


Chapter 8

The Role of Social Media Influencers on the Consumer Decision-Making Process

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ABSTRACT

The digital era has introduced many changes in the consumer marketplace. Social media and especially social networking sites redefined how consumers relate to and behave towards brands, as well as the brand-consumer relationship. Within this context and the heightened resistance to brand communication through traditional media, marketers are turning to other strategies to connect with their customers and influence their consumer journey. One of these strategies is influencer marketing. In the last years, brands have used social media influencers as endorsers of their products and services, and as brand ambassadors. Digital influencers connect consumers and brands, strengthening their bond and allowing the brand to reach their target in a more natural way to influence the consumer buying process. In this chapter we will provide a narrative review on the role of digital influencers on the consumer decision processes.

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has witnessed considerable changes in the consumer marketplace. Some of these changes have been introduced by the rise and massive use of social media by individuals. Nowadays, social media has become, as Duffett (2017) claims, an indispensable part of life in contemporary societies, deeply intertwined in our daily activities.

Its pervasiveness in multiple spheres of society has extended to businesses and consumers. Social media and especially social networking sites (SNS) redefined how consumers relate to and behave towards brands, as well as the balance of power in the brand-consumer relationship. Their consumer

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journey has also been altered, from information search to post-purchase, under this ever-present influence of social media.

In their continuous effort to adapt to consumer changes, businesses have altered their marketing strategies, using digital channels to better reach their targets, although many businesses have little in-depth knowledge about SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, or Pinterest (Whiting et al., 2019). It is in this digital context of transformation that businesses are increasingly using influencer marketing, moving away from celebrities as endorsers, and instead relying on social media opinion leaders, often referred as social media influencers or digital influencers (e.g., Abidin, 2015; Freberg et al., 2011; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Attending to the relevance that social media influencer communication has recently gained for brands and consumers, in this chapter we will review the existing literature on the field of influencer marketing, highlighting the role of social media influencers on the consumer decision processes. We initially proceed to the description and characterization of these digital influencers, as well as present the main characteristics that enhance their influence on consumers. We then review the existing evidence on the role of social media influencers on each phase of consumer decision journey.

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Social media influencers are do-it-yourself social media users that create their own digital persona, are content generators and have the capacity to attract and build a sizable audience overtime (e.g., Lou & Yuan 2019; Marwick, 2010; Turner, 2006). They can attract and mobilize their audience's attention throughout time, strategically sharing information through posts, pictures and messages to boost their popularity (e.g., Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Marwick, 2016; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Abidin (2015) adds their engagement with their audiences and their orientation to monetize their social media activity when she defines them as “everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the 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). Yet, one must note that only social media users with the right kind of social capital of interest for brands can monetize (Zulli, 2018).

Opinion leaders have been described as socially active individuals, interconnected in the social system (Rogers, 1995), a notion that can be extended to the digital world. Indeed, digital opinion leadership is seen, first and foremost, as a social practice that involves an ongoing carefully constructed self-presentation to be consumed by others, by an audience of fans, and popularity is maintained through a continuous process of fan management (Marwick & boyd, 2011). But not only social: Pöyry et al. (2019) go one step further, by defending that it is a technosocial practice, where social media influencers have constantly to deal with the pressure of being likeable, credible and interesting for their fans, as well as economically profitable and, at the same time, they have to assimilate and adapt to the changing technological affordances of the digital platforms.

At the core of this notion is the idea of interpersonal influence: these digital content creators have the ability to influence, to persuade and to shape the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of their followers through regular content production and distribution and ongoing interaction on social media (e.g., Enke & Borchers, 2018; Freberg et al., 2011; Gorry & Westbrook, 2009).

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