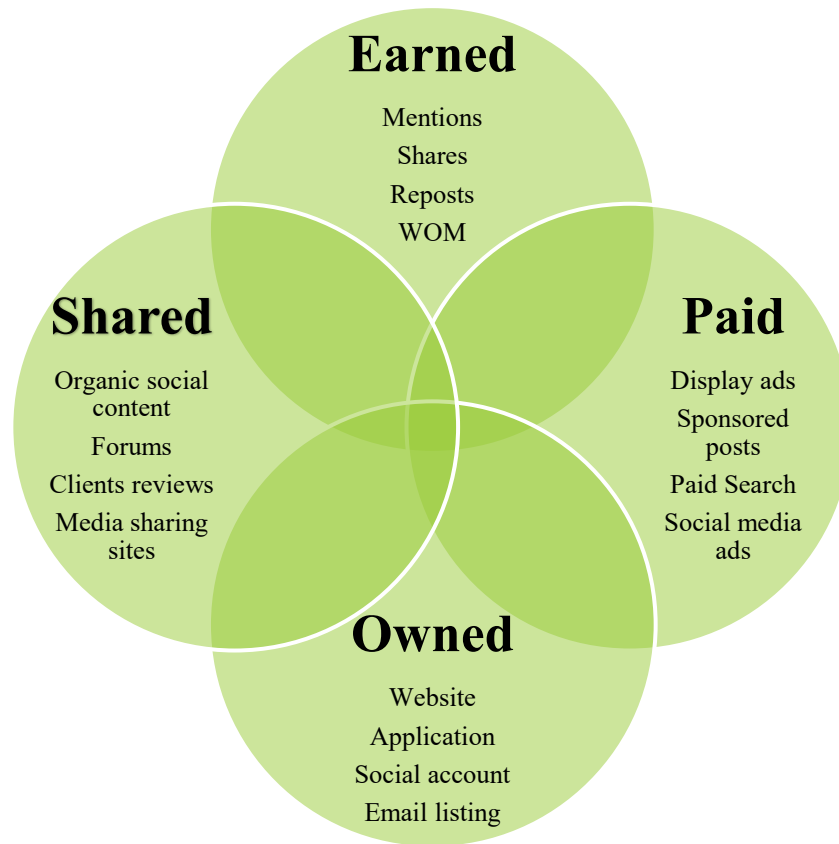


Source: Own work.

There has been an ongoing battle through the years between marketers, about which is more valuable and more important to work on, owned or earned media. As per a study by Distaso and Brown (2015), the best companies in the world put more determination into owned media and they believe their high demand and sales come from it (Distaso & Brown, 2015). Owned media is believed to be helping the most in obtaining higher sales (Srinivasan, 2016). As a positive effect of the owned media, they win more followers and expand their earned media. Hence, in a way, they cannot go one without another and are very tightly connected. With the utilization of owned media, the company can present as a lead in the field and in that way grow its status (Lovett & Staelin, 2016). As opposed to owned media, in earned media the brand does not have as much control and the consumers are the channel speaking for themselves (Florès, 2014). However, with the earned media the company creates a positive brand outlook (Mattke et al., 2019).

Lastly, the new culture has developed a new media, called shared media, which is unlocked for all the close community like friends, family, loyal followers, and subscribers to like, comment, or interact in any way via social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube etc. (Macnamara et al., 2016). This movement made the strategy from Lieb et al. (2012) POEM (paid-owned-earned model) to be transformed into PESO model (paid-earned-shared-owned model) (Dietrich, 2014). Figure 2 illustrates the PESO model.

Figure 2: PESO Model



Source: Own work.

2.4 Importance of Word of Mouth

As Backaler (2018) testifies, the primary target that makes influencer marketing successful is the word-of-mouth references from trusted peers. The consumer's commitment is growing together with the user-generated content as it is a channel that permits users to connect with the brand (Eslami et al., 2022). Moreover, together with the boosted attention to user-generated content, the attention for electronic word-of-mouth comes into the spotlight (Yoo et al., 2013). Electronic word-of-mouth refers to some online declaration (no matter positive or negative), declared by a consumer concerning the brand which is accessible to many people worldwide (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Traditional word-of-mouth is limited with time, space and connections and as

such, is not as effective as before. As opposed to it, the electronic one has progressed a lot and can get to a much bigger audience (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Electronic word-of-mouth gives another side of the product or service which is not presented in the commercials, which develops the audience's opinion of that product or service (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018). The companies always keep encouraging their audience to share their feedback, especially when positive. Many companies even give some sort of contribution to the consumer, in order to receive online feedback on their brand. With electronic word-of-mouth, the consumers receive personal opinions and experiences on the brand, which helps them decide how to proceed with the order. It is a known fact that before purchasing an item or service, consumers go online and check all sources before making the final verdict, so the brand's image and the eWOM is a key step (Krishnamurthy & Kumar, 2018).

The eWOM can be a downside for the company as well. Obstructive estimation can cause a deficit of new and already established clients (Yoo et al., 2013). The worst thing for companies and their marketing campaign teams is that they cannot manipulate eWOM, but they can respect the feedback and work on internal improvements to the brand. Nonetheless, eWOM is capable of destroying the product's appearance on the market (Dalman et al., 2020). In situations where a brand is a part of harmful eWOM, it is very important how the brand will react to it, as it might turn out to be a positive case. Correct behaviour in a certain negative situation should relieve the disappointment of the client and increase the satisfaction of the brand (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Following the fact that eWOM cannot be manipulated, brands try to find their solution in people who can easily convince and have an effect on the audience – the influencers (Yoo et al., 2013).

As famous people pay attention to a brand, influencers promote eWOM as an advertising tool, utilizing individuals who are trusted by their audience (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2012). In other words, influencer advertising creates WOM by exhausting individuals who are reliable on social platforms (Geppert, 2020). The bigger the number of followers is, the better the reach of the audience becomes, which as a result gives more leverage to the power of the WOM (Agam, 2017). The final result is, that online reviews are trusted more than the brand's commercials (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019).

2.5 Cooperation of Brands and Influencers

Nowadays it is a practice that the brand works together with influencers in order to advertise their products or services on their social media channels (Belanche et al, 2021). As the trend advisers of the time, influencers are often chosen to be the only people who will represent the brand (Sokolova & Ket, 2020). The brands choose to collaborate with the influencers as they are witnessing the fact that they get higher sales and more attention from the consumers in this way. The main challenge for each company is to identify which is the right influencer who will make the needed impact on their consumers and convince them to buy the company's offering (Ewers, 2017). Each influencer has a devoted group

of followers with which they share their common interests. Each company's audience will be differentiated for each brand. It is essential to know that influencers are not simply marketing kits, but more relationship assets to be used for collaboration which will result in achieving the marketing objectives.

Depending on the brand's target audience, it is important to choose the influencer wisely, as the consumers will be triggered in this way (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). With these collaborations, the consumers no matter whether it is a paid collaboration or not, they listen to their favourite influencers, admire their style, value their opinions, and go after their recommendations (Rakuten, 2019). Following the trends of advertising, the influencers' prices have been increasing over the years, and the companies are obliged to increase their budgets for hiring them as well. As the campaign managers now accept influencer marketing as a decision that surely leads to success, the prices for using them go up to 8 billion dollars (Schomer, 2019). Nowadays, the number is just rising and it is predicted to go up to 24 billion dollars by the end of 2024 as per Influencer Marketing Hub (2024). All these highlights reflect the significance of the effective connection between influencers and brands.

Product placement increases the awareness and the audience's knowledge about the product features and influences certainly on the buyer's intention (D'Astous & Chartier, 2000). The term product placement is defined by d'Astous & Chartier (2000) as a correlation of a product, a brand name or the name of the company in a film or a TV program for promotional intentions. It is the purposeful combination of commercial content into noncommercial settings, that is, a product plug generated via the merge of advertising and entertainment (Ginosar & Levi-Faur, 2010). When a brand and an influencer collaborate with each other, that ends up in transparent advertisement from the influencers which can be presented to the consumers in many forms, like video, post or reel. The focus is on the video, post or reel must be the product or service itself. When collaborating with specific brands, the content that the influencer makes can be in their typical style, but the production and sharing of it is managed by the brand (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Efficient product placement is a result of the thoughtful incorporation of advertising content with non-advertising surroundings (Woods, 2016). Usually, the influencers present or use the products and give out their experiences with opinions on it. Some make a tutorial or unbox the items that they receive, some choose different kinds of advertising. This is a concept known as seeding content, which means the spontaneous incorporation of brand-related content into the feed in a discreet way. Consequently, product-related content should be shown to the audience in intelligent, organic and unobtrusive ways (Ginosar & Levi-Faur, 2010) in order to avoid negative connotations of the products or services. Lately, it is often seen that very similar content presented by few influencers referred to the same product, which shows that the brands have specifically ordered that type of content (Kadekova, 2018). This way it has a negative outcome not only to the brand, but also to the influencer for the supposed imitation. These companies are known as pushy and too presumptuous which makes them present the

brand in a negative light and bring down the sales intention of the client (Kadekova, 2018).

When influencers are cooperating with companies, on their content (especially when they are under a contract), they need to mark it as sponsored (Neal, 2017). For the audience, it is often difficult to differentiate between sponsored or not, as influencers are omitting the ad signature. To avoid the misleading practices of this marketing, there should be a disclosure that realistically explains the advertising nature of the idea that will demonstrate to the consumers that the content is an ad (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2012). This kind of disclosure can be platform-based or text-based. The first one is supported by the platform as a mechanism like on Instagram when shown as: paid partnership with Instagram. The textual one is inserted manually as specific hashtags seen as: #ad, #sponsored, #sp etc. (Neal, 2017). All of these can have recommendations and reviews on how the product or the service functions, as long as it is specified that it is an advertisement. Although there are rumours that consumers do not like sponsored posts, the objectivity of their words counts, therefore it contributes credibility to it (Dreifaldt & Drennan, 2019). Even though the paid content brings out disbelief in the consumers, if the influencers explain and give an honest evaluation of the product, the buyers' intent of the client turns positive (Dreifaldt & Drennan, 2019).

As per Carlton (Carlton, 2018), there are four general consequences (for the company) when a company involves influencers in their brand's development:

- Authenticity (if the company does not use a suitable person, the campaign might be understood as bogus or superficial)
- Relevance (if there was not a good background check on the influencer and the whole campaign was hurried, then it is difficult to say if it will reach the intended consumers)
- Engagement (depends on the exposure of the influencer, if it is negative, it can provoke a brand counterblast)
- Value (influencer's commitment will generate a key performance, however, the success cannot be certain)

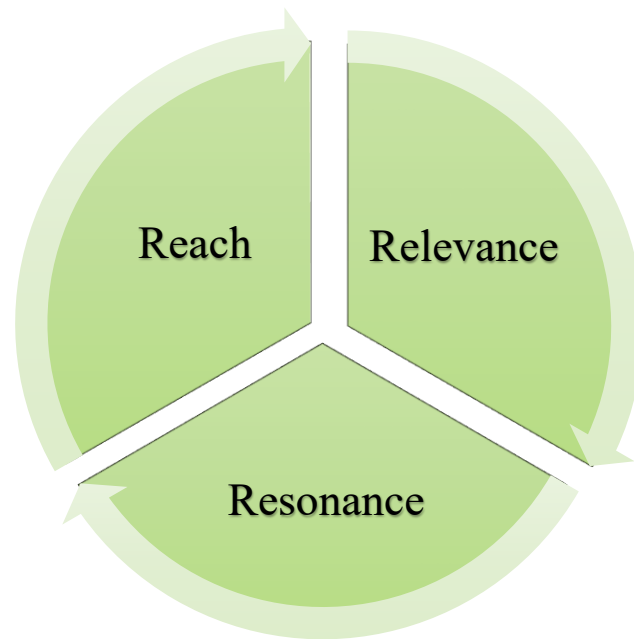
Being a successful influencer who will be attractive for the brands for collaboration and at the same time, entertaining for the audience, requires a strategic framework. This framework consists of three pillars, which are known as the three Rs of influencer marketing (Solis, 2012):

- Reach (refers to the amount of the audience following the influencer). The reach is not a crucial thing as many nano-influencers carry great brand campaigns and grip the right audience. The more consumers you reach, the better but still the quantity does not have to overpass the quality. Reach determines whether the influencer has fake followers. Getting the influencer post seen by hundreds of people gives a great boost to the brand.
- Relevance (speaks how well the influencer associates with the brand/product/services). Influencers tend to have the most matching personalities with the brands, they try to

integrate more by using the product intensively before saying to the audience that it's an advertisement. Each wrong choice of influencer will cause just confusion and dissatisfaction. Relevance determines whether the influencer for the brand is a good fit or not.

- Resonance (influencers' ability to drive measurable engagement) If the number of followers is 25.000, and the influencer gets around 100 likes per post and around 5 comments, it is obvious that the followers are fake. Influencers use tools to present their numbers to the companies so they can decide correctly.

Figure 3: The 3 Rs of Influencer Marketing



Source: Own work.

Each of the three presented Rs is very important, and the influencers cannot function without any of them.

3 DARK SIDE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

From the start, we can say that influencers and their social media channels cannot be under control always, and the collaboration will be exposed to the risk of unwanted acts and undesirable behaviour by the influencer at any time (Armstrong, 2017). The influencers' profiles are followed by a significant number of followers, which means that each of these acts and behaviours can go viral in a very short period. The brands can dictate the content, but they cannot control it once it is published online and shared with

the consumers. All the brands usually go through third-party agencies so they can accurately choose their influencer based on their target audience and budget. The influencers, as they have the capacity to spread the required message and create a positive wave around the product, can also share a negative association with it, no matter how consciously or unconsciously it happens (Stubb et al., 2019). The bigger the number of followers is, the worse the crisis for the brand might become. Detrimental acts launch with private scandals, inappropriate performances, and potentially politically sensitive statements, all the way to bigger issues like accidental racism acts (Backaler, 2018).

3.1 Potential disadvantages of using Influencer Marketing for the Brand

Many studies have highlighted the advantages that social media brings to individuals and companies. Regardless of it, there is undoubtedly a dark side that begins from cyberbullying, through addictive consumption, trolling, false information, and invasion of privacy (Hudders & Lou, 2023). The fast development of social media is leading to influencer marketing expansion, and it is making companies aware that using influencers will improve their marketing strategies, so implementing it, is the main goal of each new campaign. Nonetheless, despite having companies believe in the many chances that the influencers bring to the brand, there is a negative side to it that can be from time to time slipped up on it (Kim & Johnson, 2016).

There are many examples of influencers losing trustworthiness as a result of their statements, unsuccessful posts or just inappropriate conduct. This is tightly correlated to the brand's image and reputation. Brands need to be aware of the possible lawful threats and alerted by the influencer's actions, as if they go in the wrong direction, it may harm the brand (Backaler, 2018). A significant concern could occur if an influencer attempts to use the brand only as a promotional path to get to their product line. After all the influencer's hard work, this is the main goal of all influencers – to have their brand. On the other side, the influencer can always work for one company for a limited time and then sign another contract with the brand's biggest competitor after the campaign is over. In this case, the company should apply the “exclusivity window” (Backaler, 2018) so that the brand is safe from future exposure.

The proliferation of social media and the appearance of influencers has created covert advertising. Covert (or misleading) advertising happens when the consumers do not recognize what they are engaging in the actual commercial. Covert advertising is often met through native advertising. Native advertising is a conceptualisation of producing advertisements that are very adhesive to the website content, incorporated in the design, and consistent with the platform behaviour that the consumer considers the ad fits there. (Gürkaynak et al., 2018).

Occasionally, a company works with an influencer who does not fit the brand, and the vampire effect occurs. Vampire effect is defined as a decline in brand recall for an advertising stimulus that features a celebrity endorser versus the same stimulus with an unknown but equally attractive endorser” (Erfgen et al., 2015). Some influencers use techniques like faking their followers, which means they are artificially increasing the number of followers by paying them. Such practice is not good for the brand perspective as you cannot distinguish if they truly have an audience, or if it is all paid supporters. For this reason, it is important to know the difference between organic and paid clients (Backaler, 2018).

On another note, consumers might associate the product/service with the influencer promoting it and, depending on the qualities of the influencer, they might like or dislike the product being sold. Once a company has positive brand equity, consumers respond better to the selling item, than to the other from a company that does not have as much positive brand equity. As Kotler and Armstrong (2010) stated - brand equity is the differential effect determined by the consumer’s perception of its appeal and quality, it impacts the consumer response to the product or its marketing. It is an estimate of the company’s potential to record clients' fondness and fidelity (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

3.1.1 Fake influencers trend

False representation of the number of people following the influencers' content cannot bring success and cooperation on a long-term basis. Sooner or later the results will show the real feedback and will make the marketing agencies avoid the influencer’s profile. Collaborating with influencers who have fake amount of followers can severely damage the brand. The reason for that is that fake followers do not engage on the profile, do not relate to the content, nor have anything to do with converting the consumers. The worst they can do is to dilute the authenticity of the brand’s message (Block & Lovegrove, 2021).

Influencer marketing has made the pressure to the influencers so that it led to appearance of shady businesses like click farms that for a certain price, suggests influencers fake followers, increase the quantity of likes on their social media channels, and post false comments on the posts. The influencers do these actions so that they can request higher payment from the marketing agencies in their brands’ campaigns (Backaler, 2018).

There is a study that was made on the influencers hired by Ritz-Carlton hotels, and it showed that even 78% of them had fake followers. The prices for the fake followers are affordable and the influencers can have them just by credit card payment, with no contracts involved (Paquet-Clouston et al, 2017).

It happens that a large number of online companies are disposed to a few different kinds of marketing fraud. However, not only the influencers are using this marketing game

changer, but also the brands themselves. Starting from the click farms that simulate genuine clicks, all the way to fake reviews on social media. The most approachable tool for all nowadays is fake positive reviews which can significantly boost the brand's visibility (Lappas et al., 2016). The dominance of questionable restaurant reviews on Yelp has increased a lot over the years, as managers tend to be more involved in online review fraud when they are confronted with huge competition (Luca & Zervas, 2016). In 2017, an American marketing agency Mediakix, decided to explore the issue and investigate how it would go to create a fake influencer profile (Backaler, 2018). They made two profiles on Instagram with fully bought followers, likes and comments, paid a person to take pictures for the feed to convince the world it was a real profile, and started applying for brand collaborations which worked out well as they received already 2 deals for brand advertisement in such a short time (Backaler, 2018).

There are two categories of influencers based on followers' numbers and those are organic and paid ones. Organic followers are the ones that the influencer gained naturally, who were interested in their content and did not require any funds for the given likes and comments (Backaler, 2018).

There are three approaches influencers use to attract followers organically: influencer pods, follow-unfollow and over-engagement (Backaler, 2018). Influencer pods refer to a group of influencers who plan together and help by sharing each other's content at a specific time which results in good feedback from the audience. The follow-unfollow tactic is just as the name states, the influencer starts following thousands of people and expects a follow back, and after the number of their audience is big enough, they unfollow him/her and their count shows a net gain. Over-engagement or the famous golden rule is very simple, you interact with others as much as you wish for them to notice you and start engaging and interacting with you. Paid followers are relatively easily achieved if we follow the Mediakix example, which shows that with funds you can reach your desired number of followers' amount (Backaler, 2018).

No matter what precautions measures are taken, the problem remains trending, some influencers will use fake followers to affirm their goals, and there are brands that are going to boost their products with fake reviews, the gap remains unsolved for now but marketers should learn the lesson not to take numbers at face value (Backaler, 2018).

3.1.2 Sponsored vs non-sponsored content

Social media platforms are valuable for companies and their brands, so they can access the consumers online. Marketing influencers as a rapidly developing industry help brands conquer numerous groups and present quick access to the audience compared to traditional marketing channels (Evans et al., 2017). With the enhancement of social media marketing, the audience is demanding more clarity in the online world. Influencers have been subject to many critics due to their paid brand advertising, as consumers at times do

not understand they are the consumers of it (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2012). Demonstrating disclosure creates transparency which in turn determines trust. Sometimes the consumers who follow the content of the influencer do not distinguish between the paid content and the real authentic opinion of the influencer (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). The influencers' content might be ambiguous and immoral in this part from the consumer's viewpoint (Cain, 2011).

Because of these issues, regulations were applied that influencers and marketers must obey and reveal clearly what is sponsored content on their channels (FTC, 2015). Yet, sponsored posts affect consumer responses very negatively as it make them think that the influencer is doing all the content because of the paid services (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2012). But this also happens on a normal basis, when the influencer is advertising, something completely aligned with the profile and sharing an honest opinion about it. That is why it is making the influencer avoid the law, and not release the disclosure, as the sponsored posts receive less favourable attention than the normal ones (Campbell et al, 2013). Some studies are alarming that sponsored content can cut down young people's wish for the marketed product when they recognize the intention to promote (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2012), and prove that brand confirmations by influencers can produce negative feedback among their followers (Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). This happens because of the parasocial relationship, where the consumers expect the influencers to have a deep connection like to a best friend and through sponsored posts, they become disappointed (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Normally, the rage of the consumers is expected as when it is happening when the influencer suddenly is emphasizing products that are not in line with the profile or it has many sponsored posts so that his profile looks like a marketplace. However, if it is properly disclosed it raises the followers' credibility in them (Dhanesh & Dunthler, 2019).

The process of posting brand-related content on social media in the form of advertisement, under a contract or with paid transaction, when collaborating with it, is called a sponsored post (Boerman et al., 2017). As the consumers need to be aware of the type of content, the influencers can use platform-based disclosure or text-based one. Either way, the sponsored content is subject to disbelief until the client is face-to-face with the purchase intention (Dreifaldt & Drenna, 2019).

This goes even to the extent that some still not established influencers are faking the sponsored posts to get attention from the brands. The fake ads that look paid are attracting companies to choose them for the next campaign (Baccarella et al., 2018).

According to the latest studies by Gross and Wangenheim (2022), consumers engage more with visibly sponsored posts and the exposure of paid content increases influencer reliability and positively affects consumer reactions (Gross & Wangenheim, 2022).

3.1.3 Competitive Risks

All brands are looking to leverage the significance and visibility of social platforms to improve brand awareness and increase sales (Ortakales, 2020). The deafening achievement of influencer endorsement has led brands to progressively invest in influencers and sponsor their lifestyles, employing them with cash, gratis products, and even all-inclusive paid luxury retreats (Schomer, A. 2019). Competition is healthy as it brings out a wider spectrum of products, with more quality and innovation. The stack of influencers that are on the market is raising the competitive risks between each other for the brand to a higher level (Baccarella et al., 2018).

The biggest threat within the competitive risks from the brand side, that the marketers consider is the influencer's past cooperations and the potential future ones. The fact that the influencer can work with the brand and after a week with the brand's biggest competitor is just diminishing the endorsed product, which is why the contractual protections are crucial, even with implied exclusivity windows when it is necessary (Backaler, 2018).

The most important factor for everyone involved is reputation as it emerges when circumstances change depending on how society observes the brand and the influencer. The marketers check reviews on reputational past first and then choose the influencer for the upcoming campaign, so for sure it plays a big role. Another feature is the pricing, there are celebrity influencers that will cost for much as 20 micro-influencers, however, the question is, would the celebrity influencer do a good job as the number of followers is not a certain factor for success. It is better to go with an influencer who matches the target audience than just using a big name for the campaign who does not associate in any way with the products or services. From time to time, it happens that an influencer is delivering to transfer the right message and unintentionally drops an unwanted message online. The brand, so that can later avoid this risk, should have a crisis management plan for each campaign and be ready to comment fast and appropriately on the negative reviews. Lastly and most importantly is the lack of release about the partnership with the brand. That may disrupt the people following, which is why to avoid it, the influencers must be educated on the FTC rules in the States or the Digital Service Act in Europe. This law is not only showing the legal risk, but brands and influencers similarly are both subject to legal acts, consumers, and competitors who are misled concerning the source of the content. Concerns about disclosure are not proven yet. In the worst cases, brands purposely cover the connection with influencers to manipulate the market for their product or service (Sands, et al., 2020).

3.2 Examples of influencer marketing lapses from everyday practice

Influencer marketing is a trending marketing strategy, but there are many drawbacks. Regardless of the benefits that influencer marketing can have, utilizing social media influencers to promote a brand, product, or service would not promise success in meeting marketing goals and objectives. Starting from the process of choosing the right influencer, moving forward with the campaign, and making sure the ads are efficient, all the way to finishing the campaign, this influencer represents the brand until the end of the contract. Even after the campaign, the audience will remain associated with the brand through the selected person (Salo et al., 2018).

One of the world's most famous cases is Disney's Makers Studio's collaboration with the Swedish most popular Youtuber Felix Kjellberg, his channel is well known as PewDiePie. He is an established influencer, with a background of 111 million subscribers (2024), nonetheless still was not the perfect match for Disney as he shared the wrong content with the world. With the intent to bring out more attention and attract future followers to his channel, he started experimenting with extreme ways of representing the content. His intention failed, as it led to having an Indian person dancing half-naked with a sign that said "Death to all Jews". Having such a big company collaborating with him, as soon as the anti-semitic video showed up, Disney declared that his content was irreverent and they immediately ended up the affiliation with him. Overall, this big deal went away, he lost many followers, the brand lost its reputation and it needed a big crisis management system to save it from the failed advertisement. Disney figured out that there is too much reputational risk involved where they are putting a lot at stake and may tarnish the established brand. The initial plan of collaborating with a network of thousands of influencers was immediately cancelled at that point as the first one with PewDiePie went dreadfully bad (Backaler, 2018).

Another type of noteworthy case is the one with a very famous Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni with almost 30 million followers (2024). She started with a blog just showing her closet and outfits, which led to advertising the best brands worldwide, so that in the end she became their competitor creating her brand of shoes. The companies, especially in the B2C relationship, must be careful with the influencers and mind that they will be testing, learning and collecting experiences so that they can bring out their new flawless product or service on the market, as their rivals (Backaler, 2018). This has become a very common practice nowadays when an influencer becomes a brand competitor.

In 2017, Pepsi had a big social media campaign that was supposed to capture the spirit of the young people who were part of the protests, in that moment there were many actions as a part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Their marketing team has selected a star like Kendall Jenner to be part of the commercial. As soon as it went live, the audience had so many objections to it. Starting from the fact that they used a very privileged influencer who's never known difficulties her whole life, through the fact that the advertisement was showing how Pepsi can solve such a big societal problem. The video

was called off swiftly in less than 48 hours, and regardless of the apologies for the failed message, the harm to the brand was done. Choosing the wrong influencer who would share the wrong message was alarming and required some time for Pepsi to stand up again with the competition. Pepsi had the lowest measured perception levels in over eight years. Younger people's buying factor was at its lowest level in three years. Remarkably, the buying decision of millennials has gone from a stable 33% in 2015 to a disappointing 23% in 2017, an all-time low for the brand (Tillman, 2019).

There are cases where mistakes are made by the influencer as an act of ignorance, as when Adidas used Naomi Campbell and she included the instructions by the marketing agency on the post as well. Campbell was only judged as the irresponsible in this situation, but under the excuse that it can happen to anyone, while Adidas lost credibility as they hired someone for which they did not want to give leeway to sell their products (Greenwood, 2016).

Choosing a big celebrity influencer does not guarantee you successful marketing campaigns. This was shown in practice when Microsoft appointed Oprah Winfrey to promote their new product Microsoft Surface. Just exactly when Microsoft was on the way to conquer the world, Oprah announced how she was using the new surface via Twitter from her own iPad which was contradictory as she was using their biggest competitor's product. This has made just a contra effect and the sales of iPads increased. This shows how a much lesser-known influencer who actually is familiar with and knows about the products would make an impact, instead of a big celebrity name doing it for the income (Greenwood, 2016).

Lapses in influencer marketing can have expensive consequences. In 2021, there was an Ethereum max campaign collaborating with big names such as Kim Kardashian who caused high financial and reputational losses. Kim has not revealed that she received a payment to promote the crypto assets on her feed. As a result of that, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has pressed charges as this was misleading the audience and illegally touting the cryptocurrency. She paid a fine of 1.26 million dollars, and the brand lost 95% of its worth (O'Callaghan, 2023).

The B2B companies are not resistant to brand destruction from the cooperation with the improper influencers either. Robert Scoble, a famous technology influencer was collaborating with Rackspace, a huge cloud computing company, when the accusations of sexual harassment and attack became well-known to the public eye. Several women have come out and openly shared their stories online, which resulted in Scoble being done with all the tech partnerships. Whenever there is disgraceful behaviour on the influencer's part, it confuses the consumers as they are not aware of what is the truth. That is why it is a marketer's accountability to harness the voice and clean up the mess made. The process of identification of a potential influencer for the next campaign of the brand should involve a deep background check, not only on the influencer's channel but also gaining insight from past actions and personal associations (Backaler, 2018).

As we have discussed so far, the topic of how the brands should protect themselves from influencers and influencer marketing, there are also campaigns where the influencers come in a much worse position than the brand. One example of a situation of this type dates from 2017 - the Fyre Festival which never happened. The influencers need to be fully aware of what they are advertising before it becomes so massive and powerful. While the marketing team engaged around 250 well-known influencers and celebrities like Emily Ratajkowski, Bella Hadid, and Hailey Bieber who were sharing the news about the event and endorsing it, the audience got attracted and they bought tickets for it. It was supposed to be a luxury experience in the Bahamas, however, in the end, it never occurred (Tietjen, 2019). That is why the emphasis is on the importance of the influencer doing their diligence, otherwise, they are not trustworthy anymore.

One important part of the negative side, that everybody often ignores, is mental hygiene. The compulsive use of social media leads to problematic sleeping, social media stalking and online self-disclosure. As the ways of communication have transformed social media not only is used as a channel for product placement, but also as a channel for social change (Yannopoulou et al., 2019). Using social media models, individuals have changed their mode of communication, but also numerous concerns have been elevated (Lim et al., 2012). Considering users spend significant time online using these platforms they have been exposed to problems like social media fatigue, sleep disorder, uncontrollable use, online regret and fear of missing out. Social media is converting users into vulnerable creatures that are comparing their lifestyle with others and measuring quality between themselves. With the extensive use of it, today, some topics are involved in social addiction and problematic social relation problems associated with (Backaler, 2018).

The real challenge to the success of using influencer marketing is to measure the true efficacy and ROI. Unlike traditional marketing networks, the system of measurement of influencer marketing is subjective and varied. The determination of brand awareness, sales and clients' engagements comes from analysis of the reach and clicks (Backaler, 2018).

3.3 Legal Framework of Influencer Marketing

The fine line between the consumers recognizing that the content is sponsored, or it is just something on which the influencer enjoys spending time and resources, is very thin. The regulations and laws about influencer marketing are vague which is why whenever possible, the influencers use them in their favor. This means that consumers are seeing content without the right brands, thinking this is influencers' choices and their free will to share their favourite products and services (Olsen & Sandholmen, 2019).

In reality, there should be a law protecting the brand behind any potential influencer fraud actions. In the USA, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) helps consumers to

differentiate whether the content is sponsored, or the influencer truly enjoys using the product/service. However, each country has different laws. For example, in UAE, as each influencer technically enforces products/services on others, they require a trade license, where influencers must clearly state if the posted content is sponsored. If the influencer omits this statement, the law can consider that the advert is not clear enough for all audiences and will require the influencer to take it down, as happened with the Oreo cookie video challenge (Backaler, 2018).

Following the appearance of influencer marketing and its significant impact on consumer behaviour and buying decisions imposes the question whether the consumers in Europe are adequately covered by the law. Some influencers are funding their revenue, which makes the audience question the kind of income: do influencers offer benefits against cash, is this some kind of help or is it a donation? Correspondingly, if methods which are supposed to produce engagement like giveaways, are utilized by influencers, so do they create games of chance? What tools and equipment are needed to examine the influencer endeavours, and can this be aligned and adjusted in a complex governance organization? Furthermore, in many examples, influencers are vulnerable tiny firms or freelancers who engage in unpredictable markets and might provoke losses (Goanta & Spanakis, 2020).

As per a past study done by the European Parliament (2022), the legal structure in the EU member states and non-EU states is not specifically shaped by regulation as they go under the bounds of advertising regulation. However, as there must be some existing ground rules for influencer marketing by the high court and authorities, this law now has enhanced into an important factor. The key practices by the legislators, authorities and the industry to undertake influencer marketing are (Backaler, 2018):

- Adopt certain influencer legislation,
- Apply an already existing consumer protection legislation to influencers,
- Publish procedures and codes of behaviour to create good practices,
- Use digital monitoring and prosecution kits,
- Offer official education/training and qualifications of influencers,
- Increase recognition and provide support to consumers, and
- Facilitate compliance on platforms via consistent disclosure tools.

The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) needs stricter guidelines and borders on what is feasible for this type of advertising (Backaler, 2018). In the UK, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is fighting for influencer marketing to be more transparent and show the difference between sponsored ads and influencer approval. As per American legal authorities, the FTC is not likely to apply more restrictive measures, but rather they are determined to provide more comprehensive control. If in Europe and the US, it is a common practice for influencers to disclose brand affiliations, it is certainly not the case in other places. For example, in UAE, all influencers have their trade license which obeys

the UAE Commercial Transactions Law. UAE law regulates that any actions that give some financial benefit to the individual is declared a business transaction which is under the applicable laws and should follow legal implications (Backarel, 2018).

There are many related associations worldwide, which have equivalent measures: European Advertising Standards Alliance, China's State Administration for Industry and Commerce, Brazil's Consumer Protection Code, and the ASA of Singapore. They all have the same target and that is to push influencer marketing for more transparency and make consumers informed that many of the published endorsements are paid commercials (Backaler, 2018).

One example is a campaign for morning sickness pills which has Kim Kardashian as a main star. She was threatened with regulatory actions from this collaboration as she neglected to include information about the side effects and risks of the drug which goes strictly against FDA rules. Kim had to remove the post, however, the brand attracted a lot of negative exposure for it. Overall, even if the influencers do not disclose sponsorship, they are unlikely to challenge a significant legal concern. Most of them are resolved by just eliminating or renewing the post (Backaler, 2018).

To make a reference to Slovenia, a new law has been established since January 2023, after the expansion of influencer marketing and the danger of fraudulent practices. The Market Inspectorate has announced that they will join forces with the Economy Ministry, and pay special attention to the advertisements via social media platforms (Kovič, 2023). Each individual who has an online profile which is used for profit-driven actions must be registered as a corporate entity or sole proprietor. Each person who is not following the legislation is subject to a fine. All posts that are sponsored must use language that is readily comprehensible for a Slovenian audience. All products or services, no matter if they are gifted or paid, must be marked clearly. Now, the influencers have obligations to follow new stricter rules when publishing sponsored collaborations with companies.

3.4 Protection against the relentlessly progressing dark side of Influencer Marketing

Every behaviour that comes from the consumer is induced by influencer marketing for some reason. Primarily, cooperation between an influencer and a brand should be noticed by the consumer and be of significant importance and connection for the consumer to process it. Accordingly, cooperation must work similarly with the influencer's brand and previous content. The practice confirms the theory of ELM (Elaboration Likelihood Model), which patterns the consumers via various stages of the model concerning influencer marketing (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). The ELM is a model which presents in what way the consumers interpret and manage the information received by the influencers' social profiles and do they have any behaviour variations provoked by the

shared content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The influencers represent a lot of brands promoting products and services daily, so it will be helpful to check how this affects the consumers' standpoints on it. This is an extensively used model in influencer marketing which shows relevance (Schumann et al., 2012). Trust is crucial in an effective influencer marketing approach and a unique connection linking the influencer and the follower should be endeavoured for. Attitudes are always affected by a negative connotation whenever there is a lack of belief between the influencer and the audience (Durmaz et al., 2023).

Secondly, if the influencer's profile has turned into an ad machine platform, followed by nonauthenticity of the shared message, the followers are lost in all these collaborations and decide to unfollow. The influencers need to take care of the frequency rate of the advertisements as the audience finds the non-sponsored content more inspirational, entertaining and authentic. Finally, the dark side brings out the unique influencers and the very organized ones, as they are aware of the fundamentals that make them successful from a very early starting point (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Whether the marketing team has chosen the wrong influencer or missed an opportunity by paying attention to the influencer with fake followers, there are many possible hazards on the way to be encountered. From a business point of view, companies need to have a prepared crisis management strategy even before the start of the campaign with the new influencer. It is up to the key brand personnel to take care of all the necessary precautions and monitor and verify the validity of the influencer's words (Backaler, 2018). As the dark side is constantly evolving, brands need to follow up with the latest news on algorithms and monitor the newest tricks of the trade. Brands should not be distracted by a large number of followers as they do not mean success, so never take numbers for granted, remain vigilant and avoid fake influencers (Alkan & Ulas, 2023).

4 EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE DARK SIDE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

The main goal of this chapter is to show the results and lead to a conclusion of the study that was performed. Firstly, the purpose and the goal of the study is shown. Next, the related research question is presented. Lastly, descriptions of the methods are discussed. The research analyses are based on secondary data (which is relevant, using reliable sources such as subject-related literature, books, certain case studies, published articles on the topic, scholarly journals and research papers) and primary data in the form of interviews. According to the data from the interviews, a conclusion has been formed and future recommendations provided.

4.1 Purpose, Goals and Research question of the study

The purpose of this empirical study is to identify the perception of the negative sides of influencer marketing from the perspective of influencers, brands, and social media users. Furthermore, as the research involves influencers and consumers, the findings will show the results of how influencer marketing is interpreted within these two other groups. In more details, it will be investigated if end consumers are aware of the dark scheme of this marketing channel, and how influencer's actions impact the brand. In the research, there is a further lookup at the negative consequences that can cause damage to a brand while selecting an influencer. Influencers, by sharing their daily life and personal things, are making a business, so the purpose is to take a deeper look at how it makes the consumers feel stronger self-congruence towards them.

The goals of the empirical study are:

- To explore the brands' perceptions of the dark side of influencer marketing and to show how this affects their image.
- To uncover to what extent brands are aware of the dark side of influencer marketing and how they are facing it.
- To examine consumers' perceptions of the dark side of influencer marketing.
- To explore the influencers' perception of influencer marketing as a strategy

The research question of the thesis is: To what extent are companies aware of the negative sides of influencer marketing and their impact on the brand, consumer and influencer?

4.2 Methodology

The primary data is collected using in-depth interviews. The reasoning behind choosing this method is the one-on-one approach and the open-ended questions that elicit a depth of information from a small number of participants (in contrast to surveys which are quantitative and are distributed across a bigger sample of respondents). The purpose of using a structured in-depth interviewing approach is to invest a significant amount of time with each interviewee through employing a conversational format (Morris, 2015). Considering some key characteristics of the in-depth interview, like questions that are primarily open-ended which lead to a discovery-oriented approach, the flexibility, depth of information and focus groups (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), this method was the reasonable choice for this research.

To answer the stated research questions, I collected data from three different types of stakeholders:

- three influencers (the aim is to approach the ones who have extended reach and are actively using their accounts),
- three company representatives (who are regularly cooperating with influencers) and
- five everyday users of social media platforms.

The principle that was followed, when I was choosing the influencers is that they need to have above 10.000 followers so they are closely related to the topic of the thesis and have met with the difficulties of the created questions.

When it comes to the brand representatives, I wanted to get in touch with the persons who are in actual reach of influencers and have active collaborations with them. Also, a significant factor was that these brands that were interviewed are already aware of influencer marketing and tackle the struggles of it often.

The final group required for the interviews were the social media users, which could have been any arbitrary people from the environment, yet, I wanted to make sure they all actively use social media.

The questions were formulated in English, as the most common language known by all of the interviewees. Each interview was required from around 30 minutes to a full hour. While a general order of questions was maintained, their sequence and phrasing were adjusted accordingly to the participants' pace, to ensure a natural flow of the conversation. The discussion was audiotaped and then transcribed (transcripts in Appendix 2). Considering that representatives of all parties involved in the process (influencers, brands and consumers) are interviewed, the results are more defined, and the findings can be seen from diverse perspectives. The interview ends with an open question if the participants would like to add something that might have been missed. The use of the qualitative method reflected their personal experiences and provided detailed insight.

The interviews were conducted during the summer period, from June 2024 to August 2024. In regards to the interview process, some of the interviews were done live, and some were done online via Zoom. The questions were formulated respectively for each group and for the purpose of the thesis. Some of them were repetitive for each group, and some questions were strictly related only to the dedicated group answering the topic. All the interview guides (with all the questions from the interviews) can be seen in Appendix 2. The questions are separated into five sets:

- General – This first set of questions was meant just to get to know the interviewee better with the general information about himself and his point of view on influencer marketing.
- Personal branding and authenticity questions – A set of questions in which the influencers should uncover their value proposition and how they maintain authenticity, as well as, how they keep the connection with their followers. The brands should reveal their project goals, and why they choose a dedicated person for a certain campaign. The social media users can give feedback why they follow certain person and what do they recognize in them. These questions are connected to the content creation preference and strategy.

- Collaborations and partnerships questions – Results can present real situations and past experiences over which the base is growing or not, how much the audience is engaged, how a consumer feels about influencer-brand collaborations, and potential difficulties in the process.
- Negative side of influencer marketing questions – This part is committed to the core of the topic, it should show if all three groups recognize any of the negative side, what issues they encounter and how they deal with them.
- Future expectations/predictions questions – Personal opinion on the future challenges that they expect to face.

4.3 Sample Description

A total of 11 people were interviewed in the process of collecting information about the dark side of influencer marketing. There were 8 females and 3 males interviewed. The age line was between 25 and 40. More precisely, there were two 25-year-olds, two 30-year-olds, two 31-year-olds, and two 36-year-olds. There was one person having 29, one 32 and one last individual 40 years old. All respondents answered all questions and completed the interview until the end. According to the answers, they are all highly educated, either with a bachelor's – 7 interviewees, or a master's degree – 4 interviewees. All of the respondents are employed in certain well-established companies on good positions. Their living environment mainly is Europe, majority are located in North Macedonia – 5 respondents and Slovenia – 4 respondents. Only 1 respondent is living in the Netherlands and 1 in the United Arab Emirates (Table 1).

The first respondent – I1, has 74.000 followers, and she is doing well online, meaning her only job is being an influencer. The second one – I2, has 40.000 followers and works parallel as a coach and influencer. I3 has 24.700 and works as a food blogger as well, she has her own branded product. Each of them is successful in the field and they use influencer marketing on a daily level. The influencers interviewed use many platforms, but the main channel for all of them so far is Instagram, then Facebook. The company which I4 is representing has plenty of active social media accounts on the majority famous platforms: Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn. They have a related department that deals with all the public posts, decides social media strategies in all regions where they sell their product and picks influencers that align with their brand. I5 is a representative of a brand that is very eco-friendly so they wisely invest their funds on social media platforms and their brand ambassadors. They have active Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest and LinkedIn accounts. I6 has her own digital marketing company and is in touch with influencers on a daily level. They use Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok as a way of advertising. I8 and I9 are fans of Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. I7 and I10 are mostly using TikTok and Instagram. I11 is mostly using YouTube following the newest video medium forms – podcasts. Except that they

are passively scrolling through the posted content, most of them also leave comments, likes, reviews and shares. These type of interviewees were the individuals who were the easiest to reach, had the most liberty during the conversation and shared their opinions without any hesitation. They are all living in different parts of Europe and have careers in various fields, which was chosen purposely so that we receive different opinions and compare.

Table 1: General Information

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Position/Role	Group
I1	Female	40	Influencer/ TV host	Influencer
I2	Male	36	Influencer/ Basketball coach	Influencer
I3	Female	31	Influencer/ Food blogger	Influencer
I4	Female	30	Head of social media communications	Brand
I5	Female	36	Marketing and sales associate	Brand
I6	Female	29	Head of digital marketing company	Brand
I7	Female	25	QA Tester	Social media user
I8	Female	30	Project Manager	Social media user
I9	Female	31	Project management officer	Social media user
I10	Male	25	IT test specialist	Social media user
I11	Male	32	Data engineer	Social media user

Source: Own work.

4.4 Analysis of Results

Content analysis was used throughout the research. Content analysis is defined as a cautious, detailed, efficient examination and interpretation of a particular matter in a determination to identify patterns, themes, or meanings (Berg & Lune, 2017). More specifically - a narrative analysis, which is a method that can be used to identify data and a methodology suitable for approaching figures that come from first-person stories (Manning & Cullum Swam, 1994). The whole process starts with the first step of identifying the research questions or understanding the problem. Next is a determination of the content that should be analysed. Identifying the biases is the third step of the process. Then, fourth is the data preparation or simply - defining the units and categories known as data preparation. The fifth step is very important and that is to sort the data collected, or data visualization. Step number six is the data analysis, and the final seventh step is deploying the product and offering some explanation of the findings (Berg & Lune, 2017). This method provides a deep interpretation of the consumers' actions and

motivations. It gives them space to show their stories in their own words, at the same time it shows the researcher valuable insight into the complexity of the subject.

Social media is amazingly prevalent, hiding a multidimensional dark side on the inside. The interviews have shown diverse responses from all three groups expressing their point of view. Through the interviews, a several topics have appeared that raised most of the attention. These topics were separated into three groups, each presenting the concerns about the stakeholders involved – brands, influencers and consumers (Table 2).

The first category is concerns regarding the brand, which has three themes: the reputational harm, the ethical impact and the limited control over campaigns. Reputation is, what is mostly affecting the brands, which is why they dig and scan as much as possible for the individual who is representing them. The ethical impact can be seen through the moral values which brands and consumers recognize from the content of the influencer. The third theme is the one where brands have control over campaigns, but unfortunately, they cannot always get it. The audience only sees the full final result.

The concerns regarding influencers are split in three themes: psychological path, authenticity and public scrutiny. The titles are pretty simple and self-explanatory, the psychological – refers to the pressure that influencers have daily, the authenticity which is a must, so you differentiate from the rest, and public scrutiny, that constantly follows certain behaviour.

The concerns regarding the consumers are trust issues and scepticism, vulnerability of specific group and overconsumption. The trust issues are associated with the fact that influencers are not revealing the collaborations always, but audience is doubting whether the recommendation is paid or not. For specific groups influencers need to be really careful as they are in a vulnerable age, so advertisements of some specific products can be mistakenly taken. Overconsumption as the last theme for the consumers is pointing to the fact of the endless scrolling and browsing through the social media applications.

Table 2: Key Topics and Themes

Topic	Theme
Fundamental concerns regarding the brands	Reputational harm
	Ethical impacts
	Limited control over campaigns
Fundamental concerns regarding the influencers	Psychological side of the influencers path
	Authenticity
	Public scrutiny
Fundamental concerns regarding the consumers	Trust issues and scepticism
	Vulnerability of specific audience group
	Overconsumption

Source: Own work.

4.4.1 Fundamental concerns regarding the brands

Brands have been increasingly exposed to the dark side of influencer partnerships, which has a big potential to lead to reputation damage, big financial losses, and a failure in consumer trust. Companies should be aware of how poorly managed influencer relationships, can harm their trustworthiness and commercial value (Bakalar, 2018). The following part explores the extent to which companies may face negative criticism and ruin the future of their brand, while being part of some controversial campaign that does not align with their values, do not consult or share any opinion with the influencers, but just rush them to proceed with the advertising material at soonest.

4.4.1.1 Reputational harm

The first theme that I discussed with the interviewees is reputational harm. From the brands' point of view, the representatives are worried about their public image. I2 considers that one of the biggest risks - the fake followers trend, leads to inefficient campaigns for the brands. I6 is very careful in protecting her brand when it comes to choosing the right influencer for the campaign: *"If the collaboration between the influencer and the brand feels forced or inauthentic, it can damage the influencer's credibility and erode the trust of their audience. This can lead to negative feedback, backlash, and a decline in the effectiveness of the marketing campaign."*

Brands have their own reasoning behind the actions they take. I4, who is currently in charge of the social media communications of a very significant company, located in Amsterdam, has emphasised the reputational concerns on the brand side. In her current position, she pays a lot of attention to the rules of compliance and takes care that all possible situations are covered with a well-written contract to help the company mitigate the risk. Especially, in their industry as she is representing a company which is working with healthcare professionals. The chosen influencers should be the key opinion leaders, so there must be a full history checkup on the influencers' past work and activities so that they can ensure it will have a positive impact on their brand. I5, working in the field of marketing and sales has paid attention to the special validation that influencers are lately requiring and the importance of monetising everything in exchange for services. I6, is in touch with influencers daily, since she owns a marketing agency. She is mostly concerned about authenticity and battles with the fact that each campaign must feel natural and unique so it does not cause backlash and ruin the brand. The smallest detail that does not feel fit in the campaign, can provoke the consumers to boycott the products and as per usual the negative media coverage spreads around fast. Brands have found a way with very detailed contracts to protect themselves. As per I4: *"This means that brands must ensure that the 'rules of compliance' are very clear in the contract with each influencer, to protect the brand's reputation and ensure compliance for example with regulation*

regarding privacy, copyright, legality and security, in order to mitigate reputation issues.“

The most critical point for all groups is the solution to potential crises. The brands look more attentive to it and have already prepared themselves for some possible negative scenarios. I4 claims that her company has a handbook with all possible protocols around each possible scenario. They also have a 24/7 social media listening team that would alert them if something negative is happening. I5's brand is ready to be loud and terminate the contract with an involved influencer if they do something that is not in line with the company. As for I6, they care about the influencers, but they prioritize the brand's reputation and keeping transparency with the audience. Brands have found a way with very detailed contracts to protect themselves. As per I4: *“ This means that brands must ensure that the ‘rules of compliance’ are very clear in the contract with each influencer, to protect the brand’s reputation and ensure compliance for example with regulation regarding privacy, copyright, legality and security, to mitigate reputation issues.”* In comparison, the influencers lookout to be very careful before signing the contract and when they are under their clausula. They believe that nothing will interfere with the relationship and are well aware that the collaboration might end if something negative happens from their side.

This topic has been recognized by the influencers' side as well, as they have emphasised that they feel a lot of pressure to be out of any conflicts or negatively related stories as that will reflect poorly on the brand they are representing at that moment. I1 confesses that there have been times when she has been having a hard time making a partnership with a brand due to some preexisting negative rumours: *“ Yes, there were certain times when it was harder to get the brands interested in working with me as a result of this fake news as they were afraid it wouldn’t impact their companies in a good way, but they realized that I have my audience which supports me.”* She lost many followers as a result of it, which shows that influencers suffer as much as the brand does in any similar situation. Another point for the influencers is that they often refuse many partnerships if they do not feel that they can be the face of that particular brand, I1 says: *“I check their products/services and always test them before I start offering them to others. I am collaborating only with brands in which I am interested, the ones in which I shop, use, watch, wear privately etc. I stick to my values and I am not greedy.”* Just another proof that influencers are acting as gatekeepers of the brand reputation.

The social media users are the active participants in this chain of influencer marketing. The brand, with the help of the influencers, tries to shape public opinion and at the end, the audience decides would they buy something or not. The issue that is common in most of the interview answers is inconsistency. I10 says: *“A paid collaboration is unreliable for me if the influencer advertising has no relation to that type/category of product/service at all. It makes me think that the influencer does the advertisement only for money and doesn’t believe in the product/service.”*

4.4.1.2 Ethical impacts

Ethical concerns appear only when the brands give priority to their profit over transparency, honesty and consumers' well-being. The influencers do not want unsuccessful projects, they do not want to accept something they cannot deliver. They all agree that influencer marketing highly impacts the brand credibility and image in the industry. Influencers care about their audience's opinion, all they present is under their judgment, so consumers' insights are really important to them. I2, a bit conceitedly states, that if for some reason a campaign on which he's working does not go well, it is the brand's wrong choice as he might not be their right target group for the audience. I1 speaks about her insecurity in her posts in the past, but as of now, she believes that the only possible issue would be the limited visibility of the profile or posting at the wrong time of the day. I3 claims that the right influencers need to be chosen: *"Fail can happen to the best and most followed influencers, it doesn't depend on how big and important the influencer is, but it is mostly up to the target group of the campaign. If the brand hires a food influencer like myself, to advertise sports equipment, sorry to say but that probably won't increase their sales."*

From the brand representative side of view, it is important to give liberty to the influencers to advertise as they are used to, with the understanding that sponsored wording must be used. I5 states: *"We share the brand guidelines so whatever they talk about, it has to be backed up with data and science, not just hype."* When a product is published by an influencer, the consumers, need to be certain whether this is a sponsored one or not by just seeing the post of the influencer. There should not be trouble with hashtags and tagged photos as it has been a common practice to mainly all influencers. Deceptive advertising manipulates buyers into assuming that an influencer's endorsement is neutral. The hidden sponsorship can cause regulatory penalties. The social media users have to decide by themselves based on the presented material. I7 says: *"I find that most influencers I follow do a good job of clearly stating when their content is sponsored. They typically use proper tags and disclosures, such as "ad" or "sponsored," to indicate when they are promoting a product or service. This transparency helps me distinguish between their genuine opinions and paid promotions. However, there have been a few instances where it was unclear if the content was sponsored, which made me more cautious about trusting their recommendations."*

4.4.1.3 Limited control over campaigns

Collaborationally, brands and influencers need to work in cohesion and have a mutual understanding of the assignment so the campaign is a success. The liberty and creativity of how a product or service is presented are sometimes limited by brands. I3 advised that she is very adaptable when it comes to this topic. She has been part of some campaigns

where she has the full freedom to express her feelings, but in some, she has been limited to a specific format in which she should present the news. She is happy with this as well, as long as it is in coordination with her profile. I2, despite all the guidelines asked from the brand, tries to negotiate some creative freedom. He believes that brands appreciate influencers who will integrate their products and services naturally and creatively rather than just following a strict format.

In certain cases, if the influencer has full liberty without any content preapproval from the brand, using poor-quality content, can make the brand's message to become inconsistent or misleading. I6 states: *"In our campaigns, we provide influencers with a level of creative autonomy that aligns with our brand's guidelines and objectives. We believe in collaboration and value their unique creativity and voice."* Looking from the other side, from the brand's perspective, this deficit of control, which will disrupt the established principles, may initiate insensitive observations and probable PR concerns. The last thing a brand would need is a controversial message shared with a big audience, which makes them monitor and apply compliance standards from the start with the signed contract with the influencer. I5 on this topic says: *"We try to give full freedom to creative people, we do have some guidelines when we work on a campaign, we give like a fact sheet about the product, what they can focus on, what they should emphasize etc."*

Going through the research, I wanted to implicate the social media users as researchers and get their feedback on two different situations: when an influencer works long-term for a certain amount of time with one brand or an influencer who works with many different partners. I10 says: *"I believe that influencers that do a lot of different partnerships that are not even in the same category or related in any way seem like they just advertise whatever they get offered for money/compensation. On the other hand, influencer having many paid partnerships but with the identical brand makes me believe that they really genuinely trust in that brand, so it's more likely for me to check out their offering."* I7 states: *"When an influencer works with many different brands, it can demonstrate versatility and a wide range of interests. However, it's essential that these partnerships align with the influencer's values and remain authentic to their audience. On the other hand, having multiple partnerships with the same brand can suggest a deeper, more established relationship."* In general, the audience does not mind a lot of cooperation, as long as they are in the common focus and theme of the influencer and the brand. All as long as the influencer is not just using this approach to many companies to get faster funds.

When it comes to TV versus social media platforms, television is a medium that is starting to extinct. All users advised that they would not see the advertisement on TV, but only on social media. The relationship between the audience and the influencer is significantly impacted, however it is still in a much lesser way to the brand itself. As the TV advertisements are vanishing, the brand needs to choose influencers to spread the word about their campaigns. If the brand is represented by influencers who maintain a positive reputation and continue to align with the audience's values, then the trust is not greatly

affected as it is with the influencer. Ultimately, the outcome of an unpleasant situation and how the development impacts the audience depends on how the influencer and the brand handle the situation that occurred, whether they take responsibility for it, and rectify the case properly. If the influencer has no excuse for the reckless behaviour, and the brand continues with the support, then both sides will be damaged from the consumer's point of view as well. Contrary to conventional advertising, where companies have the all-inclusive access and creative and messaging authority, influencer marketing counts on different personas that might not align with the brand's vision.

4.4.2 Fundamental concerns regarding the influencers

Being an influencer, looks very good on the outside to the community. The consumers believe that you receive free products and services all the time and you do very little to gain a lot. The brands assume that the work influencers do, can be covered with low price, free samples of their services or products. Nobody is noticing the hard challenges on the way and the pressure they receive from the environment. In this part, the research presents the key themes that are ultimate for influencers: the psychological side, the authenticity and the public scrutiny.

4.4.2.1 Psychological side of the influencers' path

As determined in the previous chapters, influencer marketing has many definitions, and the informants have a clear understanding of the term. The influencers state that it is part of their career path, and the brands are dependant from their services in order to reach their target audience and endure on the market. When it comes to risks, influencers are mostly affected by authenticity and the promotion of fake reality. I3 has emphasized how brands are connected with influencers automatically, sometimes even after the campaign ends. With that, all the choices and opinions made by the influencer will be related to the brand as well. I1, as one of the risks sees the idealised picture-perfect lifestyle that most of the influencers present to the audience. This is an idealized mock-up reality which makes social media users compare their lives with it and make drastic decisions based on non-realistic expectations. As a result of the extorted image of the influencers' lifestyle and excessive use by the audience, many psychological concerns start to arise. The pressure involving the two alternatives of being real or being profitable should always prevail on the right side. The influencers start feeling continuous pressure to stay in line with the latest news and live in persistent fear not to lose their followers. I2 says: *"There's constant pressure to produce engaging content, gain followers, and stay relevant, which can lead to stress, burnout, and even feelings of inadequacy."* The exposure to daily hate comments about their character, physics, or actions steer to depression and anxiety.

Unfortunately, many suicidal cases lately are subject to online bullying, the life exposure can result in mental strain as time passes. The social media users are under a high impact as well, I10 says: *“I sometimes feel that the negative aspects, like misinformation and unrealistic portrayals of life, are overshadowing the positive aspects of social media. This has made me more selective in my engagement and mindful of the content I consume.”*

4.4.2.2 Authenticity

Distinction is the key feature of influencer marketing. All the interviewed influencers have distinctive profile styles. I2 has a sports-related content mostly, and I1 has a profile which shares news about travel and fashion articles. I3 is a food influencer. They do not have anything in common, but their use of social media channels. The audience is looking for constant entertainment in many different ways and in order to remain attractive, influencers play along with the market demand. The influencers are well aware that they need to be authentic and they try to advertise the product they actually use. I3 likes to use Instagram because it is a very open space, with no hate speech or politics. She believes that her honesty and openness about the variety of food places in her area make her authentic. I1 considers that her unique way of presenting interesting news on different topics makes her attractive to the audience. As well, she advertises only products and services which are in daily use by herself, never pushing something that has no value according to her beliefs, as heard from I1: *“ I check their products/services and always test them before I start offering them to others. I am collaborating only with brands in which I am really interested, the ones in which I shop, use, watch, wear privately etc. I stick to my values and I am not greedy.”*

A distinction is not important only for influencers but for the brands as well. The companies always want to be one step before the rest. I4 has shared how her company is standing in front of the rest competitors in the industry – in a caring, innovative and impactful way. They try to be closer to the audience's needs, passions and values by building advocacy for their brand. In the sense of giveaways, free samples etc, they are very limited as working with health professionals, but when working on the local strategies for other products micro/nano influencers are included in the gifting programs. I5 is working on a brand which is very eco-clean-oriented, which educates the audience and shows environmental care but also cares for the consumers' health and well-being. She mentions that working with influencers has brought a much bigger audience on their social media channels, but this did not necessarily translate into sales. I6 states that they are distinctive from the competitors in their reliable adaptable and accessible services. They always tend to choose the proper influencer so they bring up the conversion of sales and increase brand awareness. As her company is constantly working with different types of influencers, they are up to date with all the big events for engaging the audience and giving free samples to attract consumers.

The pressure to present a perfect social media life, but at the same time be realistic in advertising the right products feel forced and leads to disengagement. As we see from I1: *“I know the audience can say that being an influencer is a trending profession now, but I genuinely grew my follower base by being authentic, talking about all the things that I go through, all my anxiety issues, my weight-loss journey, it was like my personal diary. There was a situation where one brand wanted to work with me and pay me to be one of their spokespeople. I think it was for weight-loss tea, but I don’t relate to that. I am into healthy habits, not rapid results. I am honest and natural, I think people recognise that.”*

The audience knows how to approach and acknowledge uniqueness and authenticity. I7 says: *“Positive recommendations from multiple trusted influencers, along with genuine and detailed user reviews in the comments, significantly influence my decision to purchase. Authentic content that shows the product in use and addresses common concerns can also motivate me to buy.”* But, on the other side, they are very precautions. I8 states: *“I believe that influencers are doing their job and they are not my friend, so I take everything they say with a grain of salt. Their stories can be real, especially when they post vlogs, but that can also be staged to pump up the views count and engagement.”*

4.4.2.3 Public scrutiny

Influencers are always under public scrutiny. Their actions and opinions - especially partnerships are profoundly analyzed by their followers, non-followers and the whole media. This so-called investigation can lead to scandals, backlash, and reputational damage which affects both influencers and the brands they are connected with. As influencers make a profit from their content, the consumers believe that they are allowed to hold them accountable. I1 says: *“I used to have anxiety attacks, and I was very sensitive about most of the things that were commented online. Now, after so many years, I just block the people with the rude comments and continue with my work. There are a lot of different opinions in the online world, not everyone can like me.”* Public scrutiny can cross the line into harassment, so setting boundaries in certain cases is crucial.

I3 is very protective of the profile she’s been building for years, she always tries to stay calm and respond peacefully to the audience. She accepts the negative feedback as constructive feedback and tries to improve herself. I2 understands that by handling negative feedback effectively, he can turn some potentially damaging situations into an opportunity to demonstrate his commitment to the followers and improve the brand’s reputation that has chosen him as a representative. As a negative outcome of the influencer marketing, I3 mentions that at the moment when she opened her wine bar, many of the brands she collaborated thought she betrayed them and considered her a fierce competitor. However, she states that this calmed down after a while after they realized that there was space for everyone on the market. I1 had a negative experience with a magazine for which she partnered, and after the photos were published - she experienced

very bad feedback which made her influencer work very hard in the following years. Now, she is very carefully choosing the brands for which she works.

The influencer marketing law is not very restrictive in North Macedonia, where all influencers can work and earn from influencer marketing. They are not obliged to have a written statement or show or highlight a sponsored post somewhere on the profile with a proper tag clarification. Nonetheless, they all try to make it clear what is paid advertising and what is regular review. In order to track their success, they use Facebook/Instagram Analytics, which is pretty straightforward for the company that wants to book them. When it comes to multiple platforms, I7's main channel is Instagram, but she also has accounts on other platforms. For example, TikTok videos, cannot be posted on Facebook, same as posts that are not suitable for TikTok, says I3.

Social media users are carefully observing both influencers and brands. I8 tries to be as much as neutral as possible, but yet she's sceptical: *"If I see the same product on different platforms, promoted by many influencers, I know that I need to wait for some period before I decide to buy it, just so the real reviews from consumers come in."* I8 believes there's a good side to trust in: *"Like anything else in the free market, social media is also a place where companies, with big budgets, can bombard you with ads and subconsciously influence you. Or they can be direct and shameless, but if you can filter out the garbage there is a wonderful world of content on the internet, created by people with genuine passion and creativity. It made me aware and helped me distinguish between quality and shameless marketing."*

A brand is particularly in the spotlight of the audience, each move counts and is putting his image on the line. I5 says: *"We do not want to be linked to people who use curse language on their social media, when you have an ambassador, they need to live and breathe your product, imagine us selling diapers through an influencer that curses, swears, uses obscene language, that's not the family picture we want to paint, so we do vet properly the potential influencers and their content and how they reply to people on their posts."* Associating the brand with the right person is a crucial part of avoiding public criticism.

4.4.3 Fundamental concerns regarding the consumers

Social media users are very often exposed to manipulative advertising, big expectations, and overconsumption pressures driven by marketing. These practices can erode trust, create dissatisfaction, and contribute to harmful behaviours, especially among younger audiences. The vulnerable side of influencer marketing is that influencers are judged after the campaign, as they do not deserve to be part of the fame and success. The following part explores the trust issues and scepticism, the vulnerability of specific audience groups and overconsumption of the social media platforms.

4.4.3.1 Trust issues and scepticism

As technology and algorithms change very often, all three groups need to be familiar with the latest news, which they do by following famous influencers worldwide, researching online, checking with their influencers-friends and keeping in touch with particular industry experts. When it comes to strategy to grow the audience and engagement, influencers use hashtags, boost the sponsored posts, organize giveaways, post regularly and interact with the audience as much as possible. This is appreciated by the consumers, however they do not show much attention to the other posts. They can all notice the ignorance of the audience when it comes to sponsored posts. I2 has a bigger reach on the sponsored posts, however he does not notice that in the comments and likes section. I3 is assured that at least 70% of her current audience tries her recommendations, however, she thinks that likes and comments are not happening as much as on the regular posts as it comes naturally for ads for the people. Same as when a person watches an ad on television and changes the channel as soon as they start, just now the channel is giving you something that will surely attract you. But, when there is a gifting section for the audience, then it changes the game. The audience prefers the personalized approach, everything else feels enforced, so as per I10: *“I believe that influencers that do a lot of different partnerships that are not even in the same category or related in any way seem like they just advertise whatever they get offered for money/compensation. On the other hand, influencers having many paid partnerships but with identical brands makes me believe that they really genuinely trust in that brand, so it’s more likely for me to check out their offering.”*

Followers feel misled when influencers exaggerate product benefits, use filters, or fail to disclose sponsorships. I9 says: *“There are cases when the influencers are promoting lifestyle and values which do not correspond with the reality. For example, they could promote that it is cool to use some products, to attend some events or to visit some places that are affordable to small number of people, which causes frustration among the wider population to whom it is promoted. Also, it creates a value that you will be more accepted by the people if you can afford such a lifestyle.”* As in theory, the point of advertising over social media is to try to sell your products best. When the audience comes to buy something, that is the power of the word, influencers know how to make you pay for something. Usually, the positive feedback is thanks to the good comments on the posts and clear review videos. What makes the audience buy something is their personal need, opposite to the good reviews and comments from the influencers. Social media users, all state that if they do not need the product they will not fall for the advertisement and buy it. When it comes to the audience side, majority of the social media users engage more on normal posts rather than sponsor posts. I7 is saying: *“I engage more with regular posts than with sponsored ones. I find regular posts to be more authentic and relatable, which prompts me to like, comment, or share. However, if a sponsored post is well-integrated, genuinely useful, and transparently disclosed, I might engage with it similarly. The quality*

and relevance of the content are the primary factors that drive my engagement, regardless of whether the post is sponsored or not.” They feel the sponsored posts are unauthentic even though they are in line with the influencer’s profile. Excessive sponsorship forces the consumers to lose interest, ignore the content and decrease engagement. I7 has stated: *“I unfollowed a certain influencer primarily because their content became inundated with irrelevant advertisements and uninteresting Instagram stories. Their frequent shifts in opinions and persistent requests for followers to support personal projects felt insincere and self-serving, diminishing the authenticity and value of their content in my eyes. As a result, I found their posts less engaging and decided to unfollow to curate a more meaningful feed aligned with my interests and preferences.”*

As per the social media users, the influencers they follow usually communicate with them via comments, Q&A sessions, or live interaction in real-time. In regards to unfollowing a certain influencer, most of the answers were going in the same direction. As soon as an influencer profile starts advertising irrelevant services or products, it changes the audience’s feedback and loses them. They diminish their authenticity and ruin their image in the public eye. Also, overposting, repetitive posts or actions, can mean an issue as the exposure need to be done with a proper tune and make sense for the audience. As social media users are not very trustworthy, they follow the advertisement with their investigation and additional reviews. On the other hand, the users suspect and consider each collaboration between a brand and an influencer to be unreliable, and each collaboration does not correlate with the other at all. Users do not like unrelated content, for example, a beauty influencer recommending nicotine pouches, or energy drinks. These types of endorsements look artificial and give the wrong impression to the consumers.

Brands are aware and they try to mitigate the risks, in ways like choosing the right influencer and being open about the sponsored posts. Brands representatives try to push for many actions so that the services and products they are selling are seen and sold. I6 says: *“Yes, the businesses I have worked with have taken actions to increase the number of consumers. These actions have included using popular influencers to endorse products or services, organizing big events to engage with the audience and promote brand awareness, and offering free products or services as part of promotional campaigns. These strategies have been employed to attract new consumers, retain existing ones, and drive business growth.”*

4.4.3.2 Vulnerability of specific audience group

Certain audience groups are more vulnerable to influencer marketing, making it easier to be manipulated, misled, or emotionally influenced by the content creators. They follow various influencers to listen to some good advice, and new trends, to laugh at the content if it’s comedy, learn something new if it’s an educational channel etc.

As per the social media users, the interviewees have answered, that they mostly follow either mega influencers, as they are curious about their private lifestyle, and micro-influencers as they believe they can relate to them in many situations, can buy some similar things or copy some of their everyday routines. Also, nano influencers are on the list to follow, as they can advice for a certain event in the area, some reliable service, or share some local news. Influencers have a positive impact on the everyday lives of social media users in general. However, presenting content to children and teenagers, who have strong attachment to parasocial relationships and lack of critical thinking can intrigue harmful trends. Young adults who are still financially dependent, women who enjoy skincare, elderly who are low digitally educated, and consumers with low income – these are all specific consumer groups, that should be ensured by ethical marketing practises as they need specific help to access platforms.

Even though influencers are targeted by many negative comments, they still have in mind the importance of the treatment of some groups of audiences. I3 says: *“By responding in a polite way and looking on the bright side. I never argue with the audience, but try to understand their stand of view. I see the negative feedback as a helpful way to show me on what to work better.”* I1 states that she declined a weight-loss tea ad, just because it is not suitable for her to promote such things as she is not a fan of fast solutions. That might have shown a different picture to some of her audience which is still in a sensitive age.

Brands try to avoid exploitation emotionally or financially. They have the social responsibility to stay united with the moral systems. I4 says that they handle well negative feedback as they treat it with genuine interest to give a value-added answer. I4 says: *“Social media is a source of invaluable feedback to us, so we aim to capture all negative comments (or mentions of the brand outside of our accounts) and use them in shaping our social media strategy. We address them with a response wherever possible.”*

4.4.3.3 Overconsumption

The average number of influencers, that the interviewed social media users follow is around 40, which is pretty significant to have certain opinions about the topic. The most common content the interviewed audience follows are videos or podcasts which are very popular lately. A podcast is a digital medium that has audio (or video) chapters that concern a given theme (Berry, 2006).

While a lot of brands understand the role of influencer marketing in promoting consumerism, very few are taken as responsible for encouraging excessive spending. I6 states that from her brand’s perspective, her company: *“prioritizes protecting brand's reputation and maintaining transparency with the audience.”* They are not profit-driven, but also they never promote minimalism or sustainability. Overconsumption can be explained as an activity of compelling surplus of an object, resource or service (Dukes, 2019). As I am talking about social media, in this case, this term refers to overuse the of

digital platforms, which often indicates a lack of productivity and media fatigue. Mindful consumption is the solution. Overuse can also negatively impact the users' mental health and self-image which is making it essential to set boundaries and digital wellness habits.

The social media users, mostly state that they only buy some item if really needed, not just if advertised. I9 says: *"If the promotion of any product is exaggerated, I will definitely not buy it. If the promotion is interesting and shows the functionality of the product, I will be inspired to buy it."* They say that they do have trouble sometimes not buying something advertised by their favourite influencer. They feel that everyone has it, so they have to own it as well. Social media apps, give an illusion of a temporary escape from real-life stress and responsibilities, and the consumers sometimes forget to control themselves. I8 says; *"social media has created a world where everyone is constantly comparing themselves and thinking they have less or are worth less. It has influenced me to think that I need all these products when in reality I have never used them ever."*

Influencers go into excessive consumerism as they justify the usage of the social media platforms as work duty. To stay in the trending and relevant, they use the excuse of their job, as they showcase each new product, outfit, appearance, and service that they are using which slowly turns their whole life into a profitable space. I1 answering on the question, about the risks in influencer marketing states: *"Keeping up with the latest trends, promoting an idealized picture-perfect lifestyle, an ever-shifting algorithm that never works in influencer's favour, complete loss of privacy, and losing my authentic self within time."* – major concerns after she started working influencer marketing.

4.4.4 The Future of Influencer Marketing

Brand representatives are very confident in influencer marketing and rely on steady established rules. I6 believes that: *"Influencer marketing will continue to shape the future by evolving alongside social media platforms and consumer behaviour. As long as influencers maintain authenticity and trust with their audiences, they will remain powerful advocates for brands in an increasingly digital world."* On the other side, I4 is strongly confident that: *"The definition of an influencer will expand. It's too focused on lifestyle social media now. In my line of work, journalists, healthcare professionals, policymakers, corporate executives – are all building out their social media presence; these are the most popular influencers of tomorrow."*

Social media users tend to avoid unrealistic fashion trends and discourage promoting a high-class social lifestyle. They expect a change in the marketing flow, despite being more careful with the endorsements of the influencers and paying attention to how influencers impact societal norms and personal well-being. I9, regarding the future predictions and expectations, states: *"I think it will start to slowly decline and turn into something different altogether. These new generations will create a new world of marketing, while the existing influencers will sell products to old ladies on Instagram."*

Subconsciously the influencers bombard the audience with ads and shamelessly try to sell different sorts of entertainment, which is recognized by most of the users. I10 says: *“I believe influencer marketing will continue to play a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour and trends, driving more personalized and direct marketing strategies. However, I also think there will be an increasing demand for authenticity and transparency, pushing influencers and brands to be more ethical and genuine in their collaborations.”*

The future of the influencers is unpredictable, they all wait until the audience is firm and take the next step in the scenario, which is influencer’s product. Influencers, according to the answers from the interviews, predict that artificial intelligence will be making a lot of changes soon in influencer marketing. As per I2: *“We, as influencers, will be obliged to some new technology, new trends and probably new social media platforms. Influencer marketing will only develop in higher form and make the social media users more dependable on it.”* I1 expects AI to evolve into influencer marketing circles. I3 expects that videos will take over and most of the content will be presented in this way, *“Influencer marketing is an exceptionally fluid industry, essentially shaped by the trends, influenced by celebrities and tech developments. I expect it to grow even more and more, with the premises of AI.”*

5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I explore the main findings of this research, comparing their positive and negative sides, highlighting the dilemmas and potential issues associated with influencer marketing. As I emphasize the highlights with the explored literature and the obtained feedback through the interviews, this part gives a deeper understanding of the broader implications for all stakeholders involved.

5.1 Interpretation of findings

Looking back at the interview results, the most important factor revolves around choosing the right influencer for the brand. Indeed, each company needs to select a face for the product whose values, image, profile and background align with the brand’s identity. The reliability between the influencer and the brand is the number one condition for a successful continuous partnership (Lim et al., 2012). From the findings of the audience, it was noticed that as soon as the influencers’ profiles turn into commercial stands, the consumers leave the market as they are aware something is not feeling as natural and spontaneous as it used to be. Another potential threat for the brand is the reputation of the influencer who will always in a way be connected with the company, even a long time after the campaign has ended. The control cannot be fully in the hands of the brand but it helps in case any crisis arises. All the influencers from my study find influencer marketing

as a constructive way of advertising in the twenty-first century. During the interviews with the three representatives of the brands, they all acknowledged the fact that influencer marketing has helped their companies a lot in the development and increased sales rates.

Comparing the answers between the influencers and the consumers, there appears to be a practice that is going in the right direction for the brand and that is influencers being authentic and sharing honest opinions, moreover, always disclosing sponsored posts. Cases like buying followers, forging likes and comments, faking giveaways or using bots to increase engagement from the audience are doomed to be injurious to the brand. These actions were commented on by Ferina et al. (2021) as trivial temporary results which cannot be maintained in the long run. Brands should always perform an in-depth analysis of the influencers before starting any cooperation to avoid consumer boycotts causing damage to their reputation (Ferina et al., 2021). This supporting literature is just complementary to the feedback from the interviews with the brand representatives who verified these facts.

Based on the analyses of the interviews, influencer marketing is very helpful to companies to connect with the audience but overusing it can negatively affect the brand. Any certain brand that is pushing multiple campaigns over many groups of influencers can feel abusive and turn off the buying power. Being careful as much as possible with choosing the right faces for the campaigns, will not help if the promotions are excessive. This might indicate speculations that the brand is unreliable or the product does not have such an important value. As per the responses received from the influencers, the sponsored posts usually have less engagement feedback than the regular ones (if not endorsed), as the audience suspects the only motive behind them is financial. Consumers are attentive to the actions of the influencers and as such, if it does not feel natural or aligned with the profile, the brand loses the loyalty and credibility that it reached. Compared to the literature, the same statements go along with what Baccarella was stating in 2018.

The influencers are the specialists when it comes to creating content that provokes feedback from their audience. Content-wise, the influencers are constantly under the attention of the public eye, which is tiring as they need to follow each hot topic, so they can participate by providing their opinions and reviews. That shows tremendous consistency in their commitment and work on a certain topic. They suffer from a lack of privacy, they must be authentic to gain credibility. The influencers are the most respected public among youngsters, but they can also be the most hated public person in a second. Social media presents people as guilty until proven innocent. In the end, it is too late for their reputation to recover. Social media is unforgiving, the brands are held to increasingly high standards and influencers are immediately punished for their missteps (Backaler, 2018). The law, depending on the country in which the influencer is working, exists but it should have more controlled regulation and better recognition of this type of profession. The influencers are calling for ethical and transparent practices in daily life so that the audience can differentiate the products and services sold or just mindfully recommended. Influencer marketing can sometimes be detrimental to the influencers, as they have

pressure to maintain good numbers on their platforms, they are under exposure by the media, and judgement by others. As I2 expressed: *“With millions of influencers vying for attention on social media, the competition can be fierce. There's constant pressure to produce engaging content, gain followers, and stay relevant, which can lead to stress, burnout, and even feelings of inadequacy. In my opinion, as the brands can choose the wrong influencer, the influencers as well can choose to work with the wrong brand, which can do more harm than good.”* Influencers should follow all updates and keep the audience well-informed with well-checked information. The focus on the future should be the recognition of the profession as it is, promoting products or services with caution and keeping it real with the audience in terms of harmful content.

Influencers by deciding to open a social media profile and start this type of occupation, are consenting to all the consequences coming with it. They display their private life, exposing it to the judgement of others openly, without a right to privacy. One of the interviewed influencers, according to her experience so far, states the risks that concern her the most in influencer marketing as an occupation: *“Keeping up with the latest trends, promoting an idealized picture-perfect lifestyle, an ever-shifting algorithm that never works in influencer's favour, complete loss of privacy, and losing my authentic self within time.”* That is harmfully affecting their mental health facing many difficulties and pressure from the media especially in an extremely competitive marketplace, affirming the statements of Hudders & Lou (2023). Regardless of the fact that the thesis is mainly focused on the brand, it is beneficial to know the consequences that influencer marketing causes to consumers and brands too. This includes sensitive topics like psychological and emotional threats to individuals. The unrealistic picture can prevail in some cases and affect negatively the young population who are at the most vulnerable age. I8 noticed the internal conflict this creates for individuals: *“There are cases when the influencers are promoting lifestyle and values which do not correspond with the reality. For example, it could be promoted that it is cool to use some products, to attend some events or to visit some places that are affordable to small number of people, which causes frustration among the wider population to whom it is promoted. Also, it creates a value that you will be more accepted by the people if you can afford such a lifestyle. I believe that it is not affecting me much, because I have some experience with marketing, and I am familiar with the process of influencing.”* The devious covert side of influencer marketing and masked advertising without any limits confirms the Boerman et al. (2017) statements emphasising the genuine conflict.

The negative effects arise within the influencers but between the social media users as well. Cyberbullying is a serious issue, closely connected with depression, and insomnia, leading to extreme cases like suicide (Baccarella et al., 2018). As a term, cyberbullying is explained as aggressive behaviour with the intent to cause physical or mental discomfort to others (Randall, 2003). I1 mentions the anxiety issues from the past, but she confesses that she has managed to overcome that mental issue and now she is much stronger.

The research gives a fair share to the expansion of the future growth of influencer marketing which according to the results from the interviews, will move forward towards artificial intelligence, it would be more transparent, users more dependable on it, keeping the content authentic and closer to the audience. In Table 2 you can see the positive and negative sides of influencer marketing from the influencers' point of view.

Considering that influencer marketing is constantly changing, the social media are spreading more and more every day, the results are relevant at the time the research was performed. The future focus should be choosing a different approach for the data collection with a broader part of the consumers. Table 1 presents the benefits and weaknesses seen from the brand's point of view.

The individuals who should be touched by each commercial, are the audience. Table 3 summarises the good and the bad side from the consumers' perspective.

Table 3: Pros and Cons of Influencer Marketing from Brand's Point of View

Pros of influencer marketing	Cons of influencer marketing
Increased brand awareness	High cost
Higher sales	Lack of authenticity
Expanding reach	Limited reach
Quality-generated content for the audience	Potential for negative exposure
Boost audience engagement	Brand reputational risk
Focus on target audience	Difficulties in measuring results
Accelerate feedback on the product/services	Difficulties in choosing the right brand ambassador
Establish brand credibility and trust	Dependence of influencer's behaviour
Strengthen relationship with consumers	Lack of control over actions
Easily accessible to all	Content unaligned with the brand ethics

Source: Own work.

Table 4: Pros and Cons of Influencer Marketing from Influencer's Point of View

Pros of influencer marketing	Cons of influencer marketing
Freedom of expression and creativity Freedom to control the brand Big potential for high earnings Flexible working hours Opportunity to collaborate with big companies Free products and events Chance to build own community Power to influence audience	Loss of privacy Pressure for authenticity Stay ahead of latest news and trends Need for constant content preparation Subject to online abuse Inconsistent earnings Increased scrutiny Lack of account security Prepare to be engaged with audience anytime

Source: Own work.

Table 5: Pros and Cons of Influencer Marketing from Consumer's Point View

Pros of influencer marketing	Cons of influencer marketing
Chance to understand a product/service better Enjoy quality-generated content Share actual feedback for a used product/service Be part of a certain community Be updated with latest news Having a sense of belonging and friendship	High probability of purchasing unnecessary items Being witness to social media abuse Increased visibility of advertisements Not being able to distinguish between ad and honest opinion Comparison of influencer's extravagant lifestyle and user's one Addiction to social media Insomnia as a result of overconsumption The appearance of the halo effect

Source: Own work.

5.2 Limitations and future research directions

Although the thesis adds to the existing body of knowledge, certain limitations do exist in the study. The goal was to get a comparative analysis of the outcomes obtained during the qualitative interviews concerning the dangers of influencer marketing. There were 11 people interviewed, and each interview had approximately 20 questions. Between these 11 persons, 3 influencers, 3 brand representatives, and 5 social media users. With these interviews, the point of saturation has not yet been reached. For the future, the recommendation is that the number of interviewed individuals should be increased until data saturation is reached. By interviewing more people, we might get a greater variety of responses, which can enhance the quality of the research. The limitation in this case is the subjective characteristic of the data saturation. The researcher decides whether the data collected is enough or needs to be explored further with more personas.

Looking at the topic, as it highlights the negative side of influencer marketing, it was quite problematic for some of the interviewees. It was noticeable that they did not want to share any negative experiences and subtly avoided the negativities and kept only the good side or shared some general opinion about it. The influencers interviewed were scared to openly talk about the many challenges they were facing, as they were afraid it would have some effect on their image and collaborations.

Geographically, the majority of the respondents come from North Macedonia, therefore the result cannot be applied to other areas. Also, looking at the nationality, even if they do not reside in North Macedonia, they are all born and raised there, so ethnic variations, purchase behaviours, certain advertising practices for sure vary between countries. This is very important when we are reading the results, as a general assumption is not an opinion, as this applies to a specific territory. Results may vary if the sample is geographically more balanced. Following the examined results, they might be affected by the subjective perception of the respondents.

Likewise, one of the biggest limitations of the research is the sample method which was made by my personal choice. The interviewed people were connected with my social circles, familiarities or the ones who were willing to spend some time and give answers to my questions. For the planned time that the research was done, the feedback was received, but it might not have been as protracted as it would have been if I had explored persons with which I was unfamiliar. It has some consequences like getting the expected answers. As well the limitation of the diversity of the interviewees is present. Most of my interviewees are young, with finished bachelor's degrees and the majority - female. For the future, to escape from the lack of diversity, a profile of people with who the researchers are unknown might help.

The fast-evolving environment of this sensitive subject demonstrates that some perceptions might be obsolete very fast. The time restraints do not work in my favour, as

the interviews were performed summer 2024, but if they were done now, some answers would for sure differ and bring different outcomes.

Following on the received outcome from the research, it is important to acknowledge the fact that influence is subjective, with distinctive effects on each individual dependent on their current condition, experience and belief. Therefore, the results presented could have been divergent if other persons had been questioned. Also, the precise period of the search is a good clue to know that if we had done this interview a year or two earlier or later, different results would come up as influencer marketing is constantly developing.

Moreover, the study was focused on beauty, food, sports or overall lifestyle influencers and their followers, and the findings could have been much more distinctive if it had been done in another field or if other influencers had been targeted. Indeed, some influencers might be trustworthy when others are not and it's something very hard to determine. Furthermore, this study was mainly conducted on specific nationalities (Macedonians) which limited the result from a cultural point of view as it is another factor of variation.

Lastly, considering the time limitation, no particular study was done on any social network, which would be stimulating as the content prepared and shared with the audience by the influencers is not the same for all social media platforms, so each network might be affected differently. The dark side of influencer marketing on Instagram might not be as dark as the influencer marketing used on X due to their algorithm difference.

Ultimately, even though the topic is exploring how influencer marketing affects negatively brands, other stakeholders like influencers and social media users – consumers, were involved in the study. Nevertheless, there is no contribution from the regulators or the marketing experts, whose opinions might be very important and lead to new results.

6 CONCLUSION

The research study focuses mainly on practices that can affect the brand's established name, integrity, awareness and connection with the clients, with an additional side concentration on the dangers that influencer marketing can have on the consumers and influencers. My initial thought, when I came up with the idea for this thesis, was to dive deep into a fairly attractive topic of influencer marketing. Exploring influencer marketing makes you aware that it is in fact, the most prominent form of communication and advertising online (Jayasinghe, 2021). Influencer marketing has some grey areas in certain ways and a handful of risks can appear through the cooperation. But, at the same time, as proven in the research, it is one of the fastest-developing marketing strategies which if implemented correctly can offer great results. Nonetheless, there is a harmful side of it, which needs to be treated cautiously.

Putting it in writing sounds very simple - choosing an influencer who will precisely present the brand's niche, at the same time showing the brand's values. The negative part

comes after the campaign is out and some things go out of control. “This post has been sponsored by...” or “There is a discount if you use this promo code” are just a few of the statements that have been quite popular on social media in recent years. There isn’t any chance to go through the news feeds without encountering a single sponsored post. Traditional advertising and direct marketing actions are slowly but surely losing the audience’s attention or are viewed with scepticism by consumers (Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018).

To answer the research question, indeed the companies are very well aware of the dark side of influencer marketing, but at the same time are well prepared to act accordingly when things start to deteriorate. The companies who get in board and join with transparency about sponsorship as a part of honest and credible influencer-brand relationship, are leading their work in the right direction.

The results from the interviews confirm the main directives, which is that authentic, credible, trustworthy and diversity-driven influencer has a better probability of influencing the audience which results in positive feedback for the brand that is promoted, which leads to consumers increased interest and engagement. The essential goal is to reach consumers in the key moments that will impact their decisions.

Following the responses from the influencers, to use influencer marketing validly, the law regulations need strong monitoring and effective enforcement. The consumer protection law should be the top priority over the overly engaged influencers that pack social media with information. Providing the appropriate guidance can facilitate all the participants involved in the cycle. A responsible influencer and a professional brand will follow the regulations so that a better service is available to the consumers through a safe digital environment.

Overall, the research emphasizes that social media users believe that brands should manage each vulnerable topic through the influencers with care, transparency and straightforwardness. When a certain campaign is linked with a sensitive subject, the influencers should create a story for the community which will have in the background a lot of reasoning and consideration so that it could be well understood from many points of view. In specific cases, the goal of the campaign might lead to simple support to the community, not to increase sales. Steering through the risks is the key to an effective influencer marketing campaign.

Given the insecurities seen in the responses of the clients, when it comes to the failure of a campaign, the most important from both sides, influencers and brands – is to take accountability for the decisions made. Regardless of the error that has led to it, this is the key to maintaining an authentic and long-term relationship with the consumers. Some campaigns are well developed and accomplished perfectly, but they weren’t accepted well by a particular part of the audience. In these cases, the brands should stand behind their choice and respond properly to the feedback of the audience. Ignorance is never a good feedback for the clients. As per them, the influencers will continue to scale and grow in

the further period, with more marketers and brands adding this feature as an essential part of the marketing mix in every cooperation. Platforms like Instagram will start rolling out features that will help measure ROI more productively, so influencers can get a better perception of their results. New social networks might also appear, giving advanced chances for brands and influencers to develop their content and message to the world.

Influencer marketing keeps being a very crucial part that brands must use and carefully approach its threats. Integrating a strong compliance operation, considering ethical norms and giving precedence to longstanding cooperations should be of service to avoid successfully the dark side.

Finally, I would like to end this thesis by using my favourite quote, which is exceptionally aligned with the discussed topic, by the co-founder of Intuit, Scott Cook: “ *A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is. It is what consumers tell each other it is.* ”

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Povzetek (Summary in the Slovene Language)

Vplivnostno trženje je danes ena izmed najpomembnejših oblik digitalnega oglaševanja, ki preoblikuje sodobne komunikacijske strategije in vpliva na navade porabnikov. Obstaja veliko definicij, ena izmed širših pa je tista, ki jo ponujata Brown in Hayes (2008). Vplivnostno trženje opredeljujeta kot vrsto dejanja, pri katerem ena oseba vpliva na porabnikove nakupne odločitve.

To magistrsko delo proučuje manj raziskane, pogosto spregledane vidike vplivnostnega trženja, njegovo temno plat ter kako ta vpliva na blagovne znamke, vplivneže in porabnike. Ker vplivnostno trženje še naprej prevladuje v digitalnem oglaševanju in preoblikuje sodobno komunikacijo, želim z mojo raziskavo odkriti tveganja, izzive in nenamerne posledice, ki se pojavijo, ko blagovne znamke sodelujejo z vplivneži na družbenih omrežjih.

Glavni cilj študije je analizirati negativne vidike vplivnostnega trženja in razumeti njihov vpliv na ključne deležnike: blagovne znamke, vplivneže in porabnike. Z uporabo kvalitativnega raziskovalnega pristopa, ki vključuje poglobljene intervjuje z 11 udeleženci (trije vplivneži, trije predstavniki blagovnih znamk in pet aktivnih uporabnikov družbenih omrežij), delo predstavlja primerjalni pogled na to, kako vsaka skupina zaznava temno plat vplivnostnega trženja.

Raziskava se osredotoča na sodelovanja vplivnežev v življenjskih kategorijah, kot so lepota, hrana in fitnes, večina udeležencev pa prihaja iz makedonske kulturne sfere. Ta geografski in demografski fokus zagotavlja globlji kontekst, vendar predstavlja tudi določene omejitve.

Pomembna tema, ki je izstopala, je pomen avtentičnosti v vplivnostnem trženju (Block & Lovegrove, 2021). Intervjuvanci so dosledno izpostavljali, da so občinstva vse bolj skeptična do vsebin, ki se zdijo preveč promocijske ali neavtentične. Vplivneži, ki ohranjajo preglednost in prikazujejo pristno povezavo z izdelki, ki jih podpirajo, imajo večjo verjetnost za ohranjanje verodostojnosti in spodbujanje zaupanja.

Blagovne znamke so zelo dovzetne za poškodbe ugleda, ko partnerstva z vplivneži ne uspejo (Stubbs et al., 2019). Neusklajenost v vrednotah, neprimerno vedenje vplivnežev ali slabo vodene kampanje lahko privedejo do javnega odziva, izgube zaupanja porabnikov in dolgoročnih poškodb ugleda blagovne znamke.

Vplivneži se soočajo s pomembnim pritiskom, da ohranjajo brehibno podobo, izpolnjujejo pričakovanja blagovnih znamk in nenehno ustvarjajo privlačne vsebine. Mnogi intervjuvanci so poudarili, da se vplivneži pogosto izogibajo govorjenju o negativnih izkušnjah, saj se bojijo izgubiti partnerstva ali škoditi svojemu ugledu, kar kaže na psihološki vpliv tega dela.

Z vidika porabnikov stalna izpostavljenost sponzoriranim objavam vodi do impulzivnega nakupovanja, nezadovoljstva in v nekaterih primerih nezaupanja do vplivneža in

blagovne znamke. Obstaja tudi skrb glede zavajajočih oglaševalskih praks, ki brišejo mejo med osebnim mnenjem in plačanim promocijskim sporočilom (Hudders & Lou, 2023). Raziskava poudarja potrebo po močnejših regulativnih okvirjih, ki bi zaščitili porabnike in zagotovili preglednost pri razkrivanju sponzoriranih vsebin. Vplivnostno trženje deluje v hitro spreminjajočem se digitalnem prostoru, pomanjkanje doslednega nadzora pa lahko vodi do neetičnih praks in izkoriščanja zaupanja porabnikov.

Raziskava izpostavlja tudi več omejitev:

- Velikost in raznolikost vzorca: Raziskava je bila omejena na 11 udeležencev, ki večinoma izhajajo iz moje osebne in profesionalne mreže. Odsotnost nasičenosti podatkov in homogena skupina (večinoma mladi in izobraženi) omeujeta ugotovitve.
- Kulturna in geografska pristranskost: Ker večina udeležencev prihaja iz podobnih kulturnih okolij, vpogledi morda ne odražajo širših globalnih dinamik vplivnostnega trženja.
- Časovna občutljivost: Podatki so bili zbrani poleti 2024, kar pomeni, da so že morda zastareli zaradi hitrega razvoja trendov družbenih omrežij, pričakovanj porabnikov in algoritmov platform.
- Pomanjkanje specifičnih raziskav na platformah: Študija ni podrobneje preučila posameznih družbenih omrežij. Vendar pa ima vplivnostno trženje lahko zelo različne učinke na različnih platformah, kot so Instagram, TikTok in X (prej Twitter), zaradi različnih algoritmov in vsebinskih formatov.
- Izključitev mnenj regulatorjev: Medtem ko so bili v raziskavo vključeni vplivneži, blagovne znamke in porabniki, mnenja trženjskih strokovnjakov, pravnikov in regulatorjev niso bila zajeta, kar bi lahko obogatilo razpravo o odgovornosti in etičnih standardih.

Kljub omejitvam to delo pomembno prispeva k razumevanju kompleksnosti in tveganj, povezanih z vplivnostnim trženjem. Poudarja, da čeprav ta oblika trženja lahko prinese zelo učinkovite rezultate, jo je treba izvajati previdno, s strateškim načrtovanjem in etično odgovornostjo (Backaler, 2018).

Za blagovne znamke je ključni poudarek, da se povežejo z vplivneži, ki poosebljajo njihove vrednote, ohranjajo avtentičnost in prednostno komunicirajo odkrito s svojim občinstvom. Vplivneži pa morajo skrbeti za svoje duševno zdravje, postavljati etične meje in pregledno razkrivati sodelovanja, da ohranijo svojo dolgoročno kredibilnost. Porabniki pa morajo razviti medijsko pismenost, da kritično ocenijo vsebine vplivnežev.

Poleg tega raziskava poudarja potrebo po nadaljnjem vključevanju raznolikih raziskav, ki vključujejo različne perspektive po geografskih območjih, starostnih skupinah in strokovnih disciplinah. Ker se vplivnostno trženje še naprej razvija, morajo temu slediti tudi regulativni sistemi, etični standardi in strateški okviri, ki ga usmerjajo.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Questions for social media users:

General Questions

Q1: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

Q2: What is the number of influencers that you follow on social media channels?

Q3: What kind of content format do you engage the most online? (There are many: blogs, podcasts, videos, newsletters, images, articles etc).

Q4: In which way are the influencers that you follow, communicating with the followers? (For example: giving feedback on direct messages, comments on posts, videos etc)

Q5: What is the reason for unfollowing a certain influencer? Please explain what the motives for that decision were.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q6: What types of influencers do you follow? And why exactly them? (There are nano, micro, macro, mega influencers)

Q7: How do they impact your everyday life? Can you give some examples, please?

Q8: Do you believe the influencers you follow and why?

Q9: What inspires you to buy something or not to buy it over the social media channels?

Q10: Do you think that the influencers you follow clearly state when they have sponsored content and when they share their opinion on something? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised need to be clearly addresses with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just a percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the consumers).

Q11: How important is for you to see the disclosure of the paid content in terms of credibility and how does it effect on your trust in their endorsement?

Q12: Please advise do you engage in the form of like, comment, share on the sponsored posts more or the regular ones, or you don't make any difference?

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q13: How do you feel about influencer having a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands versus many paid partnerships but with the identical brand?

Q14: How do you feel about brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers versus many paid partnerships but with the identical influencer?

Q15: If there are two competitive products, one advertised on social media via influencer marketing, the other using traditional channels like television or newspapers, which one would you choose and why?

Q16: How do you feel if an influencer which you are following provokes a scandal, does it influence only your relationship with the influencer or with the brand they are representing as well?

Q17: Under which circumstances would you purchase a product or service recommended by an influencer?

Q18: What makes a paid collaboration unreliable? Do you change the opinion you have of the influencer or the brand?

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q19: As a frequent user of social media platforms, are you aware that there are negative outcomes of influencer marketing? If yes, then how has that influenced your life?

Q20: Do you feel like the bad side is taking over the good side of the social media channels?

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q21: How do you believe the influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

Questions for brands:

General questions

Q1: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

Q2: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

Q3: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing?

Q4: To what level does influencer marketing have an influence on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

Q5: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand? (For reference: what if your posts do not reach a large audience, don't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q6: What makes your brand authentic and distinctive from the rest?

Q7: What is the key objective you aim to achieve when starting an influencer campaign?

Q8: Have you ever taken any actions to increase the number of your consumers? (For example: using popular influencers, creating big events for meet up with the audience, giving free products and services etc).

Q9: How do you track the success rates?

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q10: How does the influencer perform vs the expectation/calculations that you made before the campaign starts?

Q11: Can you advise the level of creative autonomy given to the influencers in your campaigns?

Q12: How do you ensure transparency and disclosure in influencer partnerships?

Q13: What significant benefits have you realized on the brand image and sales target since you started using influencers for the campaigns?

Q14: What do you take into consideration when choosing a new face for a new campaign? What are the selection criteria apart from credibility and likeability? (For reference: number of followers, target audience, competitors, budget, and resources).

Q15: I would like to ask you, if you recognize the difference between celebrities and influencers. With whom do you prefer to work with and why? (For clarity, celebrities are already known famous stars, who don't have to be experts to promote a product or a service; influencers are individuals who have the power to influence a certain community by sharing their experience over a service or a product).

Q16: How do you manage social media crisis situations? (It refers to situations like reckless behaviour from influencer that is connected with the brand, sensitive statements from an influencer representing the brand, bad conduct from an employee in the company etc).

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q17: How do you handle negative feedback or criticism on social media?

Q18: What is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the brand).

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q19: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

Questions for influencers:

General questions

Q1: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

Q2: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

Q3: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing? (To simplify the term, influencer marketing refers to each collaboration made between a popular social-media user and a certain brand in order to advertise brands' products or services to the audience.)

Q4: To what level does influencer marketing have an impact on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

Q5: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand? (For reference: what if your post doesn't reach a large audience, doesn't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q6: What makes your content authentic and distinctive from the rest?

Q7: How do you keep up with the social media trends and all the algorithm changes?

Q8: What strategies do you use to grow your audience and maintain high engagement levels? (For example: buying followers, accepting low budget projects, using hashtags etc).

Q9: What are the differences in the feedback from the sponsored posts versus the regular ones?

Q10: To what extent you are aware of the legislation for disclosure advertisements on social media platforms and how do you indicate it on your profile? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised needs to be clearly addressed with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just a percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the audience).

Q11: How do you track the success rates? (For reference: what is the reach, the follower growth over time, number of likes and comments received, link clicks, ROI etc).

Q12: Do you have a different strategy for each social media platform and if yes, why? (Referring to actions like: do you upload the same post on Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, X or do you adapt to each platform individually).

Q13: Describe a moment when you had to adapt to some meaningful change in your niche or industry.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q14: How do you align your personal brand with a company's brand when promoting their products/services?

Q15: Do you have to customize your profile to be in accordance with the brand that you are representing? (Customization refers in the sense of posting at a certain requested time, presenting content just as the brand wants it, recommend it exactly in the format the brand needs it).

Q16: What exactly is a match or mismatch when it comes to influencer-brand collaboration and how it affects each-others credibility?

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q17: How do you handle negative feedback on social media platforms?

Q18: How is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the personal profile).

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q19: What is the final goal for you as an influencer after reaching a certain level of experience and a significant number of followers?

Q20: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

Appendix 3: Interviews with the Three Target Groups

Interview 1 (I7 in the thesis) – Social media user (Evgenija Solarska)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: My name is Evgenija, and I'm 25 years old. I hold a bachelor's degree in economics and work full-time as a QA tester. Currently, I am based in Slovenia, where I am focused on advancing my professional career.

Question for group A: Social media users

General questions

Q: What is the number of influencers that you follow on social media channels?

A: The number of influencers I follow on social media channels varies depending on my interests and the platform. Currently, I follow approximately 50 influencers across different channels.

Q: What kind of content format do you engage the most online? (There are many: blogs, podcasts, videos, newsletters, images, articles etc).

A: I primarily engage with images, articles, and news online. Lately, podcasts have also caught my interest and I find myself listening to them more frequently. These formats resonate with me because they offer a mix of visual, informative, and auditory content that suits my preferences and interests.

Q: In which way are the influencers that you follow, communicating with the followers? (For example: giving feedback on direct messages, comments on posts, videos etc)

A: The influencers I follow communicate with their followers through various channels. They often post updates and messages on their stories, engage in Q&A sessions during YouTube videos, and host live sessions on Instagram where followers can ask questions in real time. These interactions help create a sense of community and allow for direct engagement, which I find valuable in staying connected and informed with their content.

Q: What is the reason for unfollowing a certain influencer? Please explain what the motives for that decision were.

A: I unfollowed a certain influencer primarily because their content became inundated with irrelevant advertisements and uninteresting Instagram stories. Their frequent shifts

in opinions and persistent requests for followers to support personal projects felt insincere and self-serving, diminishing the authenticity and value of their content in my eyes. As a result, I found their posts less engaging and decided to unfollow them to curate a more meaningful feed aligned with my interests and preferences.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What types of influencers do you follow? And why exactly them? (There are nano, micro, macro, mega influencers)

A: I follow micro-influencers for daily life and fashion because they offer relatable and practical content that fits seamlessly into my everyday routines. For sports like F1 and football, I follow macro and mega influencers who provide in-depth analysis, updates, and insights on a larger scale. Additionally, I am open to following nano influencers if they showcase a style that resonates with me and aligns with my personal interests.

Q: How do they impact your everyday life? Can you give some examples, please?

A: Influencers impact my everyday life in various ways. They often share advice on common problems through their stories, providing practical tips and relatable solutions that I can apply to my own situations. Sports influencers, keep me updated with the latest news and developments in the sports world, ensuring I never miss important updates or insights.

Q: Do you believe the influencers you follow and why?

A: I tend to be cautious about believing the influencers I follow. If I see that more than two or three influencers recommend the same product and the comments from their followers are positive, I am more likely to consider purchasing that product. However, there have been instances where I unfollowed influencers who appeared to promote products without genuinely trying them, as it was evident they were primarily focused on selling. Therefore, while I might occasionally trust influencers, I always check other people's opinions and reviews before making any decisions.

Q: What inspires you to buy something or not to buy it over social media channels?

A: Several factors inspire me to buy or not buy something over social media channels. Positive recommendations from multiple trusted influencers, along with genuine and detailed user reviews in the comments, significantly influence my decision to purchase. Authentic content that shows the product in use and addresses common concerns can also motivate me to buy. Conversely, if an influencer appears insincere or overly focused on sales without providing real value or honest feedback, it deters me from making a purchase. Additionally, negative reviews or lack of engagement from other followers also impact my decision not to buy a product.

Q: Do you think that the influencers you follow clearly state when they have sponsored content and when they share their opinion on something? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised need to be clearly addresses with a proper tag, even if it is

gifted, or the influencer makes just a percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the consumers).

A: I find that most influencers I follow do a good job of clearly stating when their content is sponsored. They typically use proper tags and disclosures, such as "ad" or "sponsored," to indicate when they are promoting a product or service. This transparency helps me distinguish between their genuine opinions and paid promotions. However, there have been a few instances where it was unclear if the content was sponsored, which made me more cautious about trusting their recommendations. Overall, I appreciate when influencers follow legislation and clearly explain the nature of their endorsements to maintain transparency with their audience.

Q: How important is for you to see the disclosure of the paid content in terms of credibility and how does it effect on your trust in their endorsement?

A: Seeing the disclosure of paid content is very important to me in terms of an influencer's credibility. Clear disclosure signals transparency and honesty, which enhances my trust in their endorsements. When influencers are upfront about sponsored content, it shows they respect their audience and comply with advertising regulations. This honesty makes me more likely to value their opinions and consider their recommendations. Conversely, if an influencer does not disclose paid content properly, it diminishes their credibility and makes me sceptical of their motives and endorsements.

Q: Please advise do you engage in the form of like, comment, share on the sponsored posts more or the regular ones, or you don't make any difference?

A: I engage more with regular posts than with sponsored ones. I find regular posts to be more authentic and relatable, which prompts me to like, comment, or share. However, if a sponsored post is well-integrated, genuinely useful, and transparently disclosed, I might engage with it similarly. The quality and relevance of the content are the primary factors that drive my engagement, regardless of whether the post is sponsored or not.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you feel about influencers having a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands versus many paid partnerships but with the identical brand?

A: I feel differently about influencers who have a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands compared to those who have multiple partnerships with the same brand. When an influencer works with many different brands, it can demonstrate versatility and a wide range of interests. However, it's essential that these partnerships align with the influencer's values and remain authentic to their audience. On the other hand, having multiple partnerships with the same brand can suggest a deeper, more established relationship. This continuity may enhance credibility and trust if the influencer consistently supports and uses the brand's products or services over time. Ultimately,

whether it's multiple partnerships with different brands or the same brand, what matters most to me is authenticity, transparency, and how well the partnerships resonate with the influencer's content and values.

Q: How do you feel about a brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers versus many paid partnerships but with the identical influencer?

A: As a consumer, I perceive brands differently based on whether they have numerous paid partnerships with many different influencers or focus on multiple partnerships with the same influencer. When a brand collaborates with a wide range of influencers, it can suggest versatility and the ability to reach diverse audiences, which is positive. However, I look for consistency in the messaging and authenticity in these partnerships to ensure they align with the influencers' usual content and values. Conversely, brands that maintain multiple partnerships with the same influencer can build a deeper connection and trust over time. This ongoing relationship often signifies genuine endorsement and commitment, which resonates positively with me as a consumer.

Q: If there are two competitive products, one advertised on social media via influencer marketing, the other using traditional channels like television or newspapers, which one would you choose and why?

A: I would likely choose the product advertised on social media via influencer marketing over the one promoted through traditional channels like television or newspapers. Influencer marketing appeals to me because it often feels more genuine and relatable. I appreciate that influencers can provide personal insights and experiences with the product, which helps me make a more informed decision. However, before making a final choice, I would conduct additional research to ensure the product meets my needs and has positive reviews from other users. I find that influencer endorsements combined with user feedback provide a balanced perspective that influences my purchasing decisions. In contrast, traditional TV ads are less appealing to me because they often lack authenticity and are more generalized. Additionally, I don't watch TV regularly anymore, so I'm less likely to be exposed to or influenced by traditional advertising methods. Overall, the personalized approach of influencer marketing coupled with thorough research aligns better with how I prefer to make purchasing decisions in today's digital age.

Q: How do you feel if an influencer which you are following provokes a scandal, does it influence only your relationship with the influencer or with the brand they are representing as well?

A: If an influencer I follow becomes embroiled in a scandal, it definitely affects my perception of them and to some extent, the brand they are representing. My relationship with the influencer may be significantly impacted depending on the severity and nature of the scandal. Trust and credibility are crucial in influencer marketing, so a scandal can undermine the authenticity I previously perceived in their content. Regarding the brand

they represent, my opinion may also be influenced, but to a lesser degree compared to the influencer. If the brand is represented by other influencers who maintain a positive reputation and continue to align with my values, then my trust in the brand may not be greatly affected. However, if multiple influencers associated with the brand face similar scandals, it could raise concerns about the brand's values and integrity. Ultimately, the impact on my relationship with both the influencer and the brand depends on how they handle the scandal, their transparency, and whether they take responsibility to address and rectify the situation appropriately.

Q: Under which circumstances would you purchase a product or service recommended by an influencer?

A: I would consider purchasing a product or service recommended by an influencer under several circumstances. If the influencer provides genuine before-and-after pictures showing noticeable results from using the product, it significantly influences my decision. Seeing real-life transformations helps validate the product's effectiveness. Moreover, if the influencer's followers express genuine satisfaction and positive feedback about the product in their comments or reviews, it further enhances my confidence in making a purchase. Knowing that others have had a positive experience lends credibility to the influencer's recommendation and makes me more inclined to try the product myself.

Q: What makes a paid collaboration unreliable? Do you change the opinion you have of the influencer or the brand?

A: Personally, I value influencers who maintain their authenticity and express their genuine opinions even within a paid collaboration. If an influencer clearly discloses their partnership and continues to provide honest feedback or personal experiences with the product, I'm more likely to trust their endorsement. However, if the collaboration feels insincere or if the influencer promotes the product without genuinely believing in it, it can affect my perception of the brand more than the influencer. Brands naturally aim to sell their products, but if their collaborations lack transparency or authenticity, it erodes my trust in their marketing efforts. While I appreciate influencers who maintain their voice and opinions, a paid collaboration becomes unreliable when authenticity is compromised. My opinion may change more towards the brand if their marketing tactics seem manipulative or lack transparency, rather than towards the influencer who might still maintain credibility based on their transparency and authenticity.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: As a frequent user of social media platforms, are you aware that there are negative outcomes of influencer marketing? If yes, then how has that influenced your life?

A: Yes, I'm aware of the negative outcomes of influencer marketing, such as lack of transparency and the potential for unrealistic expectations. This awareness has made me more selective about the influencers I follow and more cautious about the products I consider purchasing based on their recommendations. Furthermore, I prioritize

authenticity and thorough research to mitigate the risks associated with influencer endorsements on social media platforms. I also pay attention to how influencer marketing impacts societal norms and personal well-being, aiming to maintain a balanced perspective amidst the curated content.

Q: Do you feel like the bad side is taking over the good side of the social media channels?

A: Certainly! There's a noticeable trend where influencers are increasingly prioritizing paid promotions over sharing genuine opinions, which can make their profiles feel more like advertising billboards for brands. This shift blurs the line between what influencers authentically endorse and what they're paid to promote, leaving followers unsure of what to trust. This growing scepticism challenges the credibility of influencer marketing and its impact on consumer trust. It underscores the importance for influencers to maintain transparency and authenticity in their partnerships to continue positively influencing their audience.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: In my view, influencer marketing will continue to profoundly impact how brands connect with consumers in the future. Influencers have established themselves as trusted voices in various niches, making them pivotal in reaching targeted audiences effectively. As social media platforms evolve, influencers are likely to play an even larger role in shaping trends, influencing purchasing decisions, and shaping brand perceptions. However, ensuring authenticity and transparency will be crucial as regulations and consumer expectations evolve, ensuring that influencer partnerships maintain credibility and trustworthiness. Overall, influencer marketing seems set to remain a dynamic and influential force in the marketing world, adapting to new technologies and consumer preferences to stay relevant.

Interview 2 (I10 in the thesis) – Social media user (Mario Petkovski)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: My name is Mario, 25 years of age with a bachelor degree in computer science and engineering. I'm currently employed full-time as a test specialist, residing and working in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Question for group A: Social media users

General questions

Q: What is the number of influencers that you follow on social media channels?

A: I believe the number of influencers I follow would be around 30 to 40.

Q: What kind of content format do you engage the most online? (There are many: blogs, podcasts, videos, newsletters, images, articles etc).

A: I mostly engage with video content formats (YouTube) and also podcasts, mostly as audio formats.

Q: In which way are the influencers that you follow, communicating with the followers? (For example: giving feedback on direct messages, comments on posts, videos etc)

A: Communication with the followers for the influencers I follow most of the time are by replying to comments on their content, acknowledging the followers' posted opinions in their content (videos or articles) etc.

Q: What is the reason for unfollowing a certain influencer? Please explain what the motives for that decision were.

A: Almost all of the time that I happen to unfollow a certain influencer is when the content is filled with ads that much, that I start to lose focus of the main reason why I started following the influencer. Often times when an influencer does a major change of the content style they're posting and it doesn't suit my preference, I also tend to unfollow them.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What types of influencers do you follow? And why exactly them? (There are nano, micro, macro, mega influencers)

A: I follow different types of influencers. Some are mega, like the biggest names in sports which I have idolized growing up and followed their career, while others can even be nano/micro and are mostly local influencers that help me keep up with the news/events happening around a smaller community (news happening in my country, city etc.)

Q: How do they impact your everyday life? Can you give some examples, please?

A: Different types of influencers impact my life differently, depending on the category they fit in. For example: sports influencers I follow are helping me keep up with the sports' results/updates and maybe some are role models in a way of following their principles/discipline. Other example can include fashion influencers I follow, that are actively helping me keep up with the latest fashion trends.

Q: Do you believe the influencers you follow and why?

A: I believe most of the influencers I follow, depending on the context of the content they share of course. If it's an obvious advertisement of a product/service, then I would like to explore a bit more about it before I believe their posts. On the other hand, if it's some genuine content where advertising of something is not included, it's easier for me to believe that.

Q: What inspires you to buy something or not to buy it over the social media channels?

A: My personal needs are the main indicator for the decision to buy something over social media channels.

Q: Do you think that the influencers you follow clearly state when they have sponsored content and when they share their opinion on something? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised need to be clearly addresses with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the consumers).

A: Yes, more often than not, the influencers I follow clearly state if their post is an advertisement of any kind, whether that would be by tags on a post, or personally saying that the following part of the content is an advertisement for a product/service.

Q: How important is for you to see the disclosure of the paid content in terms of credibility and how does it effect on your trust in their endorsement?

A: Disclosing that something is an endorsement builds more trust with me for that influencer since I would know that they got a compensation for it and I would look into the product/service more before trying to pay for anything.

Q: Please advise do you engage in the form of like, comment, share on the sponsored posts more or the regular ones, or you don't make any difference?

A: I engage with sponsored posts the least, as most of the times I know a post is sponsored, I skip it. The only time I spend time on sponsored content is, if it's a product/service that I actually need at the moment.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you feel about influencers having a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands versus many paid partnerships but with identical brand?

A: I believe that influencers that do a lot of different partnerships that are not even in the same category or related in any way seem like they just advertise whatever they get offered for money/compensation. On the other hand, influencers having many paid partnerships but with the identical brand makes me believe that they genuinely trust in that brand, so it's more likely for me to check out their offering.

Q: How do you feel about brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers versus many paid partnerships but with the identical influencer?

A: Contrary to the previous answer, a brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers seems like it's trying too hard for attention to the public, which gives me an idea that the brand might not really be of high quality since it needs that much advertising (with exceptions). But for a brand that has many paid partnerships but with the identical influencer, seems like they know their audience and continue with their belief with the same influencer for further collaboration.

Q: If there are two competitive products, one advertised on social media via influencer marketing, the other using traditional channels like television or newspapers, which one would you choose and why?

A: Would definitely choose the influencer marketing as a more trustable source, because I find TVs and newspapers highly controlled by the government, especially the mainstream channels. This can also be applied for some mega influencers, but for the smaller influencers, it's less likely to.

Q: How do you feel if an influencer which you are following provokes a scandal, does it influence only your relationship with the influencer or with the brand they are representing as well?

A: I don't really relate the brand they are representing to the influencer in case they provoke a scandal, simply because I find them just as a face to sell the brand and not the brand itself. But it would probably make a difference if the brand they're representing is their own brand that they created.

Q: Under which circumstances would you purchase a product or service recommended by an influencer?

A: Only circumstances that I'm purchasing products/services recommended by an influencer is if I really am in a need of purchasing that type of product in that moment and if after further exploration of it, I find that produce/service useful for myself. I do not get influenced by them only because they advertised it, if I don't really need that product/service.

Q: What makes a paid collaboration unreliable? Do you change the opinion you have of the influencer or the brand?

A: A paid collaboration is unreliable for me if the influencer advertising it has no relation to that type/category of product/service at all. It makes me think that the influencer does the advertisement only for money and doesn't really believe in the product/service. As far as the brand, I don't really change the opinion, since the point of their advertisements is to reach as big of an audience as they possibly could.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: As a frequent user of social media platforms, are you aware that there are negative outcomes of influencer marketing? If yes, then how has that influenced your life?

A: As a frequent social media user, I'm aware of the negative effects of influencer marketing, such as promoting unrealistic lifestyles and consumerism. This awareness has made me more critical of product endorsements and cautious about my purchasing decisions.

Q: Do you feel like the bad side is taking over the good side of the social media channels?

A: Yes, I sometimes feel that the negative aspects, like misinformation and unrealistic portrayals of life, are overshadowing the positive aspects of social media. This has made me more selective in my engagement and mindful of the content I consume.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: I believe influencer marketing will continue to play a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour and trends, driving more personalized and direct marketing strategies. However, I also think there will be an increasing demand for authenticity and transparency, pushing influencers and brands to be more ethical and genuine in their collaborations.

Interview 3 (I8 in the thesis) – Social media user (Tamara Stamenkovska)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Tamara Petkovska, 30yo, MA in Political science / Academy for digital marketing, Project manager, employed, North Macedonia

Question for group A: Social media users

General questions

Q: What is the number of influencers that you follow on social media channels?

A: There are 5-6 influencers that I dominantly follow.

Q: What kind of content format do you engage the most online? (There are many: blogs, podcasts, videos, newsletters, images, articles etc).

A: Mainly that are the short videos, pictures and podcasts.

Q: In which way are the influencers that you follow, communicating with the followers? (For example: giving feedback on direct messages, comments on posts, videos etc)

A: They are communicating by giving the feedback on the comments of their followers.

Q: What is the reason for unfollowing a certain influencer? Please explain what the motives for that decision were.

A: I unfollow the influencer because their content becomes too long, and repetitive or changes the direction in the content creation that does not correspond with the one that was reason to choose to follow them.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What types of influencers do you follow? And why exactly them? (There are nano, micro, macro, mega influencers)

A: I follow the micro and macro influencers. I follow them because they create interesting, informative and have fun content.

Q: How do they impact your everyday life? Can you give some examples, please?

A: Since their content is informative, I am up to date with new trends and lifestyles. Some of them are also sarcastic and incorporate situations of everyday life that I can identify with. By their input and engagement of their posts, I can see how also other people deal with similar situations.

Q: Do you believe the influencers you follow and why?

A: Generally, yes. Because their content is informative and supported by video examples of what they are speaking. Usually, they clearly note that it is just their personal view, experience or opinion regarding a certain product/service.

Q: What inspires you to buy something or not to buy it over the social media channels?

A: If the promotion of any product is exaggerated, I will definitely not buy it. If the promotion is interesting and shows the functionality of the product, I will be inspired to buy it.

Q: Do you think that the influencers you follow clearly state when they have sponsored content and when they share their opinion on something? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised need to be clearly addresses with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the consumers).

A: Yes. Usually, it is explained in the description of the post.

Q: How important is for you to see the disclosure of the paid content in terms of credibility and how does it effect on your trust in their endorsement?

A: I believe that it is important to have the disclosure of the paid content and that this makes the influencer more credible and professional and gives the image that the influencer can be trusted.

Q: Please advise do you engage in the form of like, comment, share on the sponsored posts more or the regular ones, or you don't make any difference?

A: No, it doesn't make any difference to me.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you feel about influencers having a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands versus many paid partnerships but with the identical brand?

A: If the diverse brands are in a similar field, I am ok with that. But if the influencer has the partnership with brands that vary from many different industries that do not correlate

among themselves, it shows me personally that the influencer has no credibility to speak for all of them. In this case, I will opt for many partnerships with identical brands.

Q: How do you feel about a brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers versus many paid partnerships but with identical influencer?

A: I believe that partnerships with many different influencers is ok, as long as the influencer's scope of work/promotion is consistent and overlaps with the field of work of the brand.

Q: If there are two competitive products, one advertised on social media via influencer marketing, the other using traditional channels like television or newspapers, which one would you choose and why?

A: I am barely watching TV, so most probably I would buy the product from the influencer. But also, will reconsider the comment section to see the experience of the other people who already had the experience with the product.

Q: How do you feel if an influencer which you are following provokes a scandal, does it influence only your relationship with the influencer or with the brand they are representing as well?

A: Most probably with the influencer. Except in the cases where the brand is supporting the scandalous behaviour of the influencer, then it will influence my relationship with the brand too.

Q: Under which circumstances would you purchase a product or service recommended by an influencer?

A: After I read additional reviews for the service or the product.

Q: What makes a paid collaboration unreliable? Do you change the opinion you have of the influencer or the brand?

A: Probably because, in real life, those influencers are not using all of the products they are promoting. Most likely to change my opinion towards the influencer.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: As a frequent user of social media platforms, are you aware that there are negative outcomes of influencer marketing? If yes, then how has that influenced your life?

A: There are cases when the influencers are promoting lifestyle and values which do not correspond with the reality. For example, there could be promoted that it is cool to use some products, to attend some events or to visit some places that are affordable ,to a small number of people, which causes frustration among the wider population to whom it is promoted. Also, it is created a value that you will be more accepted by the people if you can afford such a lifestyle. I believe that it is not affecting me much, because I have some experience with marketing and I am familiar with the process of influencing.

Q: Do you feel like the bad side is taking over the good side of the social media channels?

A: Not in all the cases. But there could be found many examples where the bad side prevails.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: I believe that with certain period of time, only the credible influencers will prevail because they proved so far why they have to be chosen. I believe that relying on their credibility, they could maintain to be the trend setters and to help the brands to do good sales of their services and products.

Interview 4 (I9 in the thesis) – Social media user (Ivana Dimitrovska)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Hi, I'm Ivana, I am 31 and I have a master's degree in Business Informatics. I work as a project manager or more exactly an officer in a Software company - full-time employment. Currently I live in Slovenia.

Question for group A: Social media users

General questions

Q: What is the number of influencers that you follow on social media channels?

A: I follow over 30 influencers across all social media platforms.

Q: What kind of content format do you engage the most online? (There are many: blogs, podcasts, videos, newsletters, images, articles etc).

A: Mostly images and short-form videos on Instagram.

Q: In which way are the influencers that you follow, communicating with the followers? (For example: giving feedback on direct messages, comments on posts, videos etc)

A: They have QA sessions on their Instagram stories, which they respond with a story as well.

Q: What is the reason for unfollowing a certain influencer? Please explain what the motives for that decision were.

A: I have found that I unfollow an influencer whenever they start oversaturating my feed with their content.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What types of influencers do you follow? And why exactly them? (There are nano, micro, macro, mega influencers)

A: I follow mostly fashion and mom influencers, so they fall under the micro category.

Q: How do they impact your everyday life? Can you give some examples, please?

A: The biggest impact an influencer has on my life is that they may prompt me to look for a product they recommend, or if they share a personal story that is closely connected to my current situation, I feel more at ease.

Q: Do you believe the influencers you follow and why?

A: I believe that they are doing their job and they are not my friend, so I take everything they say with a grain of salt. Their stories can be real, especially when they post vlogs, but they can also be staged to pump up the views count and engagement.

Q: What inspires you to buy something or not to buy it over social media channels?

A: When it comes to mom products or cosmetics, I will definitely look for the product online, if an influencer I follow has suggested it. I do my own research afterwards, mostly reading reviews from real consumers. If it's a sponsored post I am less likely to believe the product.

Q: Do you think that the influencers you follow clearly state when they have sponsored content and when they share their opinion on something? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised need to be clearly addresses with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the consumers).

A: In recent years, yes, I don't really follow legislation and social media advertising policies, but I have noticed a lot more transparency compared to the social media posts in the past.

Q: How important is for you to see the disclosure of the paid content in terms of credibility and how does it effect on your trust in their endorsement?

A: It is a turn-off if the post is sponsored and I tend to believe it less, but for example if I know the influencer has posted in the past that they are trying similar products and gave them all a negative review, but the latest one is really working for them, even though it may be sponsored, I would believe them.

Q: Please advise do you engage in the form of like, comment, share on the sponsored posts more or the regular ones, or you don't make any difference?

A: I almost never leave comments on or share any post, but I do leave likes. If I like the post, even if it's sponsored, I would most likely give it a like.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you feel about influencer having a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands versus many paid partnerships but with the identical brand?

A: If I notice that an influencer has promoted similar products from competition brands in the past and now they are promoting the latest one that has paid them, they loose all credibility in my eyes.

Q: How do you feel about brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers versus many paid partnerships but with the identical influencer?

A: If I see the same product on different platforms, promoted by many influencers, I know that I need to wait for some period before I decide to buy it, just so the real reviews from consumers come in.

Q: If there are two competitive products, one advertised on social media via influencer marketing, the other using traditional channels like television or newspapers, which one would you choose and why?

A: I don't watch television or read a physical newspaper so probably the one promoted on social media.

Q: How do you feel if an influencer which you are following provokes a scandal, does it influence only your relationship with the influencer or with the brand they are representing as well?

A: I have to admit, I do like a little bit of drama, but as soon as it starts being the only thing I see when I use the app, I unfollow the influencer.

Q: Under which circumstances would you purchase a product or service recommended by an influencer?

A: If I believe the product is worth the money, after I do my personal research. I never blindly buy something.

Q: What makes a paid collaboration unreliable? Do you change the opinion you have of the influencer or the brand?

A: If for example a cosmetics influencer starts promoting nicotine pouches or energy drinks. I am not saying people can only be knowledgeable and competent for one thing, but if this is the first time you are putting something on your platform and it's something totally different from your previous content, I am suspicious.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: As a frequent user of social media platforms, are you aware that there are negative outcomes of influencer marketing? If yes, then how has that influenced your life?

A: Social media has created a world where everyone is constantly comparing themselves and thinking they have less or are worth less. It has influenced me to think that I need all these products when in reality I have never used them ever.

Q: Do you feel like the bad side is taking over the good side of the social media channels?

A: It has already taken over and we are slowly realizing how hooked we are to it.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe the influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: I think it will start to slowly decline and turn into something different altogether. These new generations will create a new world of marketing, while the existing influencers will sell products to old ladies on Instagram.

Interview 5 (I11 in the thesis) – Social media user (Dimitar Dimovski)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Hello, I am Dimitar, I am 32 years old and have a bachelor's degree in Computer science. Currently I live in Ljubljana and work as a data engineer – full time.

Question for group A: Social media users

General questions

Q: What is the number of influencers that you follow on social media channels?

A: I follow some stand-up comedians and podcasters on Instagram, along with multiple athletes, but I mainly consume YouTube content, where I am subscribed to 100+ channels.

Q: What kind of content format do you engage the most online? (There are many: blogs, podcasts, videos, newsletters, images, articles etc).

A: Podcasts I listen to while I drive or do house chores. Other entertainment, news, sports, gaming I watch on YouTube.

Q: In which way are the influencers that you follow, communicating with the followers? (For example: giving feedback on direct messages, comments on posts, videos etc)

A: Some podcasts accept questions, some have live callers. Coding and programming channels have Discord chats where the community can engage, as well as reddit threads where there could sometimes be AMA's.

Q: What is the reason for unfollowing a certain influencer? Please explain what the motives for that decision were.

A: There could be multiple reasons, but mainly is that the content they produce is no longer enjoyable. Sometimes it happens to be connected to the number of ads they have in their videos.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What types of influencers do you follow? And why exactly them? (There are nano, micro, macro, mega influencers)

A: Comedy podcasts ranging from nano to mega, sports commentary channels which are mostly micro, gaming news channels - micro and programming channels also micro.

Q: How do they impact your everyday life? Can you give some examples, please?

A: Comedy podcasts I listen to every day because they make me laugh and chores are easier to do. I get my sports and gaming news on YouTube as well. Finally programming channels help me with work, I learn a lot of new ways of solving issues and sometimes I listen to hardware reviews.

Q: Do you believe the influencers you follow and why?

A: Even though YouTube is free, all of the people posting content are trying to sell something. That may be tickets to their comedy shows, affiliate marketing links, actual merchandise or just the ads that YouTube runs on their video. So I don't really think of them as people in my life that I should trust blindly, but free entertainment I can decide when to consume.

Q: What inspires you to buy something or not to buy it over the social media channels?

A: I pay for YouTube premium because I don't like waiting for ads to finish. Whenever the ad is a part of the video, I skip ahead even though I know the content creator will make more money if I watch that part. The only time I have bought a product I saw reviewed in a video, I also researched for a week before I made the payment.

Q: Do you think that the influencers you follow clearly state when they have sponsored content and when they share their opinion on something? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised need to be clearly addresses with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the consumers).

A: Although it has gotten better, I think this is still a huge problem, especially with people who are not as sceptical as me. In the past 3 years, YouTube influencers made a lot of money by scamming their followers into buying Crypto or NFT's that they were technically not paid to promote. However, they were secretly investors in those projects and when their followers increased the demand by buying, they sold their shares and profited without being transparent. So even though the legislation has changed to address the transparency in paid promotions, the internet moves faster than ever and there is always going to be new ways to circumvent the law.

Q: How important is for you to see the disclosure of the paid content in terms of credibility and how does it effect on your trust in their endorsement?

A: It is not really important to me because I try to look for second, even third opinions, about a product before I trust the marketing.

Q: Please advise do you engage in the form of like, comment, share on the sponsored posts more or the regular ones, or you don't make any difference?

A: I am not the type of person that likes and comments so the type of post really doesn't make a difference.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you feel about influencer having a lot of paid partnerships with many different brands versus many paid partnerships but with the identical brand?

A: I understand that it's just a part of the business, if companies are paying them to run ads in their videos, that means it's more likely they will continue to make videos.

Q: How do you feel about brand having a lot of paid partnerships with many different influencers versus many paid partnerships but with the identical influencer?

A: A long exclusive partnership is definitely more believable in my opinion. It's rare to see that in the content I am watching but I do appreciate it when it's there.

Q: If there are two competitive products, one advertised on social media via influencer marketing, the other using traditional channels like television or newspapers, which one would you choose and why?

A: Printed media is usually late to the party in my opinion, and I don't watch regular TV. So probably the product promoted on social media, only because it's more likely I will see it.

Q: How do you feel if an influencer which you are following provokes a scandal, does it influence only your relationship with the influencer or with the brand they are representing as well?

A: Since I like comedy podcasts, scandals are always good and funny content, but up to a point. If it stops being enjoyable I will unsubscribe.

Q: Under which circumstances would you purchase a product or service recommended by an influencer?

A: If it's a product that they directly sell, to support them and their business. I have pledged to a Kickstarter campaign before for an Art YouTube channel who wanted to produce a deck of cards with their own designs.

Q: What makes a paid collaboration unreliable? Do you change the opinion you have of the influencer or the brand?

A: If the channel does a collaboration with a product that they never use or have no idea what it is.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: As a frequent user of social media platforms, are you aware that there are negative outcomes of influencer marketing? If yes, then how has that influenced your life?

A: Like anything else in the free market, social media is also a place where companies, with big budgets, can bombard you with ads and subconsciously influence you. Or they can be direct and shameless, but if you can filter out the garbage there is a wonderful world of content on the internet, created by people with genuine passion and creativity. It made me aware and helped me distinguish between quality and shameless marketing.

Q: Do you feel like the bad side is taking over the good side of the social media channels?

A: I believe that both sides have existed from the beginning but now it's only harder to distinguish between the two.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe the influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: Like anything else in life, this will grow until the bubble bursts and we revert to the old way or we create something new, even better and more engaging.

Interview 6 (I6 in the thesis) – Brands (Ana Pavlova)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Good afternoon, my name is Ana Pavlova, I'm 29, finished master studies in Business Informatics, and currently I work as a head of digital marketing company, in Vinica, North Macedonia.

Question for group B: Brands

General questions

Q: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

A: Influencer marketing is a form of marketing where brands collaborate with individuals who have a significant online following and influence over their audience. These individuals, known as influencers, create content that promotes the brand's products or services to their followers through various social media platforms, blogs, or other digital channels. The goal is to leverage the influencer's credibility, trust, and relationship with their audience to drive brand awareness, engagement, and ultimately, conversions for the brand.

Q: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing? (To simplify the term, influencer marketing refers to each collaboration made between a popular social-media user and a certain brand in order to advertise brands' products or services to the audience.)

A: One significant risk of influencer marketing is authenticity. If the collaboration between the influencer and the brand feels forced or inauthentic, it can damage the influencer's credibility and erode the trust of their audience. This can lead to negative feedback, backlash, and a decline in the effectiveness of the marketing campaign.

Q: To what level does influencer marketing have an influence on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

A: In digital marketing, influencer collaborations can significantly boost brand credibility by leveraging the trust and authority influencers hold with their followers. Authentic content creation and targeted audience alignment are key factors that enhance brand image and drive engagement in influencer marketing campaigns.

Q: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand? (For reference: what if your posts do not reach a large audience, don't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

A: Consumers' perceptions of influencer marketing can greatly impact brands, especially if influencer campaigns fail to resonate with their audience. If posts lack reach, fail to drive sales, or lack engagement, consumers may perceive the brand as out of touch, insincere, or irrelevant. This can lead to a loss of trust, decreased brand loyalty, and potential damage to the brand's reputation. Additionally, consumers may become more skeptical of future influencer partnerships, affecting the brand's ability to effectively leverage this marketing strategy.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What makes your brand authentic and distinctive from the rest?

A: Accuracy and reliability, versatility and adaptability, continuous learning and improvement, accessibility and availability.

Q: What is the key objective you aim to achieve when starting an influencer campaign?

A: The key objective of starting an influencer campaign is typically to increase brand awareness, engagement, and ultimately drive conversions or sales.

Q: Have you ever taken any actions to increase the number of your consumers? (For example: using popular influencers, creating big events for meet up with the audience, giving free products and services etc).

A: Yes, the businesses I have worked with have taken actions to increase the number of consumers. These actions have included using popular influencers to endorse products or services, organizing big events to engage with the audience and promote brand awareness, and offering free products or services as part of promotional campaigns. These strategies have been employed to attract new consumers, retain existing ones, and drive business growth.

Q: How do you track the success rates?

A: Engagement metrics, reach and impressions, follower growth, website traffic

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How does the influencer perform vs the expectation/calculations that you made before the campaign starts?

A: Influencer performance often varies from initial expectations due to factors like content quality and audience engagement. We track metrics like reach and engagement to evaluate performance against expectations and adjust campaigns as needed.

Q: Can you advise the level of creative autonomy given to the influencers in your campaigns?

A: In our campaigns, we provide influencers with a level of creative autonomy that aligns with our brand's guidelines and objectives. We believe in collaboration and value their unique creativity and voice.

Q: How do you ensure transparency and disclosure in influencer partnerships?

A: Transparency and disclosure are paramount in influencer partnerships. We ensure compliance with disclosure regulations and encourage influencers to clearly disclose sponsored content to maintain transparency and trust with their audience.

Q: What significant benefits have you realized on the brand image and sales target since you started using influencers for the campaigns?

A: Since integrating influencers into our campaigns, we've seen significant benefits in brand image and sales targets. Their authentic endorsements resonate with audiences, driving engagement, brand awareness, and ultimately, sales.

Q: What do you take into consideration when choosing a new face for a new campaign? What are the selection criteria apart from credibility and likeability? (For reference: number of followers, target audience, competitors, budget, and resources).

A: When selecting a new face for a campaign, we consider various criteria beyond credibility and likability, including target audience alignment, engagement metrics, brand fit, and the influencer's content quality. Budget and resources also play a role in decision-making.

Q: I would like to ask you, if you recognize the difference between celebrities and influencers? With whom do you prefer to work with and why? (For clarity, celebrities are already known famous stars, who don't have to be experts to promote a product or a service; influencers are individuals who have the power to influence a certain community by sharing their experience over a service or a product).

A: Yes, we recognize the difference between celebrities and influencers. While celebrities bring existing fame, influencers offer niche expertise and relatability to specific communities. We prefer to work with influencers due to their ability to authentically connect with audiences and drive engagement.

Q: How do you manage social media crisis situations? (It refers to situations like reckless behaviour from influencer that is connected with the brand, sensitive statements from an influencer representing the brand, bad conduct from an employee in the company etc).

A: In managing social media crises involving influencers, we take swift action to address the situation, including open communication, damage control, and if necessary, discontinuing partnerships. We prioritize protecting our brand's reputation and maintaining transparency with our audience.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: How do you handle negative feedback or criticism on social media?

A: We handle negative feedback or criticism on social media by actively listening, responding promptly and respectfully, and taking appropriate action to address concerns. We view criticism as an opportunity to improve and demonstrate our commitment to consumer satisfaction.

Q: What is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the brand).

A: While influencer marketing offers many benefits, we acknowledge the potential for negative outcomes such as trust erosion and reputational damage. We mitigate these risks through thorough vetting of influencers, clear communication, and continuous monitoring of campaign performance.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: We believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future of marketing by evolving alongside social media platforms and consumer behaviour. As long as

influencers maintain authenticity and trust with their audiences, they will remain powerful advocates for brands in an increasingly digital world.

Interview 7 (I5 in the thesis) – Brands (Sandra Bojkovska)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Hi, I am Sandra, I'm 36 and I have a master's degree in marketing. I work as a marketing and sales associate in North Macedonia.

Question for group B: Brands

General questions

Q: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

A: People sharing their opinion about a product/service in exchange for money, product gifts, travel etc. The ultimate goal is to influence the masses to do something, buy, read, try, travel etc.

Q: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing?

A: We do not have a lot of risks because we ask for signed agreements that have to be signed for bigger influencers, where we also do smaller influencers when they're willing to give a shout-out on their social media in exchange for product samples.

Q: To what level does influencer marketing have an influence on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

A: It does have an impact, but for us it also depended per country, for example Canada and UK, influencers were more than happy to share their opinion for samples, whereas USA, anybody who's actually nobody wanted to monetize that. We did use different platform where we would be able to see their stats and fees and we were even reaching out to the brands who had done a collab with the given influencer at some time before so we could see if they had an uplift in sales, social media outreach etc. This was back in the game where this term was not even very used, and influencers was not a profession.

Q: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand?

A: This depends on the story they tell, if they are creative, their content is unique, their engagement with their own database is good, then of course the brand will reap those benefits, because every influencer is unique, and they attract their own tribe per say.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What makes your brand authentic and distinctive from the rest?

A: We are a house of brands, we feature natural fem, baby and incontinence care brands <https://www.naturalenabrands.com/> We educate people on things nobody cares to share.

Most women do not know what the tampon is made of, why is the cotton white, how it's bleached etc. We do read labels on food, but not for tampons, baby diapers, or incontinence products. We're trying to nurture people and educate before we sell to them.

Q: What is the key objective you aim to achieve when starting an influencer campaign?

A: Usually, it's a new launch of a product so to get more eye balls on it and talk about the benefits of it.

Q: Have you ever taken any actions to increase the number of your consumers?

A: We went from 10k to 50k when a celebrity endorsed us, but that didn't necessarily translate into sales.

Q: How do you track the success rates?

A: Traffic on site, email inquiries, SM inquiries, engagement and our favourite - sales.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How does the influencer perform vs the expectation/calculations that you made before the campaign starts?

A: Depends on the budget, the bigger the budget, the bigger the expectations that not always go through.

Q: Can you advise the level of creative autonomy given to the influencers in your campaigns?

A: We try to give full freedom to creative people, we do have some guidelines when we work on a campaign, we give like a fact sheet about the product, what they can focus on, what they should put an emphasis on etc.

Q: How do you ensure transparency and disclosure in influencer partnerships?

A: We share the brand guidelines so whatever they talk about, it has to be backed up with data and science, not just hype.

Q: What significant benefits have you realized on the brand image and sales target since you started using influencers for the campaigns?

A: Word-of-mouth, the more eyeballs on the brand, the more engagement for us, people are lazy, people are bombarded with so much marketing, you're fighting for a second of their scrolling game so every impression matters.

Q: What do you take into consideration when choosing a new face for a new campaign? What are the selection criteria apart from credibility and likeability?

A: Number of followers, engagement, other collabs they have done in the past and let's not forget about their personality. We do not want to be linked to people who use curse language on their social media, when you have an ambassador, they need to live and breathe your product, imagine us selling diapers thru an influencers that curses, swears, uses obscene language, that's not the family picture we want to paint, so we do vet

properly the potential influencers and their content and how they reply to people on their own posts.

Q: I would like to ask you, if you recognize the difference between celebrities and influencers? With whom do you prefer to work with and why?

A: Ugh, this is a tough one, if there is one thing I learned is that the real celebrities are very humble people but you need the big bucks to get to them, those people are actually easy to work with if you lay out the ground rules at the very beginning. Influencers are celebrities wannabe's but it doesn't necessarily have to be the case with all.

Q: How do you manage social media crisis situations?

A: We did have an issue, but as a brand you need to make it very clear that if the influencer has done something that has been majorly criticized by the public and you as a brand think it's not right – then share that publicly, even if that means terminating the contract with the given influencer.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: How do you handle negative feedback or criticism on social media?

A: Always acknowledge it, whether it's an issue with consumer service, an issue with the actual product, an issue with delivery, you always need to hear the consumer out, reply to them via email/Amazon review etc because the best marketing is the one where your consumer is happy and shares that experience with others.

Q: What is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing?

A: Luckily our retention rate is high, so when people actually try out the product, they come back for more. We've never had influencers share bad things about the product online. But we have had issues with people asking for more stock, for example you agree to send them a whole month worth of diapers and wipes for an in-feed post and for stories and you will only get 1, not both. We do not continue working with those influences because that's not ethical and as a brand we do not want to be associated with that type of free loaders.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: I believe in the micro influencers, curating your content for less people, makes your voice stronger and more credible, it shows that you care to share what you truly love, not just to monetize your opinion for the sake of dollars. From my experience, people care about being authentic, story telling and people who are already super famous do not care about that aspect because their name is what sells, plus it's hard to persuade them to certain esthetics, or selling angle since they don't even want to hold product in their hands for photoshoots...(true story. So micro influencers with creative content strategy will always win in the long run.

Interview 8 (I4 in the thesis) – Brands (Magdalena Manevska)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: I'm Magdalena, I am 30 years old and I have a bachelor's degree in International Business and Management, currently I am living in the Netherlands and working as a head of social media communications in Philips, Amsterdam.

Question for group B: Brands

General questions

Q: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

A: The marketing/brand practice of businesses leveraging the influence that opinion makers have secured, usually with their following on social media, to drive business objectives, for example, product sales, brand awareness, and reputation building.

Q: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing?

A: The reputation of the brand is extended to the reputation of the influencer. Industry-wide trends tell us that 'cancel culture' and 'boycott' calls mostly start on social media, so this is something to be taken into consideration when planning the messaging for an influencer driven campaign. Macro-trends wise, regulation/government policy is not caught up to the same levels as with other channels used for the same purpose traditionally e.g., paid partnerships with media outlets. This means that brands must ensure that the 'rules of compliance' are very clear in the contract with each influencer, to protect the brand's reputation and ensure compliance for example with regulation regarding privacy, copyright, legal, security, in order to mitigate reputation risk.

Q: To what level does influencer marketing have an influence on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

A: Highly. Philips is in the healthcare industry, so our influencers are key opinion leaders (KOLs), mostly healthcare professionals in the specific sectors where we have product and service offerings e.g., cardiology, radiology, oncology etc. Here's a practical example of how we leverage partnerships with these influencers: A key touch point in this industry are healthcare trade shows, where vendors like Philips showcase their offering on a booth on an exposition floor; historically, Philips would have strong relationships with KOLs who leverage Philips offerings in their daily work and visit us at the tradeshow. In recent years, many of them have built credible social media following of their peers and/or patients, so our partnership agreements now extend to involve 'influencer activity' on social media during these key events. Philips also has direct-to-consumer offering in the personal care space, for example toothbrushes, hair care, etc. There's a strong practice to work with influencers there as well. These are usually selected via agencies on national level, they tend to differ per country and are part of the marketing outreach mix as a key

channel in the activation strategy of a go-to-market product launch. In both cases, as someone who oversees social media on the enterprise-wide, global, Brand and Communications function, my role is to ensure that the selected influencers and their activity have a positive influence on our brand credibility and image. We measure this consistently and have clear playbooks with criteria to be followed to ensure that this is the case. We see that their activities' impact is strong when they're part of a mix that has other types of activation too.

Q: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand?

A: We monitor the sentiment in the qualitative engagements on their social accounts, as well as quantitative metrics like reach, engagement, clicks. We also monitor the change in sales during influencer activation and/or change in 'brand strength' (collected through surveys) at the same timeline. Depending how this goes, decisions are made to continue working with a specific influencer or not. They are one channel in a bigger mix, so sometimes we decide to invest more in the rest of the mix instead and other times – even more in a particular influencer. In a nutshell, whichever way it goes – we learn from it, and implement the learnings in forward activations. (For reference: what if your posts do not reach a large audience, don't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What makes your brand authentic and distinctive from the rest?

A: Here's an extract from our brand book: Our Philips brand is the sum total of the experiences and interactions people have with us; through our products, services and solutions, our channels, and communications materials through to the people who represent and act as ambassadors of our company. We strive to make these interactions consistently memorable and meaningful. This is because we believe that great brand experiences create an opportunity to deeply resonate and connect with our consumers while building brand preference and differentiation. From a communications standpoint, our envisioned brand experience informs the way our Philips stories seamlessly unfold across touchpoints. And we also use our brand guidelines, to enable us to bring these stories to life in a powerful way and to ensure the consistency and clarity of everything we make and do. Our brand voice is empathetic, warm and engaging. Every word we write or say on behalf of Philips makes an impression. Our core brand values help define our brand voice and ensure that we always shape and tell our stories in a Caring, Innovative and Impactful way: By caring, we commit to always being the people's champion. Empathetic, personal and authentic. By innovative, we strive to be a pioneer. Forward-thinking, visionary, inquisitive and inventive. And by impactful, we are always a force for positive change. Purposeful, lively and dynamic.

Q: What is the key objective you aim to achieve when starting an influencer campaign?

A: We don't start influencer campaigns. We start for instance, a go-to-market campaign, or a brand awareness campaign and use influencers as one of the activation points. Hence, they should contribute to the objectives of the campaign. If it's go-to-market, it's likely product sales. If it's brand awareness, it's likely positive sentiment in qualitative engagements and increase in overall brand-strength among the target audience they reach. From brand perspective, our goal with influencer marketing is to show the brand in an authentic and grassroots way to enhance its ambition to be real, human and credible, increasing long term brand preference and relevancy. We'd like to be closer to audience needs, passions and values and build advocacy for our brand.

Q: Have you ever taken any actions to increase the number of your consumers? (For example: using popular influencers, creating big events for meet up with the audience, giving free products and services etc).

A: Surely, someone must have, Philips is a huge company. Give-aways are more popular in some regions than others (this is influenced by local regulations and culture, among other things). We have a section in a Philips-wide playbook on influencers outlining the different scenarios and guiding teams who execute this. It is more standard on the direct-to-consumer (Personal Health / PH) side, as the healthcare industry is highly regulated and it is often not encouraged to give free products to doctors. On the PH side, hyper local strategies include activating micro/nano influencers with gifting/seeding programs.

Q: How do you track the success rates?

A: For these types of events, they're tracked on regional and then business level. All objectives in Philips ladder up to the company goals, so if such an activity is planned in a region, it needs to contribute to a higher objective on business-unit level. For example, there might be a partnership with an influencer in the US to help with the go-to-market launch of a new Sonicare toothbrush targeted at Gen-Z. The team would have pre-agreed metrics to be achieved on influencer-activation level (week-on-week engagements, for example), and those will ladder up to the overall campaign objectives (sustain top-of-mind position with every Gen-Z person in the US who's researching to buy a toothbrush at the moment), which contribute to the overall Personal Health business-unit objectives (increasing sales of Sonicare), which contribute to Philips-wide sales growth. These are all tracked in synced, interactive, end-to-end dashboards, that can be filtered based on the user needs e.g., from brand perspective – I always filter for the qualitative metrics like sentiment among Gen-Z.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How does the influencer perform vs the expectation/calculations that you made before the campaign starts?

A: This is different on case-per-case basis.

Q: Can you advise the level of creative autonomy given to the influencers in your campaigns?

A: We aim to not be overly prescriptive. Trust is key in letting influencers produce content that will perform.

Q: How do you ensure transparency and disclosure in influencer partnerships?

A: We demonstrate the product, preferably face to face, ensuring they have real-life experience with it. Commercial usage should be made clear in the contract including transparency on impressions, reach, frequency cap etc. We also clearly flag exclusivity requirements preventing conflict of interest.

Q: What significant benefits have you realized on the brand image and sales target since you started using influencers for the campaigns?

A: For sure increased sales.

Q: What do you take into consideration when choosing a new face for a new campaign? What are the selection criteria apart from credibility and likeability? (For reference: number of followers, target audience, competitors, budget, and resources).

A: We first take an itinerary internally: Can you clearly define the objective and role of the influencer in the overall activation? We first assess the target audience we need to reach e.g., their demographics, interests/traits. Then look at the social platforms where they're present, available budget (cost of influencer + cost of media + additional cost), time capacity to scout, reach out and send products as well as availability of a messaging framework that provides freedom of creation on the influencer part. If all of this is possible, then a clear brief is provided to an agency who scout for selection of influencers. There can be a multi-channel networks, digital influencer agencies or direct-to-talent approach to this. We look for influencers who serve a limited amount of ads, have an authentic feed, engage in topics that are in line with the values of our brand, are a match with the Philips tone of voice, pass a background check and are creative.

Q: I would like to ask you, if you recognize the difference between celebrities and influencers? With whom do you prefer to work with and why? (For clarity, celebrities are already known famous stars, who don't have to be experts to promote a product or a service; influencers are individuals who have the power to influence a certain community by sharing their experience over a service or a product).

A: We call them all influencers. Celebrities would usually be under 'mega' or 'macro' influencer for us, anyone with 1+ million of an audience. Please note that celebrity status differs per geography, so we look for mass reach in a specific country via them. They're powerful endorsements towards direct audience relationship, safe for brands, credible and trusted. Micro and Nano influencers are more cost effective, better for consumer created content, creative-led process, have high audience connection, lower reach but always-on capability. So it depends per case.

Q: How do you manage social media crisis situations? (It refers to situations like reckless behaviour from influencer that is connected with the brand, sensitive statements from an influencer representing the brand, bad conduct from an employee in the company etc).

A: We have a handbook on social media crisis communications with a protocol around this, which includes a scenario where the crisis stems from a campaign activated via influencers. Depending on the case/severity, different people are involved at the beginning, middle and end. Usually, our 24/7 social media listening would alert if negative sentiment reached a certain threshold, which kicks the protocol into gear.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: How do you handle negative feedback or criticism on social media?

A: With care and genuine interest to respond in a helpful, value-adding way. Social media is a source of invaluable feedback to us, so we aim to capture all negative comments (or mentions of the brand outside of our accounts) and use them in shaping our social media strategy. We address them with a response wherever possible. We also see increased bot/fake news activity over the recent years, so there's a separate protocol to deal with en-masse mentions of Philips in a negative light based on fake news generated often by bots.

Q: What is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the brand).

A: We've been largely lucky so far on this front. When there's a negative event, it's important to acknowledge it, and make steps to correct course e.g., stop working with the influencer and take action to fix the damage they've done to the audience.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: Looking at other brands, I believe that when you invest in one-off, short-term activations through influencers – the risk is higher because you're focused on the immediate return and don't look at the big picture. In my experience, investing in due diligence to start and maintain a long-term partnership, builds the invaluable trust between brand-influencer-audience, and mitigates reputation risk. The audience is first. Brands need to be wherever they are, to meet a need / solve a problem that they have. If influencers continue to be a trusted place for people to be, brands will continue to be there too. Influencers are one tool in the activation toolbox. They won't be looked at on such an individual basis as now. The metrics available to measure success now are too vain and narrow, measured in isolation from the rest of the activation mix. I would expect this to change, with influencers becoming a strong part of an activation mix. The definition of an influencer will expand. It's too focused on lifestyle social media now. In my line of work, journalists, healthcare professionals, policy makers, corporate executives – are all building out their social media presence; these are the most popular influencers of tomorrow.

Interview 9 (I2 in the thesis) – Influencers (Darko Spejko)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Darko Petkovski, 36 years old, bachelor's degree in Physical education, currently working as PE teacher/coach in UAE.

Question for group C: Influencers

General questions

Q: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

A: In purpose to increase engagement and higher sales, it is a way of marketing where brands collaborate with individuals who have a large group of followers on social media to promote their products or services.

Q: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing? (To simplify the term, influencer marketing refers to each collaboration made between a popular social-media user and a certain brand in order to advertise brands' products or services to the audience.)

A: From my perspective that would be authenticity, trust issues, and fake followers which lead to ineffective campaigns.

Q: To what level does influencer marketing have an impact on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

A: Depending on how well it is done, I would say very high level. How well we present the products or services is how the audience will see them.

Q: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand? (For reference: what if your post doesn't reach a large audience, doesn't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

A: I If some campaign doesn't reach a large audience, or engage the audience, some potential reasons for such outcomes might be that that my audience may not align with the brand's target demographic. Or possibly the timing of the campaign might not align with audience activity. I tend to learn from each campaign and continuously optimize the approach so I can improve my future influencer marketing efforts.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What makes your content authentic and distinctive from the rest?

A: Personalization, breadth of knowledge, adaptability, consistency, trending content.

Q: How do you keep up with the social media trends and all the algorithm changes?

A: I stay current with social media trends and algorithm changes through my influencer's community, and my influencers friends. Also, interacting with users allows me to learn about emerging trends and issues as they bring them up. I rely on reputable sources and industry experts to provide the most accurate and relevant information. These strategies help ensure that I provide up-to-date and accurate information about social media dynamics.

Q: What strategies do you use to grow your audience and maintain high engagement levels? (For example: buying followers, accepting low budget projects, using hashtags etc).

A: To grow the audience and maintain high engagement levels I implement several strategies involving hashtags, boosting, and some promotions that can be effective. I use hashtags that are relevant to the content and target audience to increase visibility. I use some techniques to boost posts, ensuring they reach a wider audience. I run contests and giveaways to encourage participation and sharing, increasing reach and engagement.

Q: What are the differences in the feedback from the sponsored posts versus the regular ones?

A: For the sponsored posts I typically have a higher reach due to the paid promotion, which ensures they are seen by a larger and often more targeted audience. Depending on the organic reach, which can be limited by algorithmic constraints, on the regular posts, I get more comments and likes as the audience is repulsive to sponsored posts, except if it doesn't involve some giveaway. Engagement levels can vary widely depending on the content's genuine appeal and the current algorithmic favorability.

Q: To what extent you are aware of the legislation for disclosure advertisements on social media platforms and how do you indicate it on your profile? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised needs to be clearly addressed with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just a percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the audience).

A: I am confident that I have a decent knowledge of the topic, and I follow it constantly. I am working currently with Balkan brands only, on the territories of North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia, where the law isn't that strict. There isn't such a strict policy that you can get punished if you do not label the content as sponsored. Also, the brands do not pay so much attention to it.

Q: How do you track the success rates? (For reference: what is the reach, the follower growth over time, number of likes and comments received, link clicks, ROI etc).

A: Tracking the success rates of social media posts involves analyzing a variety of metrics that provide insights into reach, engagement, and follower growth. For example, for the reach, I check the number of users who have seen my post. Most social media platforms, especially Instagram and Facebook which are my main channels, provide built-in analytics tools (e.g., Facebook Insights, Instagram Insights). To see how it goes with the

followers' number, I use apps that track them daily, weekly and monthly. These tools are sufficient proof to show to a potential brand what are my success rates if they are deciding whether should they hire me or not.

Q: Do you have a different strategy for each social media platform and if yes, why? (Referring to actions like: do you upload the same post on Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, X or do you adapt to each platform individually).

A: Not really, I only use Instagram and Facebook for the moment and pretty much have the same content on both platforms. I tried TikTok but figured out that that is not my cup of tea, so I am very passive there. I don't find myself into making video content, I am more into photography.

Q: Describe a moment when you had to adapt to some meaningful change in your niche or industry.

A: One significant moment of adaptation in the context of Instagram was the shift in the platform's algorithm from a chronological feed to an engagement-based feed. The new algorithm prioritized posts based on user engagement rather than posting time. I had to understand how the new algorithm worked, focusing on the factors it considered most important: likes, comments, shares, and saves. As well Instagram is favouring the reels lately, which are out of my scope, but I will need to start making them if I want to stay relevant with the trends.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you align your personal brand with a company's brand when promoting their products/services?

A: I always research the brand's mission, vision and target audience. On the meeting, I clearly state my own brand's values, tone, and style. We discuss and focus on the shared goals or interests that can form the basis. I tend to avoid promoting products or services that don't fit with my profile, or they feel forced. I offer the brand a mix of content types, such as posts, stories, and reels, to keep the audience engaged. As well I promise to tag the company in all the related posts and stories to increase their visibility and engagement.

Q: Do you have to customize your profile to be in accordance with the brand that you are representing? (Customization refers in the sense of posting at a certain requested time, presenting content just as the brand wants it, recommend it exactly in the format the brand needs it).

A: - It depends on the campaign, it is always different. If the brand has a specific aesthetic, I ensure my profile and story highlights align with it. Of course, I follow the brand's guidelines on imagery, captions, hashtags, and overall tone. However, I try to integrate these within my style to keep it authentic for the audience. Despite all the guidelines asked from the brand, I negotiate some creative freedom as well. Most brands appreciate influencers who will integrate their products and services naturally and creatively rather than just following a strict format.

Q: What exactly is a match or mismatch when it comes to influencer-brand collaboration and how it affects each-others credibility?

A: -When there is a strong match, the collaboration feels authentic, and both the brand and I, we can enhance each other's credibility. Followers are more likely to trust the recommendation because it aligns with my usual content and values. The high engagement rates and positive feedback can result from a well-matched collaboration, benefiting both. A mismatch is obvious, I doesn't show good result on neither side.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: How do you handle negative feedback on social media platforms?

A: I stay calm and don't reach hastily. I refrain from responding when I am upset or defensive. I try to evaluate each comment and understand the consumer's point of view. As well I tend to respond as soon as possible to show that I value my audience's input and take their concerns seriously. Always no matter the comment, I use a polite and respectful tone, regardless of the negativity of the feedback. I always acknowledge and apologize when it is necessary. If the issue is too complex or sensitive, I send a private message, email, or direct call if possible, to the person. I understand that by handling negative feedback effectively, I can turn a potentially damaging situation into an opportunity to demonstrate my commitment to the audience and improve the brand's reputation that has chosen me as a representative.

Q: How is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the personal profile).

A: With millions of influencers vying for attention on social media, the competition can be fierce. There's constant pressure to produce engaging content, gain followers, and stay relevant, which can lead to stress, burnout, and even feelings of inadequacy. In my opinion, as the brands can choose the wrong influencer, the influencers as well can choose to work with the wrong brand, which can do more harm than good. I haven't had any big erodes so far, but had some newspaper affairs that impacted my followers' number.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: What is the final goal for you as an influencer after reaching a certain level of experience and a significant number of followers?

A: I aim to establish my personal brand which will involve launching my product. Until I get there, I am focused on monetization, which involves maximizing revenue through my partnerships. I tend to expand my influence as well across multiple platforms and industries, including traditional media TV, books, and movies) or be involved in creating content in different formats such as podcasts, courses, and webinars that will inspire the people who follow me.

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: I am sure in the future, it will become even more data based. Brands will start using new technologies and advanced analytics to estimate the effectiveness of the campaigns and they will rely on data analytics to measure our performance, optimize campaigns, and ensure better ROI. We, as influencers, will be obliged to some new technology, new trends and probably new social media platforms. the influencers marketing will only develop in higher form and make the social media users more dependable on it.

Interview 10 (I1 in the thesis) – Influencers (Mia Kostova)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Hello, I am Mia, I am 39 years old, I have a bachelor degree in Journalism, and currently I am living and working as a travel influencer in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Question for group C: Influencers

General questions

Q: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

A: The most effective way of marketing, which involves using influencers to promote any type of products of services in a creative way.

Q: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing? (To simplify the term, influencer marketing refers to each collaboration made between a popular social-media user and a certain brand in order to advertise brands' products or services to the audience.)

A: Keeping up with the latest trends, promoting an idealized picture-perfect lifestyle, an ever-shifting algorithm that never works in influencer's favour, complete loss of privacy, and losing my authentic self within time.

Q: To what level does influencer marketing have an impact on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

A: It has a huge impact, that is why I choose wisely all my collaborations. As an influencer, I don't want to be involved with a brand which doesn't have the same stand as mine and doesn't correlate with my lifestyle. The brand image depends on how creatively the influencer will present it and how trustworthy it will be to the audience.

Q: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand? (For reference: what if your post doesn't reach a large audience, doesn't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

A: In the current position that I am in, I can assure the brands that are choosing me that they won't experience that with me, however when my profile was still young and I didn't have anybody to consult I made such naive mistakes where the consequences were lower reach on the sponsored posts, no comments or likes on them, a limited amount of sales. I believe that this was as a result of the visibility of my profile in the algorithm, low-quality visuals, wrong posting time and limited engagement from my side.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What makes your content authentic and distinctive from the rest?

A: I always try to use my unique way of advertising things, and I never accept a product or service which I don't trust. I believe this is crucial for the audience, as they need to gain your trust first so they further rely on your recommendations. I grew my profile by being authentic. I know the audience can say that being an influencer is a trending profession now, but I genuinely grew my followers base by being authentic, talking about all the things that I go through, all my anxiety issues, my weight-loss journey, it was like my personal diary. There was a situation where one brand wanted to work with me and pay me to be one of their spokespeople. I think it was for weight-loss tea, but I don't relate with that. I am into healthy habits, not rapid results. I am honest and natural, I think people recognize that. Some follow me because they love me, but some for the exact contrary and that is fine, it's all part of this job.

Q: How do you keep up with the social media trends and all the algorithm changes?

A: By being present constantly, consult with social media experts, keep an eye on the competitors, but not to copy their content but be inspired and check news.

Q: What strategies do you use to grow your audience and maintain high engagement levels? (For example: buying followers, accepting low budget projects, using hashtags etc).

A: I have never bought any followers, that wasn't my way of doing things. I always wanted to reach an organic follower base that is my own niche. I started expanding the network when I improved my content quality by investing in a better camera, I learnt how to edit properly my videos, and I started communicating more with the audience. The little tricks that helped me are giveaways or any kind of gifting contests. People in our area love this kind of game. Also, a few endorsements by other already established influencers can make a great impact so that the right audience notices you.

Q: What are the differences in the feedback from the sponsored posts versus the regular ones?

A: I am sure that at least 70% of my audience, after seeing a sponsored post, checks the product/service and then they go and buy it. While consumers reject advertisements because they are insincere and have an ulterior motive to sell you something, most don't immediately dismiss sponsored content, especially when they like how you attract their

attention. The newer generations find sponsored content as more reliable than traditional ads.

Q: To what extent you are aware of the legislation for disclosure advertisements on social media platforms and how do you indicate it on your profile? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised needs to be clearly addressed with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just a percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the audience).

A: The law in North Macedonia where I currently work as an influencer, is not so strict. We don't have to emphasize that the post is sponsored by a brand, but I tend to do it often. I have some partnerships that are based purely on compensation, and some of course monetized, but I also have friends who work hard and offer great services, who do not sponsor my posts, but nonetheless, I want to promote them and share my honest positive opinion about them.

Q: How do you track the success rates? (For reference: what is the reach, the follower growth over time, number of likes and comments received, link clicks, ROI etc).

A: That is very much visible from the follower amount, from the likes/comments on my posts, my views on the Youtube videos, but still if a brand wants to collaborate with me and see some real numbers, I use the tools provided from the platforms already like Facebook Insight and Instagram Insight already.

Q: Do you have a different strategy for each social media platform and if yes, why? (Referring to actions like: do you upload the same post on Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, X or do you adapt to each platform individually).

A: Yes, indeed. It is obvious that some formats are more suitable for different platforms. For example, Tiktok is used for videos mostly. Instagram has some story time atmosphere that allows you to show your day, lifestyle etc. Facebook has a slow pace, so a few posts per week is usually enough to entertain the audience and keep them engaged, but X on the other side, moves quickly, so the audience expects multiple posts per day. Each platform has its own pros and cons.

Q: Describe a moment when you had to adapt to some meaningful change in your niche or industry.

A: When the reel appeared on Instagram, the algorithm started curating users' feeds towards this kind of format, not showing my usual photo posts at all. I needed some time until I figured out how to tailor my content to fit with the latest changes. Instagram's algorithm lately favours profiles with many stories giving them more visibility so I try to adapt to that as well. As much as I didn't want to film myself and talk into the camera, I needed to find a way to take videos of me and post them so I can keep the engagement high. I cannot imagine now, with the appearance of AI, how the influencer marketing will look like.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you align your personal brand with a company's brand when promoting their products/services?

A: I check their products/services and always test them before I start offering them to others. I am collaborating only with brands in which I am really interested, the ones in which I shop, use, watch, wear privately etc. I stick to my values and I am not greedy.

Q: Do you have to customize your profile to be in accordance with the brand that you are representing? (Customization refers in the sense of posting at a certain requested time, presenting content just as the brand wants it, recommend it exactly in the format the brand needs it).

A: It really depends on the brand and how they would rather have it. I have been in a lot of partnerships in which I have completely open hands, and I can do whatever I feel should be done. But, I have been a part of a campaign in which all involved influencers we got the specific request, the same video with the same text to be done just from different people, so the audience saw the same message hundreds of times, with the same wording and same requested images.

Q: What exactly is a match or mismatch when it comes to influencer-brand collaboration and how it affects each-others credibility?

A: Match is a very lucky and well-established relationship where both sides know what they want and need from the collaboration. The results are great, and everyone is happy after the successful campaign. A mismatch is an occurrence when the brand and the influencer are not compatible, meaning they have different views and opinions on things, so the campaign is going in different directions. Unfortunately, long time ago, I have been part of one unsuccessful collaboration, I won't mention the brand of course, we just weren't compatible at all, but we realized that only after the campaign was out and from the feedback that we received. I wasn't the person the audience was imagining for a lead role, and the brand was disappointed with the wasted budget I am sure.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: How do you handle negative feedback on social media platforms?

A: I used to have anxiety attacks, and I was very sensitive about most of the things that were commented online. Now, after so many years, I just block the people with the rude comments and continue with my work. There are a lot of different opinions in the online world, not everyone can like me.

Q: How is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the personal profile).

A: I had a disappointing experience working with one of the biggest newspaper brands- Playboy magazine, but the unprofessionalism and inability to bear such fuzz about it and attract such reputation has learned me an important lesson. I have been attacked by the

media multiple times, they have a tendency to fill the newspapers with fake news about me. Yes, there were certain times when it was harder to get the brands interested in working with me as a result of this fake news as they were afraid it wouldn't impact their companies in a good way, but they realized that I have my audience which supports me. Since then I enjoy every engagement and thoroughly select my partners.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: What is the final goal for you as an influencer after reaching a certain level of experience and a significant number of followers?

A: I am still enjoying working and promoting other brands, and being part of something beautiful. As an influencer in a very small country, I am slowly but surely stretching the boundaries for the influencers here and after a certain time, I would like to have something that will be such a unique product that will represent me in front of my audience.

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: It will become just more and more popular over time, it might be even the only world for advertising that will exist as we see that TV commercials are slowly extinguishing. I am guessing that AI will evolve the influencer marketing into something bigger and better over time.

Interview 11(I3 in the thesis) – Influencers (Monika Angelovska)

Q: Please share some personal information about yourself (name, age, level of education, occupation – employment status, country in which you currently live).

A: Hi, I am Monika, 31 years old, I finished my bachelors on the Economic Faculty in the field of e- business, and currently I am living and working as a food blogger in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Question for group C: Influencers

General questions

Q: How do you understand the term influencer marketing?

A: I think it is a very useful tool which you can talk to thousands of people, spreading your message, where if it's delivered in the right way and to the correct audience, it resonates with them and stays in the memory, which leads to the next action or conversion. I feel that it's a useful way to deliver an idea into a more personal consumer space.

Q: What are the risks that concern you the most about using influencer marketing? (To simplify the term, influencer marketing refers to each collaboration made between a popular social-media user and a certain brand in order to advertise brands' products or services to the audience.)

A: The safety of the brand and ad tagging. However, probably the biggest risk would be working with people as you're giving a lot of responsibility to someone who is unfamiliar to you, letting them present you and your products. As hard as it is to admit, the brand in the future will be automatically connected with the personality and opinions of the chosen influencer.

Q: To what level does influencer marketing have an impact on the brand credibility and brand image in your industry?

A: Huge. Sometimes it all depends on the influencer, so the brand should choose them wisely.

Q: What are the consumers' insights of influencer marketing and how do they impact the brand? (For reference: what if your post doesn't reach a large audience, doesn't trigger high sales, do not engage the audience etc).

A: That can happen to the best and most followed influencers, it doesn't depend on how big and important the influencer is, but it is mostly up to the target group of the campaign. If the brand hires a food influencer like myself, to advertise sports equipment, sorry to say but that probably won't increase their sales.

Personal branding and authenticity questions

Q: What makes your content authentic and distinctive from the rest?

A: I am active on Instagram mostly, and that is my favourite platform as there is no hate speech, no politics, there is liberty in creating inspiring posts and I like to share with my audience usually good places to eat and drink. I think what makes me different from the rest is my honesty as I would give a bad review without any hesitation. Also, I have visited many local restaurants, so they can hear my opinion on various places if they might be thinking about where to go that day.

Q: How do you keep up with the social media trends and all the algorithm changes?

A: I follow worldwide famous food bloggers which keep up with the trends, and I try to follow. As well I also research a lot online and talk with my influencers friends, so I can stay up to date.

Q: What strategies do you use to grow your audience and maintain high engagement levels? (For example: buying followers, accepting low budget projects, using hashtags etc).

A: It all started as a game for me, at the start it was really hard, especially in a country like North Macedonia, to accept a profession as an influencer. When I surprisingly came to some bigger amount of followers only for sharing my food and drinks opinions, I decided that if I would do this as a career, I would do it properly. I never accept advertising brands with which I do not correlate, I speak openly about my experiences and work only in my niche. Try to post consistently and interact with my audience as much as I can.

Q: What are the differences in the feedback from the sponsored posts versus the regular ones?

A: Incredibly, lately the difference is smaller, but in the past whenever I would say that the post was not sponsored I would get millions of people saying they bought the product, and whenever I would shout out a great product but as well sponsor the post, then the audience would remain silent. I believe this is due to the trust wall that is between the audience and influencers as they see us as walking billboards. However, after a while, when a trust is gained, the sponsored posts get as much as attention as the regular ones.

Q: To what extent you are aware of the legislation for disclosure advertisements on social media platforms and how do you indicate it on your profile? (The legislation states that everything that is advertised needs to be clearly addressed with a proper tag, even if it is gifted, or the influencer makes just a percentage of the sale of the products or services – all must be properly explained to the audience).

A: There is no actual influencers law in North Macedonia so that we need to properly tag posts. There is nobody who can check on your profile and punish you, they are all still looking on this more casually. Nonetheless, I usually either tag the company or put a hashtag for the campaign so the audience have a clear vision that it's paid commercial.

Q: How do you track the success rates? (For reference: what is the reach, the follower growth over time, number of likes and comments received, link clicks, ROI etc).

A: With the standard Instagram and Facebook analytics tools which are straightforward to use. I also use some additional applications that show the impressions per profile, the reach and the engagement of the followers.

Q: Do you have a different strategy for each social media platform and if yes, why? (Referring to actions like: do you upload the same post on Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, X or do you adapt to each platform individually).

A: I mainly use Instagram, I try to keep my consistency there. On the other platforms I might post from time to time but it's not really my type of environment. I would say for some posts you can post the same content on all, but if a brand asks from you particular video, some Tiktok challenge dance and similar, it's obvious that should not be the same content on multiple platforms.

Q: Describe a moment when you had to adapt to some meaningful change in your niche or industry.

A: I am not sure if I was in a such situation, but a meaningful change for me was opening Wine Berry, my own wine bar/shop. The brands stopped contacting me for a bit because they thought I guess, that I will just work on this as my main product and the rest will not function as it was before. Luckily that was not the case.

Collaborations and partnerships questions

Q: How do you align your personal brand with a company's brand when promoting their products/services?

A: I try to adapt as much as possible between my own point of view and the brand's one. The first step is always to test the products/services and if I would use them, then I can promote them, but if I don't see any correlation with my profile and especially if I don't like the product in question, then I do not align at all and reject them.

Q: Do you have to customize your profile to be in accordance with the brand that you are representing? (Customization refers in the sense of posting at a certain requested time, presenting content just as the brand wants it, recommend it exactly in the format the brand needs it).

A: Not my whole profile, but depending on what the brand asks, either a video, or a giveaway, or a post, that is how I present the service. I am surely not working on something that doesn't match my interest as in that way I will lose my audience and nobody will trust what I am selling.

Q: What exactly is a match or mismatch when it comes to influencer-brand collaboration and how it affects each-others credibility?

A: I have a feeling about this since the first meeting with the brand's representative. If it clicks, we immediately start pinching ideas about how to be presented, what to be the highlight of it, what suits the most etc. if the communication on the first meeting doesn't go well, and the person is here just to try to push her way of doing things, then I don't accept the campaign.

Negative side of influencer marketing questions

Q: How do you handle negative feedback on social media platforms?

A: By responding in a polite way, and looking on the bright side. I never argue with the audience, but try to understand their stand of view. I see the negative feedback as a helpful way to show me on what to work better. Of course, I am speaking about general constructive opinions, not about the hateful comments that people leave, those I delete as I don't like negativity on my channel.

Q: How is your experience with the negative outcomes of influencer marketing? (Negative meaning the trust erodes, reputational sufferings, the quality vs quantity, some exceptional situation that impacted the personal profile).

A: Luckily, I haven't been in such a situation. The only thing that I might recognize as negative is the one I already mentioned when I opened my bar, the brands kind of got the impression that I am their fierce competition. But in fact, there is place for everyone on the market.

Future expectations/predictions questions

Q: What is the final goal for you as an influencer after reaching a certain level of experience and a significant number of followers?

A: I would like primarily to establish Wine Berry as a strong and authentic bar in the area and develop it on a higher level. Otherwise, I would be happy to continue sharing regular content and share my expertise with my audience on the food and wine list.

Q: How do you believe influencer marketing will continue to shape the future?

A: Influencer marketing is an exceptionally fluid industry, essentially shaped by the trends, influenced by celebrities and tech developments. I expect it to grow even more and more, with the premises of AI. I expect the integration very soon, they already started. Just hoping that robots won't replace us influencers, that would really be sad. I expect that most of the content in the future will be in the form of videos.