

The rise of Influencers and Influencer Marketing

Chapter Overview

When the Internet provided the limitless ability for bloggers and vloggers to spread their voice, a whole new online genre emerged in the form of online influencers. This chapter introduces what it means to be able to influence others and clarifies what it means to be influential on social media. As influencers became more prominent on social media, so have the different ways of categorizing them. By understanding the different classifications of influencers, the reader will understand the benefits and challenges that each group can offer brands and their marketing activities. Furthermore, this chapter covers the key building blocks of influencer marketing and what it means for influencers and brands.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Influencers, Micro-celebrities

Learning outcomes:

- To define the terms influence, influencers and being influential
- To understand the evolution of influencers
- To understand key content strategies in order to identify key components of influencer marketing

Being Influential and Influencers

To find what influences people and their decisions has always been a mystery and hard to understand for marketers, brands, and advertisers. To understand how to influence others, we need to firstly look at how influence has been identified historically by scholars and psychologists. In Cialdini's (2009) exploratory research, he investigated this term broadly using the six principles of compliance: consistency, reciprocity, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity. He looked at how these principles have an incredible force and influence on society to vote, purchase, donate, and so on. Cialdini characterized these six principles as "weapons of influence" (p. 1). He explains reciprocity as a principle that is paying someone back if they do a favor for us. For example, influencers will often share each other's content as a means of reciprocating the favor of engagement. Consistency refers to a commitment that forces people to commit to a routine. It may be that an influencer consistently posts discounts for top products as a means of enticing followers to check their page routinely. Social proof implies things we commit to and find the right to do, if we see others doing. If popular influencers are not clearly disclosing that their content is sponsored, it might inadvertently become the norm. Liking suggests it is a principle that makes us comply with requests from individuals we like. For instance, many vloggers will ask

their viewers to like their post and subscribe. Authority principle means that people tend to accept requests if it is coming from trustful and/or accepted sources. This becomes a deeply debated topic later in the following chapters. Lastly, scarcity refers to when the availability is limited, opportunities become more attractive and valuable. While this last principle may seem contradictory to the explosion of Influencers, if one applies it to the opportunity's brands may present for sponsorship, then scarcity can drive influence. Together these six principles have proven to be extremely useful to help understand the process of influence and strengthen persuasion skills to influence the target audiences' purchase decision. However, Cialdini's (2009) principles have not revealed comprehensively the secret of how to be influential.

Increasingly though, scholars seek to identify the concept of how to be influential when it comes to other's decisions and behaviors. To add further clarity to this complex term, Hesketh (2010), looked at the ways of building relationships, and investigated how we can master influence and persuasion. Hesketh (2010) discussed that if you are a newbie to any group (industry, work, media channel, etc.), first you need to understand the nature of the group you want to impress and influence through respecting them, their beliefs, and views. Rather than focus on the characteristics, strategic approach, he argued the importance of being accepted within a community first to have an influence on people.

While scholars and psychologists have discussed the key traits of being influential, some researchers have begun to focus on certain 'ordinary' people who gain tremendous influential power over people who follow them. First of all, to understand what makes a non-celebrity (or an ordinary person) classified as an "influencer", scholars describe and

name these group of people in different ways including 'instafamous' (Marwick 2015), micro-celebrity (Khamis et al. 2017), 'market maven' or opinion leader (McQuail and Windahl 1993; Northouse 2006; Lin et al. 2018). For example, Van den Bulte and Joshi (2007) looked at individuals and their characteristics rather than principles of influence, and they posited that people became influential based on having social status and specific personality traits. However, Northouse (2006) argued that we need to look beyond personal traits to understand the concept of "being influential". He emphasized "... people likely to follow leaders who seem to know what they are doing..." (p. 418). As Song et al. (2007) emphasized individuals gain their power through being knowledgeable and disseminating new information to others.

When it comes to identifying who these influential people are, scholars focus on the group of influential people who are characterized as a powerful information source (Gladwell 2000) and named as influencers. It has been also discussed that social media has a significant role in these influential people becoming influencers or even celebrities (Chae, 2018).

However, with a constant change in social media applications, it can become difficult to define influencers and understand how they gain their influential power. Abidin and Ots (2015) proposed a broad definition of influencers as:

"Every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts" (p.1).

Although Abidin and Ots (2015) clearly emphasized the importance of the activities influencers focus on to influence their followers, as Enke and Borchers (2019) pointed out, Abidin and Ots ignored the importance of strategic approach behind their activities on online platforms.

Hence, through considering this significant point and taking into consideration the various definitions of Influencer (table 1), I define an influencer as a person who has a strategic approach and ability to influence individuals and their (buying) decisions within digital communication platforms. An influencers space can include any communication platform, although they mainly have a niche audience that would already believe their power, authority, and expertise in a subject, product, industry, or brand. These key elements (power, authority, and expertise) can make the influencer marketing system work- having a niche and a target audience who believe what influencers say! This distinction about the relationship between influencing and purchase behavior is explored further in Chapter 2 (Leban and Voyer 2020).

Table. 1. Different types of definitions for influencers

| Authors | Term/label | Definition |
|--------------|------------------------|---|
| Senft (2008) | <i>Micro-celebrity</i> | '... involves people "amping up their popularity over the Web using techniques like videos, blogs and social networking sites" (p.25) |

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| Freberg et al. (2011) | <i>Social media influencers</i> | ‘a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audiences attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.” (p.90) |
| Marwick and Boyd (2011) | <i>Micro-celebrity</i> | ‘using social media to develop and maintain an audience.’ (p.140) |
| Wong (2014) | <i>Social Media Influencer</i> | ‘a form of marketing that identifies and targets individuals who have influence over potential buyers’ |
| Ge and Gretzel (2018) | <i>Social Media Influencer</i> | ‘individuals who are in a consumer’s social graph and have a direct impact on the behavior of that consumer’ (p. 1273) |
| Influencer Marketing Hub (2019) | <i>Influencer</i> | ‘...an individual who has the power to affect the purchase decisions of others because of his/her authority, knowledge, position or relationship with his/her audience’ |
| Lou and Yuan (2019) | <i>Social Media Influencer</i> | ‘...is first and foremost a content generator: one who has the status of expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers- who are of marketing value |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | to brands- by regularly producing valuable content via social media.” (p.59) |
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Becoming an Influencer on Social Media

Solis (2010) defines the characteristics of social media as “the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers... the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many to a many-to-one model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers” (p.37). With the innovative and democratic nature of social media platforms, production, creation, and distribution of any content also become extremely easy. This is because it doesn’t require people to know any technicality of these platforms in order to become a content creator or eventually an influencer. As it is stated by Labrecque et al. (2011):

“No longer does a person need to be familiar with complex coding languages or other technicalities to build Web sites, because virtually anyone can upload text, pictures and video instantly to a site from a personal computer or phone. With technological barriers crumbling and its increasing ubiquity, the Web has become the perfect platform for personal branding.” (p.38).

With the equal and innovative features that online platforms offer, Bolter and Grusin (1996) point out that these platforms would become the new way “construction and definitions of the self.” This self in a digital world was taken further by Belk (2013) argued that in the

visual digital environment, particularly on social media, individuals are “disembodied and re-embodied as avatars, photos, and videos” (p. 481). In this way, we can argue that users start experiencing different ways of constructing their identity through sharing content that reflects their ideal selves on social media. With these unlimited communications and content creation opportunities people have had, individuals have begun practicing self-branding through producing text, content, images, and videos on online platforms, particularly on social media channels (Khamis et al. 2017).

By adding a strategic approach to self-branding one’s online activities, people start creating distinctive stories and content which help them to create high visibility, engagement, and ‘online fame’ (Khamis et al. 2017). Essentially, people began to gain fame through the visibility and engagement they receive and build on online platforms to be considered famous through creating valuable and engaging content, which is a part of building their ideal online presence. As a result of practicing continuous self-presentation and branding activities on social media, they start to grow their number of followers and build an enormous online presence.

As social media creates an interactive environment for every user where they have equal opportunities to view or create any content in any form, users are not expected to be celebrities or famous brands to create their communities and becoming micro-celebrities with a high volume of engagement with their audiences in this virtual digital world. As Khamis et al. (2017) discussed, social media frees individuals from the top-down dynamic which does require individuals to have “existing power” to be influential. However, to use the real impact on social media to grow any communities, having strategic practices is highly

crucial for particular individuals to gain influential power. As Marwick (2015) stated, 'ordinary' people can become 'famous' or 'micro-celebrity' by using social networking applications purposefully including sharing eye-catching content including videos, selfies, images of their food, friends and their daily routines.

Considering these micro-celebrities (influencers) who can range from high school students to fitness gurus, travelers, and beauty experts (Marwick 2015; Abidin and Ots 2016; Saul 2016), scholars have challenged this vague term further to investigate potential key features that can validate individuals whether they can be classified as influencers or micro-celebrities. Some scholars believe that there are no specific criteria to measure how people perceive and accept an individual as an opinion leader or not (Xiong et al. 2018). On the other hand, some scholars have argued what is considered a high or low number of followers to consider an individual as an influencer (De Veirman et al. 2017). Although this quantitative data can help brands to measure how many people these influencers can potentially reach, this can be evaluated as only a starting point to identify the right influencers and their social reach (e.g. Basille 2009; Straley 2010; Özçelik and Levi, 2020). As Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono (2019) pointed out, we need to look beyond quantitative data and focus the engagement individuals receive in each post on social media to identify these influential people. Similarly, Freberg et al. (2011) argued that these group of influential individuals can be identified through looking not only at the number of followers they have, but also engagement and interaction they build within their online space through likes, comments, tags, etc. Lin et al. (2018) highlighted that influencers gain specific online leadership authority based on influencers' social reach (e.g. number of comments and likes) on social media channels. When they build their social reach, they also make sure they

maintain their relationship with existing followers through increasing social capital by sharing new information (Marwick 2013), specifically about brands and products their audiences are interested in. In this way, influencers benefit from having tremendous social reach both socially and commercially by having a “unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interest of target audiences” (Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017, p.1).

As Khamis et al. (2017) described, Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) stated ‘the social media influencers work to generate a form of “celebrity” capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic “personal brand” via social networks, which can be subsequently used by companies, and advertisers for consumer outreach’ (p.194). Not surprisingly, practitioners now pay closer attention to opinion leaders who have high social reach and have the most authentic and strong relationships with their followers (See Chapter 3). Equally, as a part of social media marketing strategies, partnering with influencers has become one of the most emerging strategies for brands and marketers (Brown and Hayes 2008; Kafka and Molla 2017) such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Youtube.

Influencer Marketing: What makes it work?

From a practitioner and academic perspective, there are two types of terms defining influencers and their role in the marketing and advertising industry: Influencer marketing and influencer relations. Influencer marketing refers to influencers’ marketing activities related to short-term and paid activities. Influencer relations refers to activities in which influencers use unpaid, earned, and share media content which aims for a long-term

relationship with their audience (Schach and Lommatzsch, 2018). When we look into the term “*influencer marketing*” further, because of the wide range use of influencers by marketers and advertisers, it implies a comprehensive range of marketing activities which fuelled by brands and advertisers through investing in influencers and their relevant posts and content to brands’ target audiences and products (Yodel 2017).

Although brands enhance their interaction with their desired audiences more on social media, they are still perceived by consumers as an organization trying to sell their products. Since, influencers and their branded message (e.g. eWOM) are often perceived more authentic and credible than any brand-generated content created by marketers or advertisers (Talavera 2015), brands started seeking third-party endorsers who can deliver engaging branded-content and enhance the communication with the brands intended target audience and consumers on social media sites (Uzunoglu and Kip 2014). Therefore, brands started seeking strategic ways of working with digital influencers who already have a powerful impact on their established community and their followers’ purchase decision. This way, brands have an opportunity to build closer relationships with their audiences through influencers’ eWOM power and influencers’ strong connections with their followers.

The power of Electronic Word of Mouth

As noted earlier, social media offers unlimited tools for consumers who freely create and disseminate brand and product-related information through using their social connections (e.g. Lyons and Henderson 2005; Boyd and Ellison 2007; Jansen et al. 2009; Knoll 2016). In recent years, marketers have become increasingly interested in directly managing these

brand-related communications between consumers (e.g. WOM) as well as consumers' communication with brands. This is because consumers have become active co-producers of value and meaning regarding brands, products, and services (e.g. Brown et al. 2009; Kozinets 2001; Kozinets et al. 2010) through engaging brand-related posts on social networking sites. Initially, the idea of searching and understanding consumer opinion on social media websites attracts a greater interest from organizations, since any positive product-related posts was also viewed as having value as great promotional vehicles for marketers and organizations for the length of the life cycle of the post (Duan et al. 2008).

The reason eWOM becomes a powerful way to promote any brands, products, or services is because people are more likely to trust more their peers' opinions than advertisers (De Veirman et al. 2017). Villanueva et al. (2008) contend that people who buy any products recommended by others, have a tendency to add twice as much long-term value to the organization than the ones who did not buy the product as a result of their social connections' recommendations. Similarly, Swant's (2016) study evidenced that consumers trust social media influencers and their endorsements just as they would trust their friends. As consumers trust any product or service endorsement by influencers and purchase those products accordingly, eight out of 10 consumers have purchased something after seeing it on an influencers' social media post (Rakuten Marketing 2019).

Therefore, brands have begun partnering with influencers who are interpreted as credible electronic word of mouth sources rather than traditional advertising methods to reach a wide range of audiences as a part their branding and marketing activities (e.g. Fransen et al. 2015; Abidin and Ots 2016; De Veirman et al. 2017). For brands, the whole point of using

influencers is to create a reliable and trustworthy eWOM effect. Brown and Hayes (2008) describe this powerful eWOM effect as “...like being on a trial...” where you need a witness to support your case that whatever you say is credible and trustworthy (p.23). Therefore, in order to target large audiences with a powerful eWOM strategy, brands seek influencers (witnesses) who have a high impact on their followers and fans on social media networks, as their followers tend to perceive their endorsement as word-of-mouth communication (Liu et al. 2012). In this way, brands and organizations can influence consumers’ purchase decisions in an indirect way through using powerful eWOM method influencers as well as a viral effect which helps to disseminate influencer generated branded content among the followers (De Veirman et al. 2017). Whilst we cannot deny the fact that although the use of eWOM strategy helps influencers marketing become an important form of marketing and advertising, it is also true eWOM effect is increased by using creative and engaging content strategy.

Influencers and their content

Content that is produced by influencers largely relies on the effectiveness of user-generated content (UGC) and is considered one of the major factors influencing consumer behavior (Hoffman and Fodor 2010). This may be due to users believing user-generated content contains more trustworthy, reliable, and up-to-date information than other branded sources (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). Similarly, Cwynar- Horta (2016) argued that if branded content is created by influencers in a user-generated content nature, it creates stronger relationships between influencers and their followers, which has an indirect impact on brand-consumer relationships. In line with this argument, Zhu and Chen (2015) argued that

Instagram is a content-based site and its users primarily engage with posts because they like the content more than they like the person behind the profile. The subject of each content mainly constructed around the exhibition of their exotic lives, purchases, daily routines that their followers do not have but wish to have (Abidin and Ots 2016; Saul 2016).

In general, social media influencers focus on three main objectives to achieve through their content: 1) to increase the number of followers they have, 2) increase product knowledge among their followers, and 3) influence their fans' purchase intention and/or decision. To achieve these objectives, several strategies have been applied by influencers and brands particularly in content creation to disseminate their ideas (Thomas 2004).

Influencers typically build their content strategies around structuring aspirational photos of brand or product through using hashtags, filters, and photoshops which help them to become self-made micro-celebrities (Dewey 2014) on different social media channels.

Although all social networking platforms enable online and social interaction, they do not all offer the exact same services, nor do they have the same functions or focus (Hughes et al. 2019). Because each social networking channel offers diverse features and experiences, influencers incorporate different ways of generating branded content based on the platform they are active on.

Despite influencers actively engaging with their audience in various social media channels, among different social media platforms, Instagram is found as the most popular social media platform for influencers to create appealing online presence and large networks, with more than 1 billion active users monthly (Statista 2019). This has been supported by some

scholars who argue that the influencer and their persuasion power substantially results from Instagram's characteristic features which allow any content creators to design their content in a creative and innovative way. Instagram, therefore, is one of the most important platforms for eWOM and influencer marketing by scholars and practitioners alike (Evans et al. 2017; De Veirman et al. 2017; Jaakonmäki et al. 2017).

To clarify the value of influencer generated branded content further, some scholars investigated the type of content and its impact on the interaction and engagement between influencers and their followers. Firstly, as social media was specifically founded as a platform for individuals to satisfy their needs related to information (Park et al. 2009), the value of informative content on social media engagement has been discussed by several scholars (e.g. Park et al. 2009; Muntinga et al. 2011; Yesiloglu 2018). Lou and Yuan (2019) suggested that influencers' informative branded content has a positive impact on followers' brand awareness and purchase decisions. Whereas, other scholars discuss that product knowledge itself is what has a significant impact on people's purchase decisions (Kay et al. 2020). This may be because the internet and social media influencers have become a trusted source for updated product information (Mallipeddi et al. 2018). Therefore, the tactic has been implemented by influencers to show they have a solid product knowledge is to emphasize key features of a product (Lou and Yang 2019) in different "*how to..*" posts including "how to make healthy food", "how to match blazers with different trousers", "the best places to go in London" etc.

Trying to move beyond the context of influencer-generated branded content, some researchers suggest that influencers and their content tend to be highly influential when

they mix exposure of both online and offline, self-branding, and strategic self-presentation (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016). As a part of self-branding and presentation that was noted earlier, Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) found that physical attractiveness can lead to admiration and become a reason for individuals to follow an influencer on Instagram. Additionally, we begin to see influencers start glorifying their selfies and posts they share to get noticed on Instagram. Saul (2016) maintains that successful influencers who attract a high volume of engagement, usually have some common characteristics including a sense of humor and original perspective. This approach helps influencers to be considered as more 'relatable' trendsetters as opposed to traditional celebrities and brands itself (Mediakix 2018), which fuel the buzz effect among the followers. As people share information published more by someone (influencer) they feel close or relate to than individuals or brands they do not feel connected to.

As we begin to see the influencers' strategic approach to content creation on social media enhance the interaction with their followers, practitioners and scholars began to seek further tactics that can be implemented by influencers to impact consumers' purchase decisions. Particularly on social media channels such as Instagram, showcasing content including photos and videos on sellers' Instagram posts, has been considered as one of the most important tactics to encourage users to make impulsive purchases (Lo et al. 2016). Although brands acknowledge the fact that influencer generated videos, images, and content can have a positive impact on users' purchase decision, they need to look for further integration of social media characteristic features to increase the effectiveness of influencer generated branded content on purchase decisions. For example, in 2016, Instagram added a call-to-action button to help online businesses to share their product and

brand-related content (Instagram 2016). This form of direct purchase also helps branded content become more attractive and engaging in terms of triggering potential consumers to make impulsive purchases (Handayani et al. 2018). Likewise, influencers integrate 'buying tags' features on Instagram, which provide the greatest usefulness for users to buy products directly from brands' e-commerce sites. To explore influencers and their marketing activities on social media, we need to explore the partnership relationship between influencers and brands further.

Idea Fairy: Influencer Content

Influencers are probably one of the most popular groups of people that media and marketers talk about. Think about influencers you follow on Instagram and their content and list the things you like about their content. What does it say about the influencers you follow? What kind of Influencer content consistently grabs your attention? Has the content ever lead you to purchase something?

Work relationship between Influencers and Brands

Since influencers start becoming an important part of marketing and advertising strategies in different industries, they have been defined as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweet and the use of other social media " (Freberg et al. 2011, p.90). To explain their role in marketing further, scholars focus on Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) concept of "two-step of communication" with the audience; which helps to explain the role potential opinion leaders play as a third-party endorser to pass brand-related information to them. Based on the 'two-step of communication' framework in influencer marketing and influencer relations, brands engage with key opinion leaders (influencers) to endorse their products and services within the community they establish on digital platforms.

Thomas (2004) stated that finding these key opinion leaders is crucial for brands to engage with larger audiences and spread brands' messages to their followers more effectively. So, brands started seeking outright influencers who either had the same type of audiences these brands target or can help them tap into a market where the brand does not have influence yet. Therefore, for brands to achieve any digital marketing goals which involve influencers, they need to have strategies in place.

It has been discussed by several researchers that people's decisions are mostly influenced by information they receive from others and this interaction has been found the most influential way to receive information for consumers (Keller 2007). As a part of eWOM and viral marketing strategies, brands recognize the power of referral marketing for acquiring new customers (Van den Bulte et al. 2018). For example, the Freberg et al. (2011) definition has drawn attention to the importance of influencers and their activities as a part of referral marketing strategy as influencers also have been employed not only for endorsing a brand or an organization (Liu et al. 2012), but also influencing brands' reputation (Freberg et al. 2011).

One of the major challenges for organizations to achieve successful referral marketing is to identify and select the right influencers who can have a powerful impact on their followers and influence these followers to buy a new product, or help them to diffuse them in their social networks through their content (Momtaz et al. 2011; Pophal 2016). Hence, several scholars investigated influencers and how their strategic approach to marketing works in general. Researchers looked at influencers and their marketing strategy from different

angles including how an organization needs to approach to influencers (Uzunoglu and Kip 2014), how social media influencers impact stakeholders (Djarfarova and Rushworth 2017) and how to integrate organizational activities, external resources influencers bring to the relationship between organizations and influencers (Enke and Borchers 2019), and social media influencers' working routine (Pang et al. 2017).

Another important aspect of influencer marketing that requires further discussion is how the relationship between influencers and organization need to be identified and managed in different ways. Organizations use influencers as a part of their marketing, public relations, and advertising strategies, but not necessarily in the same way. For example, a brand may use influencers in a public relations campaign to help gain awareness or educate them about the products' benefits or uses and employ influencers in marketing campaigns to generate sales. Each discipline lends itself to different tactics and outputs and so should the strategic use of influencers. As influencers are not limited to only blogs anymore, companies need to look at this collaboration with influencers in more comprehensive ways (Enke and Borchers 2019) through a more complex strategic approach. Enke and Borchers (2019) defined this strategic social media influencer communication as "the purposeful use of communication by organizations or social media influencers in which social media influencers are addressed or perform activities with strategic significance to organizational goals" (p.261). To explain different aspects of strategic communication between influencers and brands, they proposed a comprehensive framework to shed light on the management process. Enke and Borchers (2019) propose strategic communication in three different ways including *managed strategic social media influencer communication*, *unmanaged strategic social media communication*, and *strategically insignificant social media influencer*

communication (p. 271). *Managed strategic social media influencer communication* is characterized as the influencers' activities aligned with organizations' objectives. *Unmanaged strategic social media influencer communication* refers to the influencers' activities that are only managed by influencers themselves without organization involvement. Lastly, *strategically insignificant social media influencer communication* describes the influencers' activities which are purposely insubstantial to organisation and their objectives. These activities can include influencers' daily eating routine, exercises, or self-care routine etc. They discuss that organizations need to employ both substantial and insubstantial approaches for influencers communication.

As a part of referral marketing, which is mainly managed by brands, brands can work with influencers in different marketing forms including sponsored content, product placement, documenting daily life, affiliate links, partnerships, and gifted posts. To take the relationship with influencers further, brands start seeking more efficient and direct ways to reach their audience to increase engagement which can grow sales. As a result, brands decide to work with influencers directly involving launching a product range together. For example, *In the Style* shows a great partnership example with influencers (Geoghegan, 2019). In 2019 clothing retailer *In the Style* announced a new product range collaborated with social media influencer Lorna Luxe. As a result, they revealed that they have the fastest-selling collection and the highest conversion in Europe, the US and Australia since 2014 when the brand was launched. Please explore evidence of credibility between sponsored and non-sponsored content in chapter 10 (Costello and Urbanska 2020).

As noted earlier, eWOM is an effective strategy in influencing purchase decisions, brands therefore begin to seek out influencers that genuinely endorse products or services of a brand that have a positive impact on purchase decisions. Therefore, as a part of the referral marketing strategy, influencers begin to focus on *managed strategic social media influencer communication* through affiliate links which are integrated on their posts and stories on Instagram to sell their product directly on social media (Affiliate Marketing, 2019) (see figure 1).

Figure 1. An example of affiliate marketing



However, since brands encourage influencers to create eWOM effect seems their recommendations are genuine, influencers began to face legal regulations for disclosing content they share on social media (e.g. Evans et al. 2017; Den Jans et al. 2019). For example, the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) took a crucial step to clarify potential issues paid advertising can bring. As consumers cannot always differentiate

between paid or unpaid posts influencers share on their social media profile, certain rules such as including the word #ad or #sponsored must now be included. The UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (the CAP Code) requires that: *“Marketing communications must not falsely claim or imply that the marketer is acting as a consumer or for purposes outside its trade, business, craft or profession; marketing communications must make clear their commercial intent, if that is not obvious from the context.”* Furthermore, The CAP Code requires that users need to know whether the post they see is paid by brands or not, for example, paid or organic content. Please check Chapter 13 for further information (Bosher 2020).

Idea fairy: Who can be an influencer

Think about can anyone be an influencer? What makes them an influencer? Please make a list of activities (e.g content creation, engagement with brands, use key traits of personality etc.) ordinary person need to do to become an influencer.

Summary:

- There is a difference between influence and being influential.
- Converging various application of social media channels, together with influencers' content strategies and their relationship with the brands, make influencer marketing the potentially most significant type of marketing in the future.
- Marketers and advertisers need to focus on how they can enhance their engagement with influencers who have a significant power in their followers' purchase decisions.

Case study: The rise of an influencer: Joe Wicks as a healthy living guru

In a digital world, it cannot be denied that influencers and their strategies have become one of the key impacts on consumers' decisions and their lifestyle in general. One recent example we see is Joe Wicks who is known as "The Body Coach" on social media and TV. Joe is a British fitness coach and TV presenter. He has been recognized by several major publications including Harper's Bazaar, Elle UK, and Forbes for his effort and success in the fitness industry. His career started in TV and traditional media and continues growing on different social media channels specifically on Instagram and Facebook. After he has become popular on social media, he launched his fitness and nutrition plan website www.bodycoach.com.

His digital content includes High-Intensity Interval Training workouts, healthy food recipes, and snapshots of his daily family life. Through the self-branding method, his personal brand has become one of the most followed accounts on Instagram and YouTube. His content mainly consists of healthy recipes and tailored workouts.

With a book deal, upcoming TV show, and numerous product endorsements, Wicks's business is now earning £1m a month. It is growing so fast that he's hired a large team, led by his brother and best friend, to run it.

His Content strategy on Social media: What makes him an influencer?

Although he has started earning his fame through his appearance on several TV shows, a well-planned content strategy behind his social media posts provides him further success in society particularly in digital platforms. He started posting content on Instagram in 2014 including images of simple healthy food recipes, short intensive work out videos, and his daily life routine. He began posting fitness content to his YouTube channel, named 'The Body Coach TV', in 2014. His first video garnered over 6 million views. The channel has amassed over 2.2 million subscribers and more than 128 million views.

He has reached 3.6 M followers on Instagram and 2.3M subscribers on YouTube. He provides content that meets people's needs to learn about healthy living styles, recipes, and workouts as a part of his self-branding activities. His content strategy has been built in providing informative content that is integrated with entertaining and fun content. Research suggested that the integration of informative and entertaining content in digital posts increases engagement (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). He also avoids disturbing branded content, relying, therefore, more on subtle product suggestions placed within healthy food recipes he shares across different social media channels. When he shares his content on social media channels, he is also aware of the power of positive and inspirational words on people and their engagement as he stated in his interview "It's the power of social media, the power of a good message" (Heritage 2016). By posting about his passion for social media, Joe Wicks has gained immense internet popularity, allowing him to shape and influence his audiences through his eye-catching videos, recipes, and funny images. While his engagement mostly relies on his characteristics and both informative and entertaining content he shares, he also designed his content strategy linked to altruistic content during global pandemic COVID-19. During the UK COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the UK, he

started series videos “P.E with Joe” on YouTube to help children and families stay active and this series of videos had a wide impact and viewed more than a million times by followers. The result of his content strategy was astonishing, and he was awarded a Guinness World Record for 'most viewers for a fitness workout live stream on YouTube', after achieving almost a million viewers on March 24, 2020 for his live stream.

Questions to consider:

- 1) What type of content strategy does Joe Wicks follow? What factors do you think make Joe Wicks such a successful influencer?
- 2) Do think influencers need the support of traditional media as well as social media channels to be more influential?
- 3) Do you have any other ideas on how influencers can get more engagement? Are there any content strategies can you suggest?

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