

Instagram Social Media Communication in Pandemic Times: A Deductive Qualitative Analysis of a Portuguese Digital Influencer's Profile

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Abstract: The power of social media as an influential tool is undeniable, and influencer marketing has emerged as a strategic element, introducing innovative methods of communication, promotion, and advertising to support content creators (Brown & Hayes, 2008). In this context, the study aimed to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the communication strategies of Portuguese digital influencer Helena Coelho. The focus was on the content shared on her primary platform, Instagram, widely recognized for influencer marketing. The epidemiological crisis triggered by the pandemic raised the crucial question of how content creators adapted to new ways of communicating with the public. This period of uncertainty imposed significant challenges, forcing creators to reevaluate their communication strategies. To understand these adaptations, the research presented in this paper adopted a deductive qualitative approach, which enabled an in-depth analysis of the content posted by Helena Coelho, a highly followed Portuguese Instagram influencer. A focus group was conducted and included a convenient purposive sample of five female individuals, aged between 22 and 24 years and all active followers of the influencer's Instagram account. The study also resorted to observational research techniques with which 60 Instagram posts, collected between April 1st and April 31st, 2019, and April 1st and April 31st, 2020. This interval was chosen to identify changes in the influencer's communication strategies, covering both pre-pandemic and active pandemic periods. The results revealed that, although the influencer faced challenges due to the lack of common everyday activities during the lockdown, she was able to adjust her communication strategies, engaging the audience through home-produced content such as live streams and challenges, and effectively utilizing hashtags. As a consequence of these adjustments, the influencer experienced a substantial growth in her number of followers and engagement rate on Instagram in 2020 when compared to 2019. The collected and analyzed data indicate that the changes in her communication strategy, due to limitations derived from the pandemic, had a positive impact on her overall results, contributing to her growth and influence in the digital landscape.

Keywords: Social media communication, COVID 19 Pandemic, Instagram, Digital influencer

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, has had widespread impacts on global health and the economy, accelerating the need for brands to establish a digital presence, especially on social media. In this context, influencers have played a crucial role, standing out for their rise amid pandemic uncertainty (Canton, 2021; Richbourg, 2022).

Social distancing, globally adopted for health reasons, imposed significant adjustments on both businesses and content producers, requiring a reevaluation of their communication strategies. Faced with restrictions, businesses turned to digital marketing as an effective response, enabling consumers to make remote purchases (Fabius et al., 2020). Content producers, including digital influencers, adapted to the circumstances, finding new ways to connect with the audience, often operating from their own homes (Buvár et al., 2022).

Given this scenario, it was considered relevant to analyze possible changes in the communication strategies of Portuguese digital influencer Helena Coelho, based on an analysis of her Instagram content during the pandemic. The research sought to answer the central question: "In what ways did the context of the COVID-19 pandemic influence the communication strategies of the digital influencer Helena Coelho?" To achieve this, the study investigated how the challenges faced by content creators during this period impacted the communicational performance of the digital influencer. Additionally, the study aimed to assess the influence of COVID-19 on Helena Coelho's growth and identify the strategies implemented to maintain relevance in a scenario where social media consumption and information seeking saw a significant increase.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered a crisis that had a significant impact on businesses, compelling them to adapt and develop new forms of communication (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). According to Castro et al. (2020), organizations faced the socio-economic impacts resulting from the global crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, it became paramount for organizations to adopt new strategies, such as efficient communication, work planning, digital enhancement, telecommuting, and actions aimed at the well-being of their employees, to minimize the harmful effects of the pandemic on the organization.

The pandemic redefined commercial dynamics and daily habits, prompting influencers to adjust. This adjustment became evident during the isolation period, where the increased time dedicated to online content consumption not only boosted follower growth but also strengthened engagement with the audience. This scenario was amplified by the pivotal role of social media, which became an indispensable tool for digital marketing. With technological advances, social media not only enabled consumers to create and share content but also influenced other users, transforming marketing strategies into more effective approaches than traditional ones (Thackeray et al., 2008).

It has become evident that the virtual realm of social networks is advantageous for brands. The act of sharing content has facilitated a deeper understanding of users, their preferences, and needs, thereby enabling a more adaptable market strategy. In this densely populated network of interconnected individuals (Ryan, 2014), the consumption of social media has been significant, experiencing a notable increase during periods of social isolation. Consequently, influencers have had to devise creative strategies employing the tools available on digital platforms. Alves et al. (2020) assert that, during lockdowns, social networks became steadfast allies for many individuals, serving as a means to 'disconnect' from the prevailing circumstances. However, for others, these platforms became a source of anxiety due to the overwhelming influx of information related to the health crisis and the saturation of available activities.

Lincoln (2016) defines digital influencers as individuals who are active online, possessing the ability to shape perspectives and influence the decisions of others through their perceived or real authority, knowledge, position, or relationships. In a parallel perspective, Francalanci and Hussain (2015) characterize influencers as users on social media platforms with a substantial audience (followers). They differentiate the term 'influencers' from the broader concept of 'influence,' which encompasses the social impact derived from the content shared by users across various social media platforms.

Digital influencers, increasingly prominent in Instagram photos, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos, have evolved into celebrities, amassing substantial followings on digital platforms. They now wield the power to influence the choices of their audience, akin to actors, musicians, or politicians. Recognizing this reality, brands are keenly aware of the potential to promote their products through these influencers (Santos, 2018). According to Santos (2020), during the period of social isolation imposed by the pandemic, the interests of digital influencers transformed to align with the cultural moment and adapt to new conditions of content production. Despite the initial impact, influencer marketing has not faded away; professionals have adapted along with the market. Faced with measures to contain the virus, rather than merely adjusting their content and posting routines, digital influencers have taken on the role of disseminating information about precautions and offering tips on dealing with the pandemic. Beyond the realm of digital marketing, this period has yielded positive outcomes for those who focused on education, producing conscious, relevant, and authentic content. Moreover, the audience has displayed increased participation, curiosity, and a propensity for questioning.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, organizations have encountered unprecedented challenges, compelling the need for innovation in their marketing strategies. Wang et al. (2020) define marketing innovation strategies as a company's commitment to developing new marketing tactics or improving existing ones, enabling efficient resource utilization, meeting consumer demand, and creating more value. In this context, the reactive, collective, proactive, or partnership strategies outlined by Wang et al. (2020) have emerged as valuable responses for companies affected by the pandemic. Consequently, organizations have been able to introduce new products and/or services through partnerships with complementary companies. Such collaborations leverage the advantages of both partners, resulting in a 'win-win' outcome. For instance, organizations opting for the partnership strategy developed a unique competitive advantage and were even able to profit from the crisis period. This approach allowed organizations to enter new markets and establish new businesses (Wang et al., 2020). These changes have significantly impacted the digital marketing landscape, leading to exponential growth. Fueled by the necessity to maintain a market presence and adapt to new circumstances, companies have been compelled to invest in online actions. The pandemic, by accelerating the transition to the digital

environment, has transformed marketing operations, previously centered on face-to-face approaches. This transformation underscores the growing importance of digital marketing as an essential tool for reaching and engaging consumers in the new normal.

The swift adaptation of organizations, coupled with an astute anticipation of trends in the digital environment and strategic investments in digital marketing, proved decisive for ensuring consumer access to companies during the pandemic. According to Oliveira (2021), digital marketing played a pivotal role in helping companies adjust to circulation restrictions imposed by the pandemic. An exemplary instance of this adaptation was the use of social media as a tool to connect with customers. Through direct communication, the sharing of relevant content, promotions, partnerships with influencers, and targeted ads, companies were able to maintain a strong connection with their clientele during the pandemic.

This transformation in business-customer communication, facilitated by social media platforms, not only sustained commerce during one of the most significant recent economic crises (Oliveira, 2021) but also underscored the influence of these platforms on the online purchasing decision-making process. Borges (2020) emphasized these changes, citing an international study conducted by ISAG - European Business School that unveiled the growing loyalty of Portuguese consumers to online shopping. The study concluded that e-commerce in Portugal is expected to continue its upward trajectory. Additionally, the research highlighted a shift in consumer profiles—individuals who are more sophisticated, tech-savvy, and possess high expectations of brands are emerging. In response, companies must adapt their commercial strategies, the available product offerings, and even the shopping experience to reinforce customer trust and maintain business dynamism (Borges, 2020). With consumers becoming increasingly active on social networks, influencer marketing plays a crucial role, providing brands with a more efficient means of attracting audiences. Social networks have become indispensable in shaping opinions that, in turn, influence customer decisions. Thus, influencer marketing stands as a manifestation of the considerable power wielded by digital influencers with their followers (Antunes, 2020).

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study follows a case study approach, aligning with Sousa's (2009) perspective that deems it appropriate for analyses centered on a single case. The primary advantage of this approach lies in the researcher's capacity to delve into specific events in detail, utilizing various instruments to comprehend the underlying processes. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, we adopted a deductive qualitative approach, which included content analysis of the Instagram account of influencer Helena Coelho and a focus group. Yin (2004) emphasizes that qualitative approaches explore the nuances, contexts, and meanings underlying the data. In this study, we opted for a qualitative approach, utilizing observational research techniques to fulfill the study's objectives. Group interviews were used to gain additional insights and deepen the understanding of the data collected through content analysis.

4. The Study

The sample selected for content analysis comprised 60 posts, spanning two distinct periods: April 1 to 31, 2019, and April 1 to 31, 2020. This deliberate choice allowed us to delineate two phases in Helena Coelho's profile - before and during the pandemic - to identify potential changes in communication strategies. The sample selection followed an intentional approach, where the digital influencer was chosen deliberately or for convenience, rather than randomly. About ethics on secondary data, all Instagram posts analyzed are in the public domain. Furthermore, all irrelevant personal information for the study was omitted to ensure the influencer's privacy. For content analysis, we employed a grid adapted from previous studies conducted by Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2018) and Romo and Aguirre (2020).

Concerning the focus group, a convenience sample of five female participants, aged between 22 and 24 and residing in the city of Viseu, was selected. These individuals use the Instagram platform and are familiar with the content produced by the influencer Helena Coelho. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their informed consent before participating. Their identities were kept anonymous, and all their responses were treated with confidentiality. In addition, participants were guaranteed the right to withdraw from the study at any time. These ethical principles ensure that the rights and well-being of the participants are protected during the conduct of the study. The focus group took place on October 20, 2022.

5. Results

The content analysis carried out on the Instagram platform covered various categories, including the number of posts, promotional nature, presence of a human figure, text, other signs, format, interaction, and theme. Upon

examining the year 2020, it was observed that the influencer shared 37 posts, indicating an average of more than one post per day. In contrast, in 2019, before the onset of the pandemic, the influencer shared only 23 posts, as depicted in Figure 1.

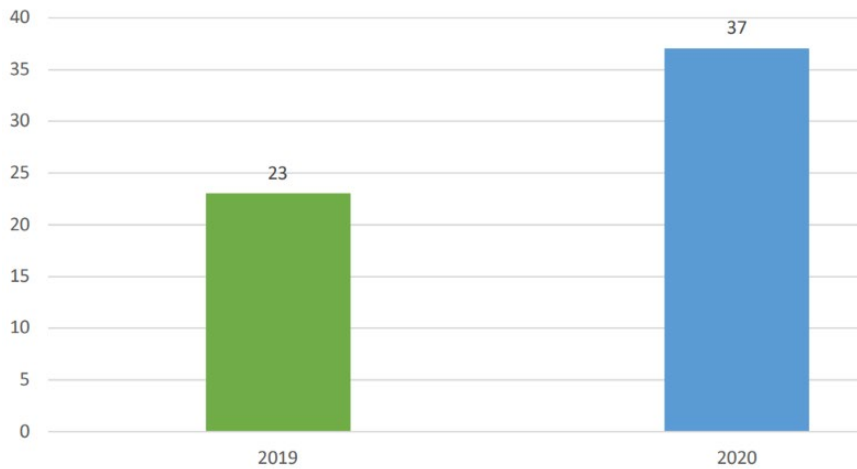


Figure 1: Number of publications

To evaluate the promotional nature of the content on Instagram, Figure 2 is categorized into three types: explicit mention, implicit mention, and visual presence of the brand. In 2019, out of 23 posts, the influencer shared 13 with an explicit mention, 7 with an implicit mention, and 5 with a visual brand presence. In 2020, among the 37 publications, there were 15 with an explicit mention, 11 with an implicit mention, and 9 with a visual brand presence. This data indicates an increase in promotional posts in 2020 compared to 2019.

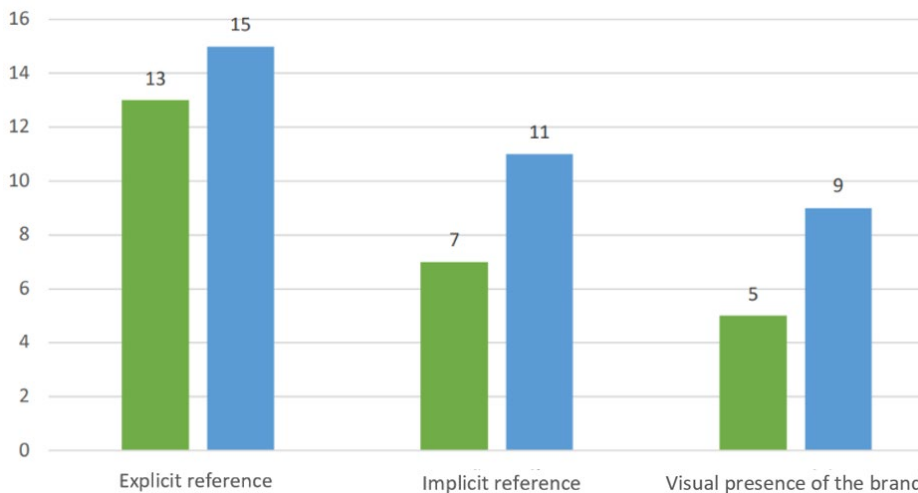


Figure 2: Promotional character

On the same subject, the focus group aimed to understand participants' reactions to sponsored content. When asked about their responses to sharing advertisements, the participants expressed diverse opinions, with some enjoying it depending on the topic, while others showed indifference.

Participant 1: "I personally enjoy watching it. Obviously, it depends on the topic, but for the most part, I enjoy watching it."

Participant 2: "I ignore it. The majority of sponsored products or companies seem forced. But I understand; it's through advertising that they make money. So, I understand, but generally, I ignore it."

Participant 3: "I ignore it. I don't find it genuine. Anyone who truly likes a brand or product doesn't need sponsorship to promote it."

Participant 4: "It doesn't matter to me. Some I like to watch; others don't interest me that much."

Participant 5: "I'm the same; it depends on what's being sponsored. I usually like to see giveaways. Although I never win, I like to take part, especially for trips."

When asked, 'Can you identify when an influencer's content is produced in partnership with a brand?' the participants provided the following responses:

Participant 1: "Yes, usually the brand appears in the photo or video, and, in addition, when they are sponsorships, they put '#pub'."

Participant 2: "They usually identify the brand."

Participant 3: "Yes, and in most cases, the posts seem forced."

Participant 4: "Of course. Most of the time, yes, because either more influencers are sponsoring the same thing or because it has already appeared in advertising on social media or television."

Participant 5: "When they promote the brand too much, you can tell it's sponsored content."

In response to the question 'Do you trust the influencer's sharing of information/content when it's produced in partnership?', the participants shared the following perspectives:

Participant 1: "There you go, I think she's a professional at what she does. So, when she shares something in the makeup field that I like or want to try, and, importantly, if it's not too expensive, I obviously trust it."

Participant 2: "When she shares clothes from Zara or similar stores, they sell out immediately. I don't know how that's possible. But she seems to be very transparent and always follows her principles. I never thought she'd share anything for more fame because she already has too much."

Participant 3: "I also feel that she's a good professional. When she shares something in her stories and I like the result, I tend to be curious to try it, especially in makeup. It all depends on budgets. She shares a lot from luxury brands, but I know there are others with more affordable prices that are as good or better than the luxury ones."

Participant 4: "She's an influencer with a considerable following and has partnerships with various brands. When she publishes clothing or a makeup product, within a few minutes, they are sold out. Even with the makeup brand she launched, it sold out straight away."

Participant 5: "I trust it. She seems realistic. It's usually not forced, and most of the time, she tries to take things in a more comical tone, which I find kind of funny."

When identifying the presence of human figures in the content (Figure 3), the analysis was categorized into two variables: the presence of the influencer in the publication and others. In 2020, there were 27 publications featuring human figures. In 2019, out of the 23 publications, 18 included the human figure of the content producer.

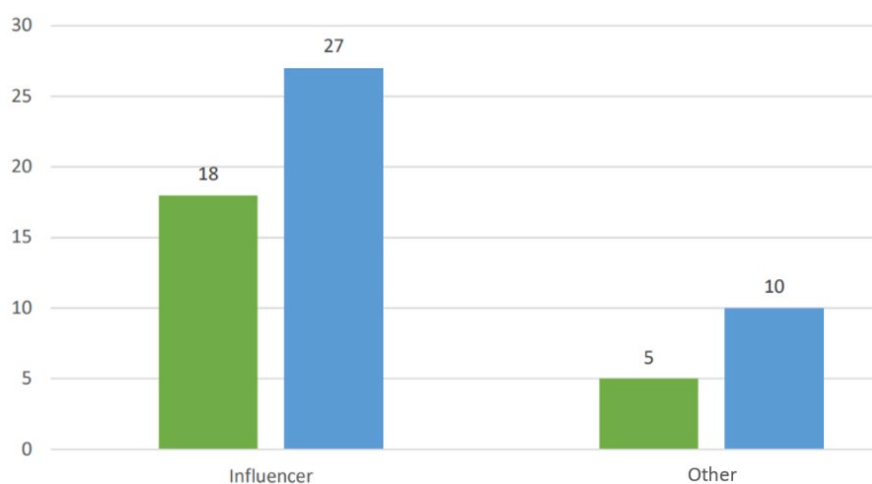
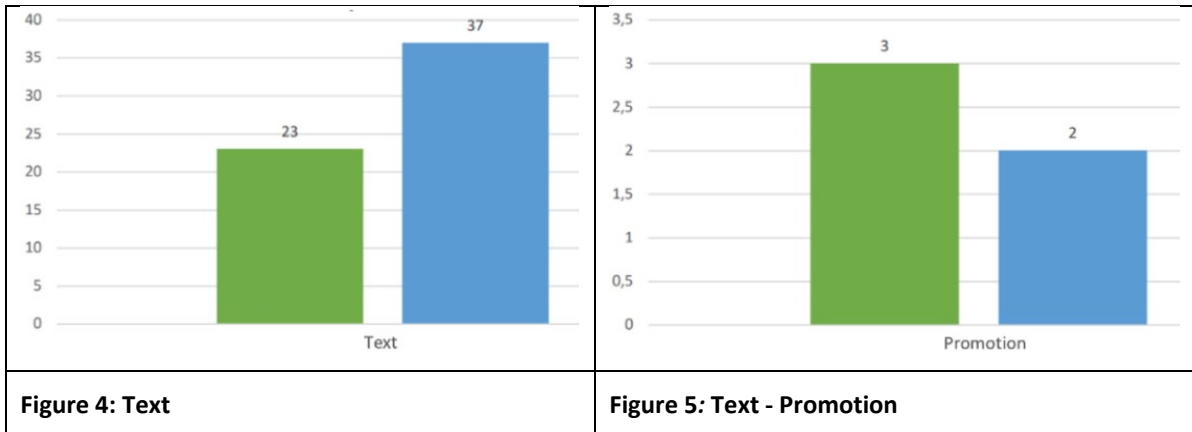


Figure 3: Human representation

In the text category (Figure 4), all publications in both 2019 and 2020 include written content to complement the rest of the content. An important aspect in the text/subtitle category is noted when there is an explicit indication in the description that the publication is in partnership with a brand, or when hashtags such as #pub

or #ad are used. As shown in Figure 5, in 2019, 3 publications were identified as paid partnerships, and in 2020, 2 featured promotional content.



In the category of other signs (Figure 6), two components were considered: hashtags and emojis. Hashtags, represented by the symbol (#), are utilized on social media to enhance post visibility by categorizing content on the same topic. In 2019, 17 of influencer Helena Coelho's posts included hashtags, but in 2020, only 8 out of 37 posts featured this sign. In contrast, emojis—small icons representing emotions—were present in both years. In 2019, 20 posts featured emojis, while in 2020, that number increased to 36.

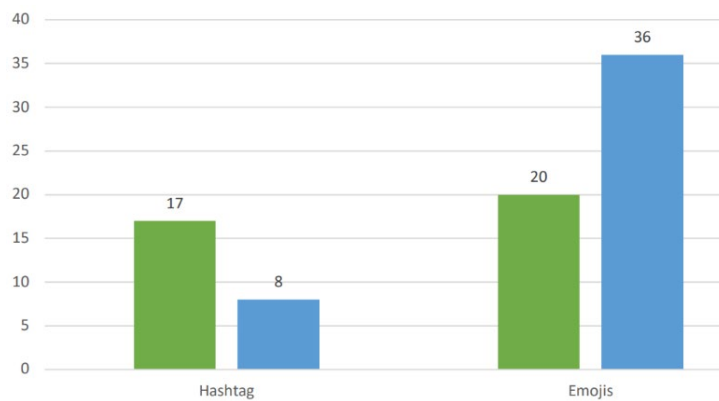


Figure 6: Other signs

Concerning the format of the posts, they were categorized into four types: photography, photo album, video, and reels (short video content, inspired by TikTok). Examining Figure 7, the photo format stands out, with 23 publications in 2020 and 18 in 2019. The second most common format was the photo album, with 5 in 2019 and 6 in 2020. While video is not the influencer's primary format, there were 2 videos in 2019 and only 1 in 2020. The most significant difference occurred in the reels format, introduced in 2019 but explored more extensively in 2020, with 7 publications, whereas none were published in the pre-pandemic year.

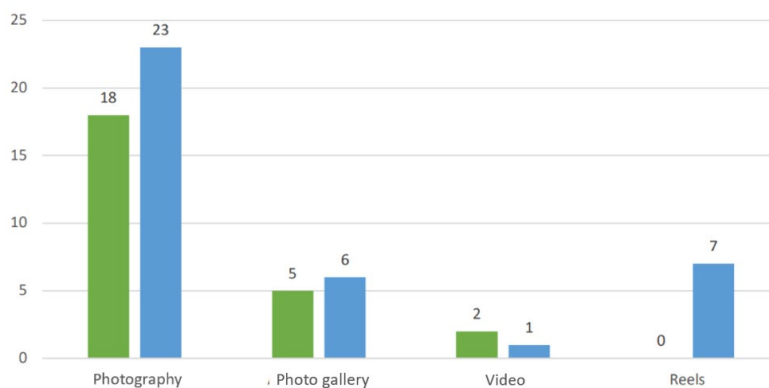


Figure 7: Format

In the focus group, one of the questions centered on the type/format of content most consumed by the participants and the reasons behind their choices. The participants' responses reflect varying individual preferences:

Participant 1: "I prefer reels."

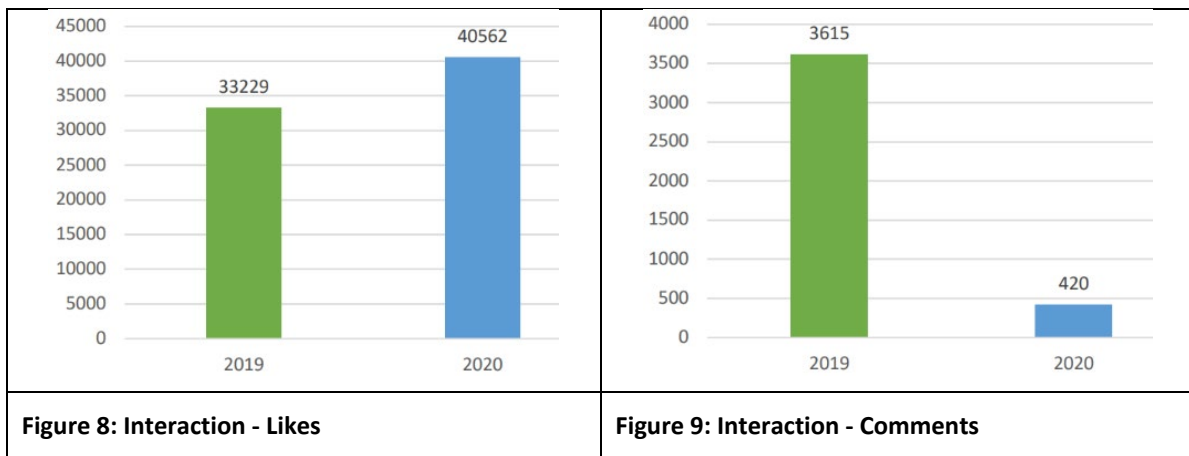
Participant 2: "I also like reels better; it reminds me of TikTok."

Participant 3: "I like to look at the photos."

Participant 4: "I'm also more of a photo fan."

Participant 5: "I prefer watching videos."

In terms of interaction, it's crucial to highlight comments and likes. In 2019, the average number of likes (Figure 8) per post by the influencer was 33,229, increasing to 40,562 in 2020, representing a difference of 7,333 likes. However, in the comments (Figure 9), there is a notable divergence: in 2019, the average was 3,615 comments per post, while in 2020, this number significantly dropped to 420.



Finally, the last category analyzed refers to the themes of the publications (figure 10), where some content covered more than one topic. The topics common to both years were beauty, personal and other. The beauty topic in 2019 had 8 posts, while in 2020 it had 16 posts. In personal posts, of the 23 shared in 2019, it is only mentioned in 4, and in 2020, of the 37 posts, it only appears in 3. The topic of others in 2020 had 14 posts, and in 2019, 12. In 2019, there was 1 post on nutrition, compared to 0 posts in 2020. Covid-19 and health were only covered in 2020, which was to be expected as it was the year we faced the pandemic. Humor was also a topic chosen by the influencer to share in 2020.

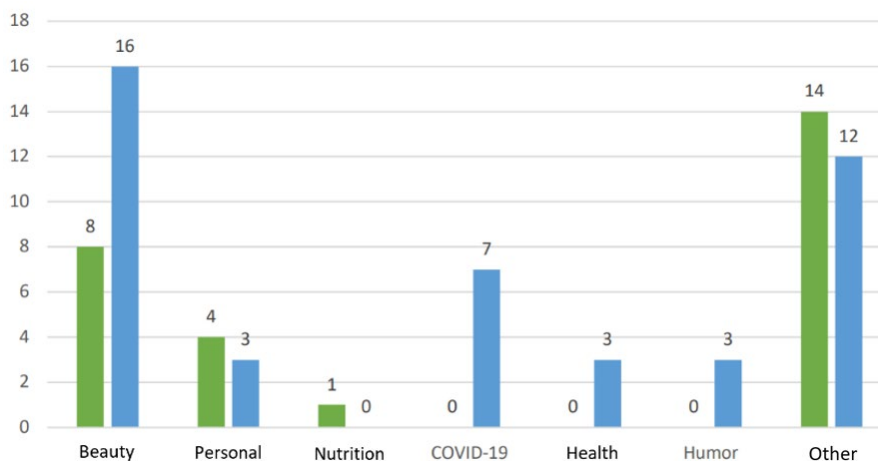


Figure 8: Themes

During the focus group, we explored the participants' preferences for themes in the influencer's publications:

Participant 1: "I'm a fan of everything related to travel. I enjoy seeing where people have been and discovering new places to visit. I'm already thinking about my next trip; I just haven't decided on the destination yet."

Participant 2: "I like to see the more personal side, the day-to-day. I appreciate it when they share recipes. I get a lot of inspiration for dinner or lunch from Instagram."

Participant 3: "I love beauty content, makeup, skincare—everything. I enjoy doing my makeup, always eager to learn new techniques, and I'm constantly on the lookout for new products to try. Instagram is a treasure trove of makeup and fashion content."

Participant 4: "For me, it's more health content. Not only because of my profession, where I need to stay informed about new products, but also because it's the content I find most interesting. I've noticed that with COVID, many brands are increasingly sharing on social media. Have you seen Aspirin's Instagram?"

Participant 5: "I really like to discover the cheapest or most affordable places for planning my next trip. My last trip was to Tenerife in the summer, and I loved it. We stayed in an Airbnb, and it was amazing."

The participants' responses indeed showcase a significant diversity of interests, ranging from travel and personal content to beauty and health. This diversity emphasizes the multifaceted nature of influencer content and the varied preferences of the audience.

When asked, 'Do you feel that influencer Helena Coelho has had to adapt her communication strategies during the pandemic?', the participants shared the following perspectives:

Participant 1: "Of course, it was noticeable that she published more. Since she couldn't share her travels, she started inventing things."

Participant 2: "She began creating exercise videos or challenges with her boyfriend, like the eyeliner challenge in stories with different colors. She gave people clues to guess the next day's color. It seemed like she wanted to maintain her network of followers by creating different ways of generating content while being at home. I honestly found it interesting because, during that period, many people were active on Instagram, and one didn't even know where to turn."

Participant 3: "I didn't notice much of a difference. I think she shared more, of course, needing to maintain engagement, but she could have done different things. Although I thought it was a good initiative to do workouts at home, especially since people couldn't go to the gym."

Participant 4: "Clearly. She was constantly posting things on Instagram, and I think she even posted videos on YouTube, which she hadn't done for a while."

Participant 5: "I know she used to post a lot of stories."

The responses indicate that during the pandemic, Helena Coelho adapted her communication strategies by increasing post frequency and diversifying content with challenges and home exercise videos. Participants' opinions varied on the effectiveness of these changes.

6. Conclusions

This paper presents an investigation aimed at analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the communication strategies of Portuguese digital influencer Helena Coelho. To achieve this goal, methods such as examining Instagram content and conducting a focus group with platform users familiar with the influencer's content were employed.

Based on the results of the content analysis of digital influencer Helena Coelho's Instagram profile, it is evident that the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the influencer's communication strategies. Changes observed in publication patterns, promotional content, presence of human figures, topics covered, and audience interaction indicate an adaptation to the new reality imposed by the pandemic. The data reveals a significant increase in the number of publications in 2020, possibly reflecting a response to the heightened online activity during periods of confinement and restrictions. In terms of promotional strategies, there was a slight increase in both implicit and explicit mentions of brands. This adjustment suggests a response to the necessity of brand collaborations to sustain the flow of promotional content. Notably, there was an increase in visual brand presence and human figuration in 2020, indicating a potentially more personal and authentic approach in publications - possibly to emotionally connect with the audience during a challenging period. The introduction

of the Reels format in 2020 can be interpreted as a response to the trends in short-form content, possibly influenced by the popularity of TikTok during the pandemic. The inclusion of topics related to health, COVID-19, and humor in 2020 reflects a sensitivity to global events and an attempt to stay relevant and connected to the audience's concerns and interests during the pandemic. Although there has been an increase in likes per post, the notable decrease in comments may suggest a shift in audience interactivity, possibly indicating a preference for more visual engagement and overactive participation. Overall, the results of the Instagram profile content analysis suggest that Helena Coelho adapted her communication strategies to the specific needs and dynamics of the pandemic period, demonstrating a conscious effort to maintain relevance and connection with her audience in an ever-changing scenario.

From the focus group results, it is evident that participants noticed a significant increase in the frequency of the influencer's posts during the pandemic. To navigate the limitations imposed by the pandemic, Helena Coelho diversified her content by incorporating home exercise videos/directories and creating challenges. The influencer also gave more prominence to the personal side of her life, as seen in her exercise videos with her boyfriend. Participants perceived that Helena Coelho addressed topics related to the pandemic, such as exercising at home. Given these results, it can be concluded that the influencer has assumed an adaptive approach, responding to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic through a greater online presence, achieved by an increase in the number of posts, diversification of content, and emphasis on more personal aspects of her life.

However, this study has its limitations: the content analysis was carried out during a brief period, and the focus group is small, so their opinions may not be representative of the influencer's followers.

To enhance precision and obtain more in-depth results, future research could include an interview with the influencer herself. This approach aims to capture her perspective on the subject and gain insights into her perception of the continuity of influencer marketing as the preferred choice for brands to communicate with their audiences.

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