

Social Media And Digital Influencers On Instagram: A Case Study

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Abstract: With the emergence of social media and continuous progress and paradigm-shifting breakthroughs in new media, communication professionals need to keep up to date with what consumers are talking about online. Brands tapped into this reality and understood that to influence interactions in this digital landscape, they would need to bring digital influencers into the equation about social media. By recognising that partnerships between beauty brands and digital influencers are a marketing strategy increasingly used by brands and by resorting to Instagram as a research environment, the project presented in this article aimed to understand, through a case study, the impacts that partnerships between the beauty brand Freshly Cosmetics and several digital influencers may have on its followers in Portugal. The study was conducted during the development of a master's dissertation in Applied Communication and, despite focusing on a single brand, enabled the authors to outline the methodology that will be further explored in future work with larger samples of brands. Ten publications from different digital influencers were selected and analysed according to a set of criteria, and a focus group was conducted with ten women who knew the brand under analysis. According to the results obtained, although digital influencers have some impact on decision-making, the participants preferred brands they already knew and their opinions were formed based on research and not on digital influencers' statements. For the participants, feedback from real consumers, external research conducted on their own, and the opinions of experts in the field are responsible for the brand's image in the eye of the consumer.

Keywords: Social media; Digital Influencers; Instagram; Beauty; Brand; Portugal.

1. Introduction

Humans have always tended to imitate certain attitudes and behaviours they see in other human beings, consciously or unconsciously, with multiple purposes, such as facilitating decision-making or seeking social approval. In today's society, the reproduction of similar behaviours is not only limited to the replication of attitudes and habits of close people, such as friends or family members, but also of digital influencers, who inspire and influence attitudes, ideas, and especially consumption habits. The willingness to replicate is, in other words, an aptitude that individuals are born with (Dijksterhuis et al., 2005).

With social media and the sometimes overwhelming evolution of the digital landscape and its paradigms, communication professionals need to keep up to date with what consumers are talking about online. Brands looking to influence these digital conversations turn to digital influencers as key players to upgrade their communication strategies in social media (Forbes, 2016). As soon as brands became aware of this reality, they began looking for influential people who matched the brand's values and target audience. They introduced them as a part of their marketing strategies producing what may be considered influencer marketing (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). Weinswig (2016), in an article for Forbes Online, mentioned that digital influencers are currently one of the most effective marketing tools brands can use to promote awareness and loyalty. According to the author, most consumers (92%) trust a digital influencer more than an advertisement disseminated through traditional media. Several brands, including beauty brands, have progressively adopted this type of communication strategy in their activities. This trend raises questions about the relationship between brands and digital influencers, the characteristics and metrics that should be analysed when establishing a new partnership with a digital influencer, and the campaign's impact assessment. With these challenges in mind, the study presented in this paper aims to understand if the campaigns carried out between beauty brands and digital influencers impact the consumer. This research shows a case study about the brand Freshly Cosmetics, in which publications and stories created by digital influencers on Instagram were analysed, and a focus group with ten women was conducted to understand the impact that the collaborations between digital influencers and the brand Freshly Cosmetics may have on the brand's followers.

2. Theoretical Framework

Influence marketing has been around for decades through advertising, always trying to get famous people and opinion leaders as brand spokespersons. It has, however, gained a new meaning with the widespread use of communication technologies and social media that have led brands to modify their marketing strategies to meet current market trends. Social media allows the creation of content that enables brands to interact more with their consumers (Castillo & Fernández, 2018). Jung (2015) argues that brands do not perform influence marketing, and if it is done well, it does not resemble marketing. Seeing the brand itself refer to its product and say it is the best does not make the consumer intend to buy it, as the consumer always seeks the opinion of family, friends, and other ordinary people with the same tastes.

From Himmick's (2016) perspective, influence marketing is a marketing strategy based on a communication flow model that considers that consumers are less influenced by traditional media advertising than by the information they get from third parties, such as opinion leaders. These opinion leaders are often seen as influencers, sharing knowledge with other users, offering them essential information, and recommending products and brands they use and like (Keller & Fay, 2016). Himmick (2016) considers that opinion leaders can be celebrities, famous personalities, or bloggers on social media whose visibility grants them a certain degree of influence over their followers. These influencers can capture the attention of brands with the content they share on their social media profiles, which include ratings, recommendations, and product posts. Brown and Hayes (2008) had already concluded that the use of public figures in television ads no longer engages the consumer as before. The same authors have noticed that individuals increasingly identify with "ordinary" people and people who come across as "experts" on specific subjects. Digital influencers have a greater prominence among the countless online content (Lincoln, 2016) and stand out in the crowd. The fact that digital influencers share their daily lives through social media enables the consumers who follow them to feel like they know them and, as a result, build a sense of trust and willingness to act on their recommendations (Zuini, 2016).

For Kapferer (2013), digital influencers are more than just a person or a product, in many cases, they become themselves a brand, just like movie, television, music and fashion celebrities have done for decades. The most significant advantage of investing in marketing actions with digital influencers is the diversity of subjects they can address and the variety of profiles and behaviours, making it easier to choose one that meets the brand's needs (Rockembach et al., 2018). The core and game changer is choosing the right digital influencer for the brand. Suppose there is no clear connection and chemistry between the lifestyle of the digital influencer and the brand's values. As a result, consumers may reject the brand and the digital influencer because the relationship will come across as too fake and commercially driven (Pereira et al., 2016). Choosing digital influencers to work with can be a challenge for brands, so to do the brands have resorted to objective metrics, such as the frequency of publications, content, reach, and social influence (Evans & McKee, 2010) that can be analysed in the decision-making process and provide reliable data to uphold any choice made. There may even be the case that a particular digital influencer may be relevant to a particular brand but irrelevant to another brand in the same sector (Brown & Hayes, 2008). These authors also mention that digital influencers will hardly risk their reputation to promote a product they do not believe in. In another study conducted by Santiago and Castelo (2020), which analysed the perceptions of beauty industry experts regarding digital influencers and influence marketing campaigns on Instagram, it was concluded that all professionals unanimously consider that digital influencers are relevant in the beauty industry. This perceived relevance is essentially due to three factors: (1) the fact that there is a need to try out products and that, through the sharing of experiences and opinions of digital influencers, this need is fulfilled; (2) the credibility that is associated with digital influencers and that makes the followers create a relationship with them, which leads to trusting their opinions; and finally, (3) the ability that digital influencers have to serve as a communication agent, since they can adapt the messages that brands want to put across through their narrative, by including this discourse in their daily lives in an organic way and reaching several audiences.

The same study also concluded that the critical factor in running a good influence marketing campaign on Instagram is the creative freedom given to digital influencers to work on the content. However, the industry professionals mentioned the importance of guidelines and that the content must be approved before publication. Other factors, such as credibility, authenticity, and the relationship between the brand and the digital influencer, were also mentioned.

The Internet provides resources, especially with the dissemination of social networks, which allow the establishment of a more significant relationship between the brand and its consumers, both in terms of promoting faster and more efficient communication between them and in terms of offering more information

to brands about their consumers (Torres, 2010). It is noteworthy, for example, that consumers who have access to the Internet and social networks can become actively involved in the market by sharing opinions with other consumers (OOC, 2009). In this context, Kietzmann et al. (2012) refer that social networks can significantly impact online consumers' behaviour, particularly in how they influence, research, communicate, create groups, establish networks and nurture relationships among them. In this regard, Kotler and Keller (2012) believe that social networks can be understood as a market constantly evolving and changing, thanks to the resources they present and their direct and indirect relationship with consumers.

Current digital consumers demonstrate new research, communication, and purchasing behaviours. In this context, younger individuals, who have a close relationship with the Internet from an early age, embody behavioural consumption habits that brands can no longer ignore (Lendrevie et al., 2010). Thanks to their particularities, social networks allow communication professionals to design marketing strategies that build brand recognition, create dialogue, adjust marketing messages, and create a presence in the digital world (Evans & McKee, 2010).

A social media user who is considered an opinion leader, as digital influencers are, can play a relevant role in their followers' behaviours and may even lead to an increase in the intention to want to recommend that profile or even follow their suggestions (Casaló et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2017). Consumers tend to place more trust in the opinions of their friends, the digital influencers they follow, or even the reviews they read (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). In turn, the followers of digital influencers use the reviews on Instagram to reduce the perceived risk, basing their purchases on the trust and admiration they have for that person since they aspire to have the same lifestyle. This may lead to imitating their attitudes, such as their dress and makeup (Djafarov & Rushworth, 2017). For Moura (2016), it is essential to mention that the relationship established with digital influencers is done organically and flows according to personal decisions and the will to engage.

3. Methodology

The study is based on the idea that partnerships between beauty brands and digital influencers are a marketing strategy increasingly used by brands and that Instagram may be used as a research environment for a better understanding of this phenomenon. Its main objective is to understand the impacts that partnerships between the beauty brand Freshly Cosmetics and digital influencers have on consumers through a case study that, besides the literature review, included a focus group and content analysis as its primary source of data collection.

The study adopted an explicit, feasible, and suitable line of inquiry for guiding the research. It defined its research question: "What impact do collaborations between digital influencers and Freshly Cosmetics have on followers?" and set out to validate the following hypothesis: i) Users solely rely on the opinions of influencers when purchasing a product; ii) Users prefer the opinion of professionals or people close to them when deciding what to buy; iii) Users follow influencers associated with the brands they are interested in. By fully embracing the idea that partnerships between beauty brands and digital influencers are a marketing strategy increasingly used by brands and using Instagram as a research environment, this project aims to understand, through a case study, the impacts that partnerships between the beauty brand Freshly Cosmetics and several digital influencers may have on their followers.

In terms of its methodological design, this study has the characteristics of a case study. A focus group was conducted for data collection, and content analysis of Instagram posts and stories was done using an analysis grid including a set of objective, quantifiable metrics.

The analysis grid aided the collection of data from content published by the digital influencers' partnerships with the Freshly Cosmetics brand and included the following metrics:

- Date: used to determine if the content was published within the time frame specified for the analysis;
- Number of comments: used to determine the relationship between the followers and the digital influencers;
- Number of Likes: used as a fundamental variable to determine the level of engagement between the followers and the digital influencers;
- Engagement rate of each publication: used to understand the overall engagement (comments and likes) that the publication may have obtained among the followers.

To understand, in a closer manner, the effect that digital influencers may have on current and potential consumers, a focus group was conducted with a script. The focus group script contained 21 questions on

understanding whether partnerships between beauty brands and digital influencers impact consumers and at what levels.

4. The study

The brand selected for this study was Freshly Cosmetics, a brand that was born in February 2016 in the city of Reus in Tarragona, Spain. It resulted from a passion for natural cosmetics and the entrepreneurial aspect of three young chemical engineering graduates to accelerate and lead the worldwide transition to natural, healthy and sustainable cosmetics (Freshly Cosmetics, 2022). The brand's presence in the digital world consists of its website, a Facebook page, a YouTube channel through Freshly Cosmetics Academy, a TikTok profile, and several Instagram profiles. The brand's Instagram profile in Portugal is @freshlycosmetics_en, chosen for this study because it is aimed at Portuguese consumers.

The profile has a verified account which indicates that the account is authentic and represents a brand, public figure, or celebrity. Through this verification, we are assured that the Instagram account analysed in this study is one of the brand's official accounts. At the beginning of the data collection in the scope of this research, we performed a status check of the account as to some of the metrics that were going to be analysed throughout this study. These metrics included the number of followers, the profile's reach and some data regarding its engagement. To collect this data, we used services provided by the *Not Just Analytics* website (<https://www.notjustanalytics.com/>).

On the day we started collecting data (March 24, 2022), the brand's Instagram account had 54,824 followers. The average number of likes on the profile's posts was 155, with written feedback through comments averaging nine comments per post. The engagement rate, a metric showing us the page's performance, was at the time 0.3%, 3.7% below the engagement rate considered normal by *Not Just Analytics* for pages with a number of followers between 5,000 and 10,000 followers. The engagement rate was calculated based on the performance of the last 12 posts published in the profile. A summary of this data can be seen in the figure below (Figure 1).

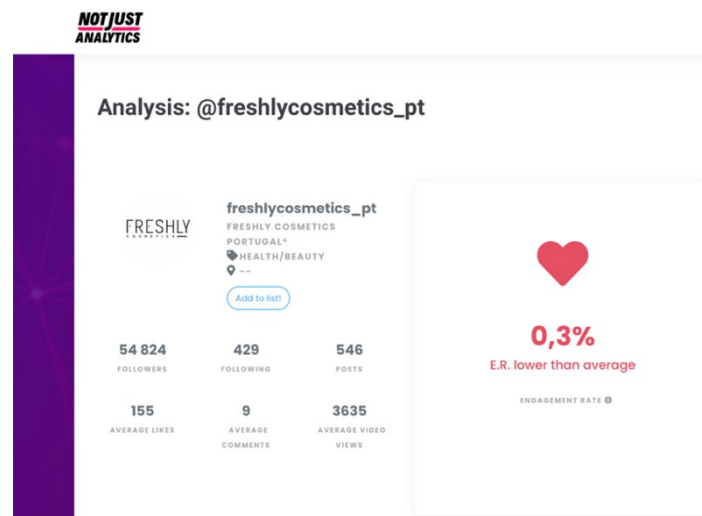


Figure 1 - Instagram Freshly Cosmetics metrics. Source: <https://www.notjustanalytics.com/>

Regarding the influencers, we selected 10 Portuguese influencers endorsed by Freshly Cosmetics: (1) Sara e Raquel - @travels.with.love; (2) Vanessa Martins - @vanessamartins; (3) Liliana Filipa - @lilianafilipa_; (4) Inês Mocho - @inesmocho.makeup; (5) Amélia Barros - @meeelbarros; (6) Ana Rita Simão - @ana_ritasimao; (7) Cristina Negrão - @crisoutfitideas; (8) Carla Alípio - @de2passamosa4; (9) Margarida de Castro Gonçalves - @margaridadecastrog; and (10) Ana Barão - @anynhabarao. The selection of these influencers and their publications was made according to the following criteria:

- the publication demonstrated that it was an advertisement, whether through the use of hashtags with the reference PUB or with the indication of a paid partnership;
- the publications were from profiles recognised as digital, macro, or micro-influencers. An analysis of the type of publications made by the profile owner, as well as the number of followers, enabled us to categorise the profile;

- the publications openly presented Freshly Cosmetics products and promoted the products (i.e., reference to some characteristics of the product, call to action suggesting product purchase by followers);
- the publications showed the number of likes and comments for each publication.

In addition to the analysis of the publications, a focus group was carried out to collect input regarding the consumers' perception of the communication strategy adopted by the digital influencers and their partnerships with the brand. Opting for a smaller number of participants allowed us to create an easygoing vibe, making it easier for everyone to give their opinion. All participants were female to collect opinions from a fully female group capable of representing the female audience who currently leads the cosmetics industry, as proven in a recent study by Kolmar (2022).

The selected women participating in the focus group met the following requirements: (1) Belonged to the brand's target audience; (2) Were active users of Instagram; (3) Followed at least one digital influencer on Instagram. The following section presents the main results obtained in this study.

5. Results

The study conducted, although limited to a single brand, enables us to collect quantitative and qualitative information linked to user engagement with content and influencers and its relevance in decision-making in product purchases. As previously presented in the theoretical framework section of this paper, there is a sense that influencers play a relevant role in promoting brand and product trends and preferences. There is, however, much to be said as to the real impact major influencers with hordes of followers may have in the users' decision process. The results attained provide further insight into this matter confirming that promoting products through influencers will not always guarantee relevant results in terms of the brand's return on investment or its return on engagement.

Among the 10 influencers chosen for this study, as shown in figure 2, we are able to find groups of followers that, in terms of their numbers, are quite a different spanning from little over seven thousand to well over half a million.

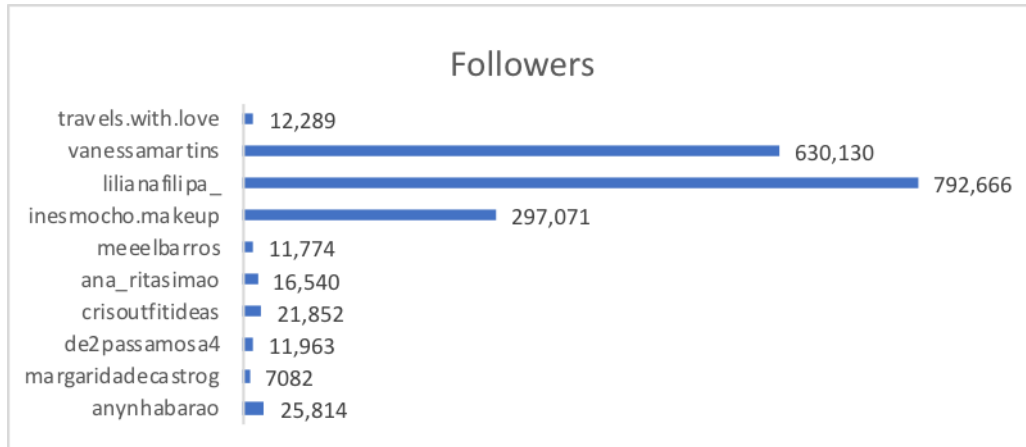


Figure 2 – Number of followers per influencer analysed in the study

The following table (Table 1) presents a summary of each digital influencer, their number of followers and the engagement rate achieved with the Freshly Cosmetics brand product publication analysed during this study:

Table 1 – Digital influencers, number of followers and engagement rate of the publication done in partnership with Freshly Cosmetics

Digital Influencer	Followers	Comments	Likes	Engagement Rate of the publication analysed
(1) travels.with.love	12 289	53	206	2,11%
(2) vanessamartins	630 130	22	4847	0,77%
(3) lilianafilipa_	792 666	54	14300	1,81%
(4) inesmocho.makeup	297 071	18	1916	0,65%
(5) meeelbarros	11 774	9	1452	12,4%
(6) ana_ritasimao	16 540	319	1237	9,40%
(7) crisoutfitideas	21 852	8	3523	16,16%
(8) de2passamosa4	11 963	58	1385	11,9%
(9) margaridadecastrog	7082	168	1030	16,91%
(10) anynhabarao	25 814	182	2226	9,32%

The engagement rate was obtained by adding each publication's number of comments and likes, then dividing it by the number of followers and multiplying the result by one hundred. As we can see from the previous table, digital influencer @lilianafilipa_ has the most significant number of followers (792,666), but in terms of engagement (1,81%), she did not even make the top 5 highest engagement rates achieved. Indeed, @margaridadecastrog has much fewer followers (16,540) but has the highest engagement rate (16,91%) among the digital influencers considered. It is clear that high numbers of followers may not lead to high engagement rates. It is also interesting to see that the type of engagement varied. Influencers with fewer followers got more comments, showing the followers' willingness to spark conversation and ask questions instead of just leaving a simple like. One might even affirm that this sort of behaviour is closer to what any consumer does when pondering a purchase. This issue of asking for additional information and opinions emerged as quite relevant in the focus group session. Large numbers of followers do not enable this sort of closer communication dynamics. Undoubtedly, the fact that a particular digital influencer has a considerable number of followers can give the publication a more significant reach; however, this does not mean that its engagement is more than just a cluster of frugal likes. A focus group was conducted to dig deeper into behaviour and decision-making issues related to the brand considered in our study and the influencers' role.

The focus group included 10 women aged between 21 and 30 from different regions of Portugal. To set aside geographical and each of the participants' schedule limitations, the focus session was held on Google Meet and lasted around 2 hours. All the participants were asked permission to record the session for future content analysis. They were also assured that the recording would solely be used for the ongoing research and would not be shared or used for any other purpose.

Through several questions posed during the focus group, we noticed a purchase intention directly related to digital influencers, to the extent that all but two participants admitted having already made a purchase influenced by digital influencers. In general, the participants who made the purchase were satisfied, and when asked if they would repurchase the same product, the answer was also positive.

During the focus group, it was also possible to realise that the products recommended by digital influencers were useful for their followers since they share topics of interest. However, it should be noted that most of these purchases were only made after additional research by the consumers. All of them responded negatively when asked if they would be able to make a purchase solely based on digital influencers' advice. They are always left in doubt about the veracity and authenticity of what the influencers are advertising. The focus group participants believe that what digital influencers share about their brand partnerships is not enough for them to be trusted and believed. According to the results obtained, and despite identifying a connection with digital influencers, the participants prefer brands they already know and whose opinions were formed based on research and not on digital influencers' statements. We can see that for the participants, digital influencers can add value to brands, but only if they are truthful and real because the consumer can already distinguish organic content from paid content. For the focus group participants, the feedback of real consumers, the external analysis they carry out, and the views of people specialised in the area are responsible for the brand's real image in the eyes of the consumer.

6. Conclusions

Regarding the research question "What impact do collaborations between digital influencers and Freshly Cosmetics have on consumers?" the study shows that these partnerships had little or no impact on the group of consumers who participated in this research. Although almost all the participants had already had contact with publications of alliances between the Freshly Cosmetics brand and digital influencers, thus recognising the brand, this is not what makes them buy the brand's products. However, for the participants in the focus group, the partnership established between the brand and the digital influencers they work with can benefit Freshly Cosmetics since, being a relatively new brand in the market, it allows it to expand and position itself in the market. Still, they do not consider it a strategy that makes them buy the brand's products because they think that sometimes the number of publications about the brand with which they interact on their Instagram profiles is excessive, thus making them question if the opinions of the digital influencers are honest or just paid to advertise.

As for the hypothesis formulated the analysed publications showed that Instagram profiles with many followers do not guarantee high levels of engagement. We can also conclude through the analysis of the comments on the publications that there are always comments made about the products, most of them showing interest in trying the product. However, many comments have no relation to the publication itself.

Through the analysis of the data collected, it was possible to see that the participants, despite having access to much information from digital influencers, still sought additional information about the products, admitting that they do not feel influenced, conclusions that are in line with those obtained by Moura (2016). Although it was found that there is a connection between followers and digital influencers, it was also understood that digital influencers could lead the consumer to have an interest in buying. Still, their opinion is not the only driving reason for the purchase. The participants in the study revealed that the opinion of people close to them or professionals in the field is essential, as well as taking care to conduct additional research independently.

It was noticed that the participants are currently more attentive to what is shared on Instagram, specifically regarding the beauty brands that digital influencers recommend. The consumer is increasingly less influenced and more focused, always trying to get the best products at the best price that meet their real needs.

The focus group results led us to conclude that the participants do not make purchases based only on the digital influencer's opinions about the products he advertises. The digital influencers' opinion is not as crucial to the participants as, for example, the opinion of a person close to them and whom they trust. Through this study, we understood that participants can pay more attention to the information they get through Instagram and that they are careful to have more knowledge about a product before being influenced.

It is important to emphasise that this research was conducted based on the consumer's point of view, according to a small sample of Instagram publications focused on only one brand.

Despite these limitations, this study allowed us to make some observations about how the Freshly Cosmetics brand uses partnerships with digital influencers to impact consumers' decision-making. All the focus group participants follow at least one digital influencer with a partnership with the brand. Almost all of them had already had contact with the brand, which provided additional input for the study.

For future research, it would be interesting to increase the number of brands analysed and broaden the focus of the study by establishing contact with communication agencies that specialise in influence marketing. This would provide additional views on the issues considered through specific information from brands and digital influencers regarding campaigns already carried out.

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