

Chapter 16

Consumption in the Digital Age: A Research on Social Media Influencers

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, the digital environment has an influence on consumers' lives, in terms of attitudes, preferences, habits, likes and dislikes, and purchasing practices. It is also observed that throughout history, a variety of professionals have been utilized to influence the public. To the group of individuals who lead as celebrities, role models, or opinion leaders in the digital age, "influencers" have been added in. This chapter aims to examine the relationship between influencers and consumption. As a result of the research, it was revealed that most of the shares/posts had the name of a brand or product, tagged brand, or used related hashtags to direct followers to consumption. The findings also show that despite the use of a large number of brand names, a very small number of these posts have the emphasis of sponsorship, advertising, or cooperation. Finally, it was also found that despite the high number of followers, the interaction rate is very low.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history, it has been observed that the popularity, reputation and persuasive skills of people have been benefitted from to influence or to guide masses. These people who are considered as "role models" and imitated by others, function as a communication and interaction instrument. On the other hand, product and brand alternatives, which are diversified with increasing competition conditions, require new methods in terms of advertising and marketing practices. While it can be seen that the digitalized communication ways also affect advertising and marketing practices, it can be said that consumers' consumption habits, information sources and their judgments on product and brand preferences have been changing. Against a consumer group, in which the traditional way of advertising and marketing conception is relatively of secondary importance, brands have to follow the developments that draws the attention of consumers. It is inevitable for brands that exert every effort to reach particularly the niche groups to lean to practices targeting specific masses.

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Consumption in the Digital Age

While the increasing influence and power of social networks and the internet in recent years have shown its impact on consumers as spending more time on these platforms, in the meantime, these instruments have also been acquiring new functions in terms of sustaining the consumption. While creating various impacts on consumers, the user-based content that enables e-shopping, digital advertising activities and experience sharing also shapes the consumption society. The posts related to user experience that can be observed to a high degree especially on social networks are seen as a new form of communication by word of mouth (WOM), which is a part of traditional communication. Unlike the advertising, promotion and communication ways that are under the control of the brand itself, these social media posts are considered to be the ways of communication, in which the feeling of trust and sincerity is intensely formed, the active participation of the consumer is allowed and perceived as relatively objective. Accordingly, it is possible to regard social networks as one of the factors that affect consumer preferences nowadays.

On the other hand, as every era of history has created its own popular character, the digital age of today is creating its own phenomena. The “celebrity” and reputation, which comes from the family (*ascribed celebrity*) or acquired by heroism and success (*achieved celebrity*) in traditional societies, has become functional mainly over ‘attribution’ (*attributed celebrity*) recently (Rojek, 2001). At this point, it can be said that the internet and social networks have recreated perceptions concerning popularity and the dynamics of popularity have been carried to a different perspective. The operation of the system becomes clear to understand when the reasons such as; spreading speed of user-generated content, vast visibility opportunity, user interaction and dual conversation atmosphere are taken into consideration. Contrary to the limited nature of traditional instruments, the new instruments of communication offer the opportunity to draw interest by creating content for everyone who desires. Accordingly, a large number of phenomena, which are called under the name of “*YouTuber, Instagrammer, blogger, vlogger, Influencer*” and who use various networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter are mentioned. These people, who serve as a part of consumer culture, also have a large number of followers and have become communication mechanisms that attract many consumers in a variety of fields. The effort of a person to access his/her sphere using his/her influence can be likened to the word of mouth communication process of the traditional period.

The study aims to focus on social media phenomena, which are defined and accepted as “influencers” in the literature, and to analyze consumption forms that are reconstructed using these people. The main motive of this study is the ever-increasing cooperation of brands with these people to promote their products. In general, influencers are defined as a new type of endorser who shape audience attitudes using social media tools (Freberg et. al., 2011). The influencers, who are consociating with brands to promote their products, to convey user experiences and to build a relationship with consumers, are becoming a mediator for a new cycle of consumption. According to *The State of Influencer Marketing* (Linqua, 2018) report, a research conducted on 181 marketer and agencies showed that 86 percent of the respondents used influencer marketing, 92 percent found it efficient and 39 percent planned to increase their influencer marketing budgets by 2018.

The main assumption of this study is that the use of product and brand names in the sharing of influencers will be effective on consumers. Within the scope of this study, which attempts to explain and examine the relation between social media influencers and consumption, content analysis method was employed. In addition, this study aims to provide a descriptive analysis. While the universe of the study was constituted by social media phenomena, “*Top Influencers 2017*” list of Forbes (2018) was taken as a reference in selecting the study sample. On the list which was compiled under the titles of “*Parenting, Fashion, Entertainment, Travel, Gaming, Fitness, Beauty, Home, Food, Tech & Business and Kids*”, the

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