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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

"How can Education First optimize the investment on Influencer Marketing?"

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ABSTRACT

Influencer Marketing has become predominantly centered around social media. By connecting directly and organically through the showcase of social media influencers to their target markets, brands are able to achieve better results. Thus, more than ever, brands must know how to maximize the investment made when partnering with influencers. Although researchers have dedicated attention to some points, there are questions that don't have answers yet. For this reason, this paper aims to study what impacts the success of a partnership between *Education First* and influencers, in order to suggest some valuable recommendations that will help the company to improve the arising results from the investment on Influencer Marketing.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers; Influencer Marketing; Followers Number

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Influencer Marketing, a New Growing Trend

The new virtually connected and tech driven world is facing a shift in the consumer decision-making and buying processes. Although customers take to the web to help them making decisions or even form opinions - more than 90% of global online consumers trust earned media, while only 33% trust online banner ads (Nielson, 2012). Consumers shape their own beliefs through data they get from a huge selection of online and offline platforms and by focusing just on what they want, customers don't succumb to promotions the way they used to, or the way brands believe they used to, which means that people don't search anymore on the internet as they did before (Edelman, 2016). Moreover, when searching for something, people frequently use mobile devices which contributes to a greater predisposition to be influenced and engaged. 90% of mobile-first consumers are brand agnostic, while 73% will make a decision about a brand based on which is the most advantageous in each occasion (Solis, 2017). This is exactly where influence occupies a pivotal position. By investing in campaign focused programs, identifying the right influencers and supporting strategic and high quality content with influencer engagement, brands are able to absorb consumers when they are more vulnerable to impressions (Solis, 2017).

Currently, AdBlock is another huge problematic situation that brands are facing when they want to reach their target audiences in an effective way. A recent report published by *PageFair*

and *Adobe* revealed that, with more than 380 million mobile devices and 236 million desktop devices blocking ads, worldwide ad blocking grew by 41% from 2014 to 2015 (Barker, 2016). Under the circumstances, brands noticed that Influencer Marketing brought out a new channel to connect with consumers more directly, organically and at scale to their everyday lives, so they started using Social Media Influencer Marketing as a strategy to better entice and retain their target audience (Adweek, 2015).

By representing a type of third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes, Social Media Influencers are able to boost e-WOM throughout their posts, messages and videos on their own social media profiles (Freberg, Freberg, Graham, & McGaughey, 2010). Truthfulness and honesty with followers is not only a key ingredient to encourage brand loyalty, but it is also what feeds the influencers' social authority and credibility (Buyer, 2016).

Strictly speaking, by investing in social media influencers, brands do not need to force-feed promotional content to its target audiences and are still able to promote its products or services through someone who is followed by a niche of people on a daily basis.

1.2 *EF*, Education First

EF Education First was founded in Sweden in 1965 by *Bertil Hult*, a young entrepreneur, who started with a very simple and straightforward initial business idea: on-site language and cultural studies. After an exciting journey with many milestone events, nearly 50 years later, *EF* is the world leader in international education, with a range of educational programs, including language schools, education travel, cultural exchanges, and academic degrees. The company operates 500 schools and offices in more than 50 countries and has a network of more than 40.500 teachers and staff.

Devoted to excellence in education, *EF* has research collaborations with the University of Cambridge and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It has also launched the world's

first free standardized language test, the EFSET, and continues to operate as the certified language training provider to the Olympic Games.

As today's world is progressively more complex, cross-cultural communication and comprehension are becoming essential for long term professional success. Therefore, more than ever, *EF's* mission - "*Breaking Down Barriers*" - is acquiring more and more significance. In 1991, when installing the first office in Lisbon, *EF* started to conquer the Portuguese market. The Lusitanian mentality and openness to a multicultural world is changing day after day, and the *EF's* results have been showing that. Today, *EF Portugal* has two headquarters - Lisbon and Porto - and, it is currently opening the first *EF Portuguese School* in Príncipe Real, Lisbon. Although *EF* invests in both organic and paid search results, the amount of money spent with paid search in the last few years is exceptionally high, when comparing to *EF* main competitors, especially because the European Market Manager believes that immediate top-of-the-page listings and better click through rates stands for increasing sales.

Last year, after a careful analysis of the results, the Country Manager realized that *EF* needed to start investing more in organic search, in order to raise business credibility, evergreen search results and spread brand awareness. Even with the successive growing results during the last years, the Country Manager found the inability of potential customers to recognize or to recall *EF* when deciding to do, or not, a language course. Additionally, results from a survey conducted in 2016, by the Portuguese *EF* team, shown that customers have many difficulties to identify the name/logo of the brand, and which type of products/services the company offers. After many discussions and brainstorm meetings with the Board, the best path to follow was to start investing in Social Media Influencer Marketing. On the one hand it would help to educate a large mass of consumers at once, reduce negative opinions, build trust in the audience and develop better brand confidence with influencers generated content. On the other hand, it

would allow to increase social following with the support of influencers and get famous websites to link to *EF* for a huge boost in search ranking (SEO Authority¹).

In October 2017, *EF Portugal* did its first partnership with social media influencers. *Vanessa Martins*, with 478.3K followers, was chosen on the basis of no explicit criteria besides the number of followers. Since it was an experiment, *EF* was not too picky or rigorous. *Vanessa* and her team went to Sydney (destination chosen by her) during one week with everything paid, excluding that only the influencer was entitled to take the course and to receive the official certificate. Although the results were good enough to justify the investment, the influencer did not fulfill with the amount of content agreed in the partnership contract.

Once the first experience with influencers brought good results, *EF* decided continue with this partnerships' program: on December 2017, *Helena Coelho* and *Paulo Teixeira* traveled to New York and Miami; *Conguito* (and a friend of him) went to New York on February 2018; *Sofia Bbeauty* (and her sister) flew to Sydney on March 2018; on May 2018, *Sea3PO* (and her team) explored Tokyo; and finally, on July 2019, *André Viana* (145.7K followers) and *Sofia Viana* (59.7K followers) went to Brisbane. There were not specific criteria behind these choices, besides the availability of these influencers to travel. The budget was limited and the company wanted to travel as many different types of influencers as possible. Depending on the justification and/or the number of followers, *EF* could also cover the value of one companion or even the all influencer's team.

Observing the results, *EF* figured out that some social media influencers - *Helena Coelho* (187K followers; Engagement Rate = 11.26%; Average Number of Likes = 21K), *Paulo Teixeira* (53.3K followers; Engagement Rate = 5.07%; Average Number of Likes = 2.7K) and *Sofia Bbeauty* (280.4K followers; Engagement Rate = 10.69%; Average Number of Likes = 29.9K) - had a positive impact on the number of leads/interests and bookings, the most valuable

¹ Search engine optimization (SEO) is the practice of increasing the quantity and quality of traffic to the website through organic search engine results.

goals for *Education First*, and also on the amount of clicks and followers on *EF Portugal* social networks. However, there were also influencers - *Conguito* and *Sea3PO* - who had hardly any positive impact on the results. Interestingly, these two were the most expensive situations. Although a contract was signed, the experience with *Conguito* (50.2K followers; Engagement Rate = 1.4%; Average Number of Likes = 2.8K) went awry because he did not even accomplish with 1/3 of what was agreed with *EF*. Despite being one of the most famous radio hosts between the Portuguese teens, his characteristic way of acting and speaking is not sufficient enough for followers to believe him and take what he says seriously. *Sea3PO* (331.3K followers; Engagement Rate = 9.05%; Average Number of Likes = 29.6K) , was the first Portuguese social media influencer to achieve such a large number of followers in such a short period of time. Moreover, she was also considered as the Portuguese influencer with the largest number of fans - kids between 7 and 15 years old are completely mad about her and they know everything about *Sea*'s private and non-private life.

As soon as the company made its first partnership with *Vanessa Martins*, proposals and more proposals from other influencers, who also sought a partnership with *EF*, began raining. Even the ones who had previously refused the proposal, due to their agents' opinions about the terms and conditions of the partnership, were interested in moving forward (with or without the agent's consent). When faced with this surprise, a mix of feelings were experienced: on the one hand, as more than one third of internet daily activities are spent on social networking (Mander, 2017) and, e-WOM is the most trusted source of brand marketing, the Country Manager wanted to continue investing in Influencer Marketing; but, on the other hand, she did not know how to guide the whole process of select the right influencer, negotiate the conditions of the partnership, welcome, encourage and give support to the influencer and finally, evaluate the results. In fact, even after one year of experience, this problem was easily recognized because *EF* continues to believe that the best results in social media communication are

strongly connected with quantities and magnitudes - number of followers, average number of likes and average number of comments.

1.3 Research Question

As, in 2019, the main goal of *Education First* is to optimize the total investment made in social media influencers, this paper aims to study what impacts the success of a partnership between the company and each influencer. Accordingly, the following research question was elaborated: "*How can Education First optimize the investment on Influencer Marketing?*"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The new marketing era is highly recognized by the stronger effects that e-WOM or any kind of evidences consumers obtain from relational sources has on consumer decision-making and decision-buying processes (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Although customers have always valued others' opinions, growing popularity of social media has enlarged the effects of peer recommendations, as it empowered shoppers to share their thoughts and practices. Since individuals are capable to create and spread different types of content and in different formats, they willingly exhibit their brand, product or service preferences through their social media channels, such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Jansen et al. 2009; Knoll 2016; Lyons and Henderson 2005). Not only the social media channels play a crucial role in the diffusion of e-WOM. The problem is that the social media are full of opinion leaders, who exercise an overwhelming amount of influence on others (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), being able to exert influence even on the others' attitudes, behaviors, preferences (Watts and Dodds 2007; Lyons and Henderson 2005).

There is also the other side of the game. As soon as brands and companies realized the potential to invest in these social media influencers, they immediately entered the race. However, it not only about spending money and sign partnerships agreements with the most famous influencers; it's trickier than it looks.

The truth is that marketers are facing different types of challenging problems to find a solution and to definitely solve. For 75% of marketers, today, the biggest challenge is identifying the appropriate influencer. However, 69% of marketers also face problems when getting the attention of influencers and then building interest with them (Augure, 2015). And the difficulty is that the success of social media influencers is indispensably important to brands; hence, technology has been conceived to recognize and follow influencers' relevance to each specific brand or enterprise. This technologies are able to track different types of metrics, which are considered crucial aspects of a social media influencer's success, such as the number of hits on a blog, the number of comments, and followers (Fredberg, 3).

Social media influencers have singular personalities, and ways of acting and thinking. However, they seem to use similar strategies to share their content. Therefore, by understanding how an influencer operates, in general, marketers can also understand and study which practices are the most profitable ones.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The suggested research intends to better comprehend what determines the success of a partnership between *Education First* and a social media influencer. More specifically, the proposed investigation seeks for answers about the conditions where the partnership agreement should be built, the criteria in which the company needs to focus in order to identify the right influencers to work with, and what motivates and encourages them to accomplish their job in

the most professional way. Having this into consideration, the best searching strategy to follow and to guide the investigation process was attained by dividing the study into two sides/categories: the relationship between social media influencers and *Education First*, and the relationship between social media influencers and their followers, as well as, *EF*'s followers. The first category comprises 1 subclass - influencer's motivations and drivers to work in the greatest way. The second category comprises 2 subclasses - the impact of the number of followers on the "*opinion leader status*" and likeability towards the influencer, and the followers' preferences on the types of posts and influencers' characteristics. Although the two categories of analysis are independent one from each other, they complement themselves and enable to obtain more complete and accurate results to answer to the research question. Both qualitative and quantitative research were conducted. While the first subclass mentioned above was explored by supervising in-depth interviews (**Appendix I**), the other two subclasses about the relation between social media influencers and followers were investigated by running a well-structured questionnaire (**Appendix II**).

3.2 Data Sample

For the qualitative research, 8 social media influencers, who already did a partnership with *Education First* (during the first year of experiment), were interviewed.

For the quantitative research, the sample of 111 Portuguese Instagram users, who were randomly selected, entailed a majority of participants in the age ranges of 15-21 (33,33%) and 22-28 (51,35%).

3.3 Data Collection & Data Analysis

The limited knowledge around influencer's perspectives and beliefs about partnering with brands determined a qualitative methodology for the research. During the last week of

November 2018, a total of 8 in-depth interviews were conducted in a pleasurable atmosphere. All of them were held in English, took between 35-50 minutes and were audio-recorded. The interview guide, mostly composed by open-ended questions, was divided into six parts, starting with broad questions and moving to the most specific ones, where the respondents could describe and evaluate the *EF* experience, the partnership, and their results perception. Once only the original data would be used, the data obtained was analyzed using *Willig's* (2008) *Abbreviated Grounded Theory*² approach, based on *Charmaz's* (2006) full version.

After the first interview and before the next one, transcripts were coded line by line to detect the initial codes, using the language in the transcriptions to stay grounded in the data and restrict interpretation. Then, the codes were laid down according to subject areas, by identifying parallelisms and connections between these to build theoretical codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some of the questions and deliberations that result from the coding procedure were analyzed with the support of memos. Theoretical sampling facilitated the process of data comparison and permitted the validation of the theoretical emerging codes. Overall, the analysis enabled a broad perception of topics which facilitated the theoretical integration and consequently, the development of a theoretical scheme. By ensuring analytical credibility through the comparative analysis to build the initial and theoretical codes, theoretical credibility is also guaranteed. However, once there is lack of some pertinent aspects in the interpretation of the results, it is not possible to accomplish full saturation of the data.

Across the same period of time, 111 Instagram users answered to an online questionnaire that was spread between a convenience sample due to its affordability and effortlessness. The questionnaire was divided into two parts in which participants were enquired to choose the most suitable option, from a seven-point Likert scale anchored. While the first part was always equal to all the respondents, the second part was different. Two scenarios were created -

² Should only be used when time or resource constraints prevent the implementation of the original full version.

Scenario I (influencer with a reasonable number of followers, $n = 2100$) and **Scenario II** (influencer with a high number of followers, $n = 21200$) - to investigate whether one's quantity of followers may act as a signal, demonstrating one's popularity, and whether perceived reputation and fame in turn might instigate individuals to ascribe opinion leadership to the person in question. Both, the number of posts ($n = 366$) and the number of followees ($n = 320$), were maintained constant over the two scenarios. In an attempt to eradicate potential biases associated to some existing connection between the respondents and the influencer, an Instagram account for one fictitious social media influencer, *Stephanie Jones*, was created. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and then fill out the questionnaire. Following these manipulations, the questionnaire results were grouped and analyzed into 3 segments: respondents' general perceptions and preferences; the impact of the number of followers on the respondents' perceptions and preferences; and, the interaction between the number of followers and perceived similarity with Stephanie (interests and lifestyle) on the respondents' purchase intentions.

4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Impact Of The Number Of Followers & The Followers' Preferences

In order to analyze the data collected through the aforementioned, several statistical tests, expressed with 95% confidence, were conducted (*e.g.* interaction analysis, two-way ANOVAs, manipulations check, multiple correlations, and t-Tests). Only the significant outcomes for the study will be mentioned during the analysis and discussion of the results.

Starting with the participants' general perceptions and preferences, the results revealed that 5,41% of the respondents do not trust social media influencers at all, while 9,91% blindly trust them. Although, 27,03% alleged they have a neutral trust relationship with influencers, a total of 47,75% reported having a positive trust relationship with them ($\bar{x} = 4,43$; $S = 1,54$). Regarding the type of content, while direct lives are the type of content that arouses any or very slight

interest on consumers ($\bar{x}= 2,324$; $S= 1,562$), a clear preference for pictures ($\bar{x}= 5,667$; $S= 1,557$) and videos/vlogs ($\bar{x}= 5,063$; $S= 1,889$) is evident. Moving to the reasons to trust social media iconic people, the four reasons most pointed out by the participants were high quality content ($\bar{x}= 6,36$; $S= 1,007$), authenticity/transparency ($\bar{x}= 6,144$; $S= 1,094$), creativity/originality ($\bar{x}= 5,838$; $S= 1,311$), and expertise ($\bar{x}= 5,794$; $S= 1,261$). Additionally, some correlations between the interest category (independent variable) and the reasons to trust (dependent variable) were also observed: even though the number of followers ($R^2= 0,148$; Significance $F= 0,032<0,05$) is not a reliable (statistical significant) reason to trust, the results shows an increase in the importance of this metric, when individuals are considering fashion, lifestyle and technology; the interactivity between social media personalities and their followers is statistically significant ($R^2= 0,394$; Significance $F= 1,34 \times 10^{-8}<0,05$), particularly when considering the lifestyle content category ($\beta= 0,473$; P-value= $4,03 \times 10^{-4}<0,05$); creativity/originality ($R^2 = 0,168$; Significance $F= 0,013<0,05$) is a significant driver for trust when the influencer is sharing travelling type of content ($\beta = 0,231$; P-value= $0,028<0,05$); high quality content ($R^2= 0,260$; Significance $F= 1,08 \times 10^{-4}<0,05$) is the reason that acquire more weight when considering the trust relationship between an influencer, who is sharing travelling content, and the consumer ($\beta= 0,338$; P-value= $1,68 \times 10^{-5}<0,05$); expertise is also an eloquent reason to trust social media influencers, who mostly share travel-related content ($R^2= 0,185$; Significance $F = 6,14 \times 10^{-3}<0,05$). In increasing order of importance, the three most critical reasons to trust on influencer travelers are: high quality content, creativity/originality and expertise. The results also revealed a meaningful correlation ($R^2 = 0,448$) between the level of trust and the consumer buying behavior after seeing a product or service being publicized by a social media influencer ($\beta=0,537$; Significance $F= 9,62 \times 10^{-16}<0,05$). Finally, although there is not any kind of significant correlation between the content category and some engagement activities, such as visiting the influencer page, continuing searching for other

brands, searching for more reviews to validate the choice, and contact the brand/business, it is quite interesting to emphasize the prevailing correlation between the travel content category along with visiting the brand/business website ($R^2 = 0,240$; Significance $F = 3,49 \times 10^{-4} < 0,05$), and that there is only a 4,2% chance that the result occurred only as a result of chance ($\beta = 0,252$; $P\text{-value} = 0,042 < 0,05$).

The results of the second part of the questionnaire reveal a significant difference between Scenario I and Scenario II, when considering both the respondents' perception of the average amount of Stephanie's followers ($P\text{-value} = 1,81 \times 10^{-15} < 0,05$; $t\text{-Stat} = -9,477$; $t\text{-Critical} = 1,985$), and the average amount of Stephanie's followers when comparing her to a standard Instagram user ($P\text{-value} = 2,45 \times 10^{-4} < 0,05$; $t\text{-Stat} = -3,793$; $t\text{-Critical} = 1,982$). This means, remarkably, that there is enough evidence to say that consumers clearly distinguish micro-influencers (<20K followers) from medium-influencers (20K < followers < 100K) and major-influencers (>100K followers)³. On the other hand, the outsized P-values (superior to the level of significance, $\alpha = 0,05$) reached when it was evaluated the effect of the number of followers at the level of consumer engagement and at the perception about Stephanie's personality, revealed that the difference between the sample means is not significantly enough to say that these variables assume particular behaviors in consonance with the social media influencer's amount of followers. In other words, the number of followers does not exert substantial influence either on the customer engagement behavior, after seeing a product/service in a post, nor on the perception of an influencer's personality (e.g. authenticity, confidence, creativity, expertise). Even though, two meaningful results were reached out: first, the number of followers has a positive and direct impact ($P\text{-value} = 6,67 \times 10^{-4} < 0,05$; $t\text{-Stat} = -3,514$; $t\text{-Critical} = 1,984$) on the individual's likelihood to purchase a product/service recommended by a social media influencer; second, the number of followers has not significance enough ($P\text{-value} = 0,12 > 0,05$).

³ Education First standard classification.

value= 0,854>0,05; t-Stat= -0,185; t-Critical= 1,986) to impact the individual's perception about the quality of the influencer content.

In statistics, an interaction may arise when considering the relationship among three or more variables, and describes a situation in which the effect of one causal variable on an outcome depends on the state of a second causal variable. Thus, and to complete the quantitative analysis, it was assessed whether the questionnaire results reveal, or not, the existence of an interaction between the number of followers (Predictor I) and perceived (interests and lifestyle) similarity with the influencer (Predictor II) on the respondents' purchase intentions (dependent variable). As in both cases - Predictor II equal to the level of interests similarity ($\beta= 0,0,073$; P-value= 0,614) and Predictor II equal to the lifestyle similarity ($\beta= 0,051$; P-value= 0,731) - the coefficients are not significant and the respective P-values are really high - it may therefore be concluded that the effect of the manipulation (Scenario I = lower number of followers; Scenario II = high number of followers) is different, but not depending on the level of similarity with the social media icon. Concluding, the independent variables, “*Number of Followers*” and “*Similarity*”, and their interaction (Predictor III), “*Number of Followers*Similarity*” have not a statistically substantial effect on the dependent variable, “*Purchase Intentions*”.

Influencer's Motivations & Drivers

The following model (Figure 1) represents what influencers consider to be the key ingredients to an optimal relation between any brand and a social media influencer. This model is centered around five main categories: Brand Affinity, Compensation, Feedback & Support, Lasting Relation and Freedom. The main category of “Compensation” comprises three subcategories of “Opportunities”, “Monetary” and “Promotion”. Also, the main category of “Lasting Relation” comprises two subcategories of “Authenticity” and “Respect”. Finally, the main category of “Freedom” comprises two subcategories of “Content Quantity” and “Content

Freedom”. Not all the subcategories directly link to all others, but are influential on a meta-level to the other main categories and the subcategories within it.

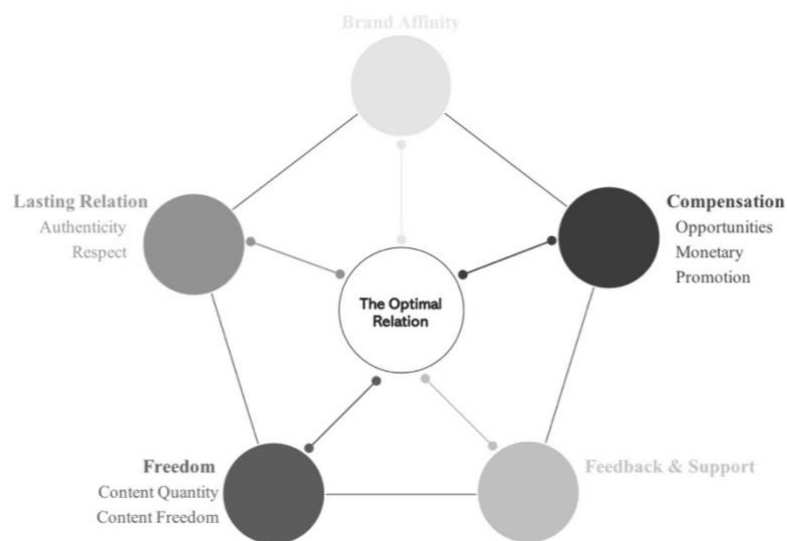


Figure 1: *Dissecting the brand x influencer optimal relationship.*

Hereinafter the model will be illustrated by underlining the fundamental elements with some quotes⁴ that resulted from the interviews.

Brand Affinity: influencers are well aware about the importance of revealing a favorably affinity for the brand they are partnering with; they recognize that the more natural they are, the more authentic and meaningful the content will be; thus, the key is a high matching level between the values, the identity and the products/services of the brand, and the social media influencer.

“I am passionate about knowing and living different cultures. EF has developed a very interesting concept that fits 100% in my personality.” (Mary)

“I identify myself with EF at several levels, but specially with moral values such as: respect for difference, honesty, the ability to share, the spirit of mutual help....” (Susy)

Compensation: the social media influencers stressed the increasing importance of cash payment; however, they do not search just for financial rewards - *Monetary Compensation*; they

⁴ Pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

feel the brands need to provide exclusive and/or new experiences for themselves and their audience - *Opportunities*; those who have less followers also consider that brands also reward them when they promote their work, their pages and their personality - *Promotion*.

"It was my first experience abroad without my parents. It was a key milestone for me!" (Kate)

"More than studying a language, walking around and, learning about new realities, I'm still sharing with my audience an exciting adventure. All influencers want this!" (Susy)

"I would prefer it if the payment in cash, but if it's a company's rule, I have to accept it." (Mary)

Feedback & Support: like another employee, influencers appreciate to receive feedback and support; while feedback helps them improving and aligning their ideas with the brand ideas, support gives them more security and sense of opportunity.

"I hate to come to the end of a project and realize that the brand was unhappy with my job.

Alone, I may not be able to identify my mistakes... so, feedback is vital to avoid situations of dissatisfaction." (Sofy)

Freedom: this is "the" category that generates more discussion and different points of view; influencers want brands to deliver them a proper brief that summaries well-defined guidelines, but leaves space for creativity within those confines; they do not want to spend more time rearranging content in which spent hours on, and don't want their creativity stifled - *Content Creativity*; similarly, influencers want brands to be aware of the amount of content enforced; it does not make sense for them to make a publication just because it has to be; quality, authenticity, and creativity are key to the best results - *Content Quantity*.

"If my audience is expecting me to reveal the best of my experience, I cannot focus only on the educational part (...) especially because they know what my passion in life is, they know me (...) and what they really want to see is the part related to make-up, fashion and beauty! I told them what the purpose of the trip was and I did a vlog about a normal day at EF's school, but more than that they don't want to know..." (Susy)

"I thought it was too much content, but I accepted it anyway! I really wanted this partnership..."

(John)

"I know I did not do the amount that was agreed between us (...) I think I only did half of the number of posts, and three times more Instagram stories" (Ally)

Lasting Relation: for both, influencers and brands, it is important to seek long-term relationships with each other; nevertheless, the influencers believe that this is only conceivable if the relation between the two entities is based on honesty and transparency from the beginning - *Authenticity*; also, influencers just want to work with brands who treat them as they would any other publisher because they are as professionals as others, their opinion should be valued and heard and they deserve to be highlighted too - *Respect*.

"This is my full time job. I pay my taxes and work during the weekends. At the very least, brands must respect us. I'm as professional as they are!" (John)

"An individual's word of honor should be the rule of this game! When word fails without justification, then it is not even worth to go ahead with a project together with that person or brand." (Ally)

Final Considerations

Overall, considering all the previously stated results and the following model (Figure 2), it is possible to make some recommendations to *Education First*.

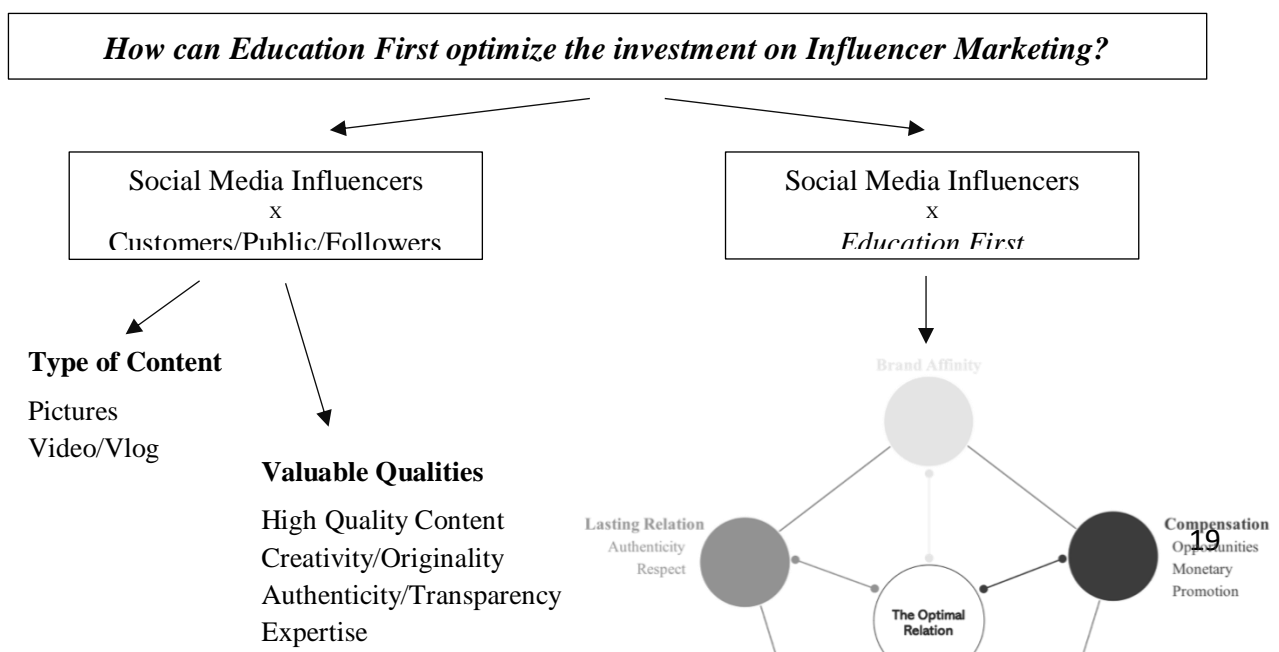


Figure 2: *What impacts the success of a partnership between EF and a social media influencer?*

The final model represents the the focal points, with which the company must play, when making the next partnership with social media influencers.

The four most relevant criteria for choosing the influencer are, in descending order of importance: High Quality Content, Creativity/Originality, Authenticity/Transparency and Expertise. Although the number of followers is quite significant, as it was observed in the quantitative analysis, it should not be a first order criteria to select the social media influencer; this metric should function as a condition for breaking up between two options. On the other hand, in the partnership agreement the company should require more content in the format of pictures and videos/vlogs, once these are the consumers' preferred type of content. Even that the results were not so significant, it is still important to reinforce, in the partnership agreement, that influencers must share the link of the landing page, that is custom-built for each one of them. When it comes to travel-related content, individuals often visit the brand/company website. And so, it is very important that the influencer often shares it, through its own link, to facilitate the research process of the that individual.

The other side of the model presents the elements in which the company must focus, in order to motivate and encourage the influencers with whom it is working, while stimulating the ideal relationship between them and the company.

Recommendations

Formulate a win-win partnership agreement is not easy, so the company need to understand and listen each influencer, its expectations and special motivations. Even so, *Education First* should also keep it fairly open so that the social media influencer can suggest the compensation proposal that suits him/her best.

Also, it is quite important to build influencer marketing campaigns and schedule influencers as early as possible. In fact, influencers usually work on three or more campaigns at the same time, which hampers their calendar, and difficult the process of finding first-choice social media influencers to embrace a campaign. Brands that have not organized their Influencer Marketing calendar in advance might discover themselves at a drawback.

Finally, the company must also pay attention to the expectations alignment. If there is an influencer with whom the company wants to work for a particular reason, it should not try to close the deal without first clarifying everything with that influencer. Both parties must explicitly share with one another what they expect to give and receive in exchange, once this is the only way to avoid dishonesty and negative surprises.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Limitations

Once the data collection was largely done throughout social media channels, a massive percentage of the mature population was not included. In addition, despite many efforts were

made in order to obtain a sample as diversified as possible, a substantial number of the questionnaire participants are people that belong to the researcher's circle of contacts, not representing the entire population.

In the qualitative analysis, as the number of participants and the resources were limited, full theoretical saturation was not achieved and, consequently, theory generation also did not. Only a developing framework was shaped based on the available data and results.

Initially, the research question was not the same as it is now, but given the difficulties in getting important confidential data about the company, the study of this paper has changed. Still, much confidential information and data could not be used directly in this study. The researcher only had limited access to this information to perceive the logic behind the company's history and numbers. The same happened with some detailed information about the influencers who already did a partnership with the company. The researcher was not able to use some of that information to ask more specific and detailed questions during the in-depth interviews. Actually, the responses given by the influencers in the interviews could not be associated with their respective names and analysed with the true results they brought to the company.

5.2 Future Research

Willig's (2008) *Abbreviated Grounded Theory* approach was embraced to support the development of a preliminary framework. This paper functioned as a “foot in the door” study (Burger, 1999) and allowed the understanding of which direct further research would be needed apart from future regular follow-up interviews, aimed to improve theoretical credibility of the connections that arose. During these follow-up interviews, it would be important to have the supervision from a mature researcher, which will help to maintain theoretical credibility. Apart from this, a larger diversified sample should allow the production of more irrefutable interactions and conclusions.

By presenting different type and quantity of information (creating different scenarios), the use of experiments would certainly be valuable to continue the narrowing process of the gap in the literature.

Finally, *Education First* should focus on the new tendency revealed in this study - the monetary compensation - and re-think the increasing importance of this type of compensation on the social media influencers minds.

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7. APPENDIX

APPENDIX I: Interview Guide

Warm-up

Good morning/afternoon/evening! My name is Cátia and I am a Masters' student of *NOVA School of Business and Economics*. I am currently doing my thesis, where I am conducting a research related to Social Media Influencers and their relationship with brands. That is why I'm interviewing you today!

For this purpose, I am going to ask you a few questions in a conversation that should last around 30 minutes. There are not right or wrong answers and please feel free to say whatever comes to your mind on the subject. For the purpose of analyzing the interviews later, I need to record the conversation – would that be ok? It will still remain anonymous and you will not be contacted concerning this project further past this interview.

TD - Target Definition

Thank you! I would like to start out by asking you a couple of questions related to your experience with Education First:

TD1- Who had the initiative to make the first contact?

- If “THE INFLUENCER” [Target 1] - [move to question TD2]
- If “EDUCATION FIRST” [Target 2] - [move to question TD3]

TD2- How and When did you contact *EF*? And why did you contact this company?

TD3- Who do you usually travel with?

TD4- How often do you travel?

TD5- What purpose do you usually travel for?

TD6- Do you value social and cultural experience?

SMIC - SMI Characterization

SMIC1- What do you value most in an SMI?

SMIC2- In your opinion, what distinguishes a good from a bad SMI?

SMIC3- What impacts the frequency and type of your posts?

SMIC4- What kind of posts do you prefer to do? What are the reasons for these preferences?

SMIC5- *The number of followers define the quality of the SMI and gives him/her an immediate "status".*

What do you think about this quote? Do you agree?

SMIC6- For a SMI, what is the purpose of taking a partnership with a brand like *EF*?

SMIC7- Do you identify yourself with *EF*? If yes, in what? If not, why did you choose to do this partnership?

SMIC8- Do you think your target audience matches EF's target market? Why?

EE - Experience Evaluation

EE1- How do you describe the experience of learning a language and traveling at the same time?

EE2- How do you describe the environment at EF's facilities?

EE3- How do you evaluate EF school teaching?

EE4- How do you rate the accommodations where you stayed?

EE5- Describe your relationship with EF Portugal during the travel period.

EE6- What did this trip mean to you?

PP - Partnership Perception

PP1- Were you well received by EF Portugal's MKT team?

PP2- Did you have the opportunity to share your "fears and desires" with the team?

PP3- Did EF give you freedom to choose content and to be creative?

PP4- Were the quantity and type of content agreed and discussed by both parties?

PP5- Do you consider the amount of content exaggerated? Why?

PP6- Compensation in EF is never monetary. What do you think about that?

PP7- During the trip, how was the feedback and suggestions you get from the MKT team?

RP - Results Perception

RP1- In terms of content, do you consider that you have complied with everything that has been agreed between you and EF?

RP2- In your opinion, did your participation bring good results to EF? Why?

RP3- Would you repeat the experience, not as SMI, but as a "normal student"? Why?

RP4- And, as SMI? If so, what would you change?

RP5- What were the reasons / main contributors for ... [choose one of the three options available, according to the performance of each SMI]

... your extraordinary performance and dedication when sharing the experience on your social networks?

... focusing on all subjects (beauty, fashion, lifestyle ...), other than the true purpose of the trip?

... your absence on social networks and for such a limited number of posts?

RP6- From 1 to 10, how do you assess your partnership with EF?

D - Demographics

We're almost done! I just need to ask a few quick questions about your profile so that I can characterize the sample of respondents when aggregating the results of the study.

P1 - Age (in years): _____

P2 - Years of professional experience as Social Media Influencer: _____

P3 - Gender [don't ask - just register]

P4 - Nationality: _____

P5 - Academic background:

Social Media Communication / Journalism New Technologies Sports
Nutrition Sciences I don't have any specialization/superior studies

P6 - Which of the following is the main focus of your current job?

TV/Radio Host Photographer Blogger Personal Trainer Studying
Writer/Journalist Musician

Wrap-up

That's it! We're done. Thank you very much for your time today. All the best for your career! In case you have any doubt or want to be informed about the results of this study feel free to contact me though the email: 24045@novasbe.pt *Cátia Fernandes Vaz*

APPENDIX II: Online Questionnaire

My name is Cátia and I am a Masters' student of NOVA School of Business and Economics. I am currently doing my thesis, where I am conducting a research related to Social Media Influencers. That is why I'm asking you to do this short survey!

The questionnaire remains anonymous and you will not be contacted concerning this project further past this interview.

1- Rate the following content categories in terms of how much you are interested in them:

| | Not at all Interested | | | | | | | Very Interested |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|--------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | |
| Technology | | | | | | | | |
| Lifestyle | | | | | | | | |
| Beauty | | | | | | | | |
| Fashion | | | | | | | | |
| Travel | | | | | | | | |
| Sports | | | | | | | | |
| Health | | | | | | | | |
| Food | | | | | | | | |

2- Rate the following types of content to receive from influencers in terms of how much you are interested in them:

| | Not at all Interested | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very Interested |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------------|
| Video/Vlog | | | | | | | | |
| Pictures | | | | | | | | |
| Instagram Stories | | | | | | | | |
| Direct Lives | | | | | | | | |

3- To what extent do you trust influencers?

| Not Trust at all | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Blindly Trust |
|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---------------|
|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---------------|

3.1- Please rate the extent to which the following reasons to trust an influencer are important to you?

| | Not at all Important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very Important |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| High Number of Followers | | | | | | | | |
| Authenticity/Transparency | | | | | | | | |
| Interactivity | | | | | | | | |
| Self-Confidence | | | | | | | | |
| Creativity/Originality | | | | | | | | |
| High Quality Content | | | | | | | | |
| Expertise | | | | | | | | |

4- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Seeing a product/service being used by an influencer is a reason to trust the brand.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|

5- Have you ever purchased a product/service after seeing that product/service in an influencer's post?

| Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

6- To what extent do customer reviews affect your buying decisions?

| Not at all | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Extremely |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|

7- After you see an influencer post, how likely are you to engage in the following activities?

| | Very Unlikely | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very Likely |
|--|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| Visit the influencer page | | | | | | | | |
| Search for more reviews to validate the choice | | | | | | | | |
| Visit the brand website | | | | | | | | |
| Continue searching for other brands | | | | | | | | |
| Contact the brand/business | | | | | | | | |

8- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Even if I don't need the product/service that an influencer is promoting, I continue paying attention to the post.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|

9- How important are these reasons to follow an influencer for you?

| | Not at all Important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very Important |
|--|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
|--|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|

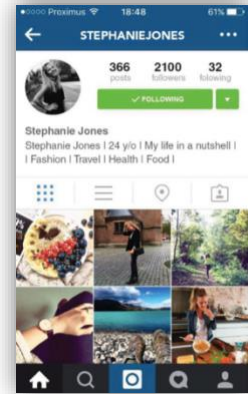
| |
|---------------------------|
| Number of Followers |
| Fame |
| Influencer's Profession |
| Amount of Fan Clubs/Pages |
| Posts Frequency |
| Content Category |
| Number of Likes |
| Number of Comments |
| Number of Shares |

SCENARIO 1 (apply to, at least, 50 individuals)

This is the Instagram profile of Stephanie Jones, a 24-year-old British Social Media Influencer.

1- Complete the sentences:

| | | | | | | | |
|---|------------|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
| | Very Small | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very Large |
| | 1 | | | | | | 7 |
| Stephan(ie) has a ? amount of followers. | | | | | | | |
| Stephan follows a ? amount of people. | | | | | | | |
| | Less | | | | | | More |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Stephan is followed by ? people than an average Instagram user. | | | | | | | |
| Stephan follows ? people than an average Instagram user. | | | | | | | |



2- To what extent would you be likely to purchase a product recommended by this influencer?

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|--|-------------|
| Very Unlikely | | | | | | | Very Likely |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | 7 |

3- To what extent do you perceive Stephanie to be...

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| | Very Unlikely | | | | | | Very Likely |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Authentic | | | | | | | |
| Confident | | | | | | | |
| Creative | | | | | | | |
| Expert | | | | | | | |

4- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Stephanie's content is very High Quality Content.

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | | | | | | | Strongly Agree |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | 7 |

5- If Stefanie recommended a brand, how likely would you be to do the following?

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| | Very Unlikely | | | | | | Very Likely |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Search for more reviews to validate the choice | | | | | | | |
| Visit the brand website | | | | | | | |
| Continue searching for other brands | | | | | | | |
| Contact the brand/business | | | | | | | |

6- To what extent do you perceive your interests similar to Stephanie?

Very Dissimilar 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very Similar 7

7- To what extent do you perceive your lifestyle similar to Stephanie?

Very Dissimilar 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very Similar 7

SCENARIO 2 (apply to, at least, 50 individuals)

This is the Instagram profile of Stephanie Jones, a 24-year-old British Social Media Influencer.

1- Complete the sentences:

| | | | | | | | |
|---|------------|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
| | Very Small | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very Large |
| | 1 | | | | | | 7 |
| Stephan(ie) has a ? amount of followers. | | | | | | | |
| Stephan follows a ? amount of people. | | | | | | | |
| | Less | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | More |
| | 1 | | | | | | 7 |
| Stephan is followed by ? people than an average Instagram user. | | | | | | | |
| Stephan follows ? people than an average Instagram user. | | | | | | | |



2- To what extent would you be likely to purchase a product recommended by this influencer?

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very Likely 7

3- To what extent do you perceive Stephanie to be...

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very Likely 7

Authentic
Confident
Creative
Expert

4- To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

Stephanie's content is very High Quality Content.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 Strongly Agree 7

5- If Stefanie recommended a brand, how likely would you be to do the following?

Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very Likely 7

Search for more reviews to validate the choice
Visit the brand website
Continue searching for other brands
Contact the brand/business

6- To what extent do you perceive your interests similar to Stephanie?

Very Dissimilar 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very Similar 7

7- To what extent do you perceive your lifestyle similar to Stephanie?

Very Dissimilar
1

2

3

4

5

6

Very Similar
7

FOR BOTH SCENARIOS

Age: <8 8-14 15-21 22-28 29-35 36-42 43-49 50-56 >56

Gender: Male Female Other

Thank you very much for your time today. All the best for you! In case you have any doubt or want to be informed about the results of this study feel free to contact me through the email: 24045@novasbe.pt.

Cátia Fernandes Vaz