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Influencer Marketing Strategies in the Fitness Industry

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Influencer Marketing Strategies in the Fitness Industry

By/por

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Master Thesis / Project Work presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialization in Marketing Intelligence.

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledge the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

Andreia Fernandes

Lisbon, 30/11/2023

ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has become a widespread strategy across different sectors and is experiencing a notable upsurge in the Portuguese fitness industry. This study explores the marketing strategies employed, combining a systematic literature review with in-depth interviews with digital influencers in the field. The research highlights the importance of authenticity and transparency in cultivating trust between influencers and their followers, as well as the imperative of value alignment between brands and influencers for effective partnerships. It shows that despite high follower numbers, deep engagement and the quality of the follower community are more indicative of sales success and product or service promotion. The insights and conclusions from this study provide invaluable guidance for marketers and influencers seeking to cultivate innovative and impactful strategies within the digital fitness marketplace.

KEYWORDS

Influencer Marketing; Fitness Industry; Influencer Marketing Strateg*; Social Media Influencer Marketing Strateg*; Social Media Marketing Strateg*; Social Media Influencer Strateg*; Digital Influencer Strateg*; Online Influencer Strateg*; Influencer Advertising; Influencer Marketing"; Influencer Collaboration; Partnership

Sustainable Development Goals (SGD):



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, digital marketing, especially through social media, has experienced exponential growth, significantly reshaping how businesses engage with their audiences (Janssen et al., 2022).

This shift has prompted businesses to recalibrate their marketing strategies. One particularly effective method of surfacing is influencer marketing, where trust is anchored not in brands but in relatable individuals: the influencers (Govindan & Alotaibi, 2021). The fitness sector, encompassing fitness centers, health supplements, and workout apparel, has been notably influenced by this trend. Enthusiasts and consumers in this domain are progressively turning to influencers for inspiration, guidance, and product recommendations, especially on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Janssen et al., 2022).

While traditional marketing methods maintain their relevance, the influence commanded by digital personalities, owing to their vast reach and persuasive content, has changed the game. Their compelling content and significant online presence position them as potent figures in shaping consumer behavior and brand preferences. Thus, for companies recognizing this shift and integrating influencer marketing has become more than a trend, a necessity.

This study aims to explore in depth the influencer marketing strategies used by digital influencers and to assess, through their opinions and experiences, the ability of each strategy to attract, engage, or even convert purchases.

The research journey begins with a review of pertinent literature on the theoretical background of Digital Marketing Influencers. The review initiates with a concise introduction to Digital Marketing, establishing a foundational context, and then delves into the benefits of social media in the contemporary digital landscape. It will then transition into a detailed exploration of influencer marketing, dissecting its components, understanding the roles influencers play in social media, and assessing their categorizations. Additionally, some context is provided about the fitness industry's presence on social media.

The research methodology for this study combines a systematic literature review with field research. The overview of the studies chapter delineates the systematic literature review on "Digital Influencer Marketing Strategies". This chapter outlines the methodological research process, detailing the inclusion and exclusion criteria established following the formulation of the research questions. Upon meticulous analysis of the data collected, the findings are presented, providing an advisory and synthesized exposition of the most pertinent and profound insights into the prevailing trends, challenges, and prospects inherent in influencer marketing.

Complementing this review, the chapter proceeds to introduce a qualitative approach, employing interviews with Portuguese influencers who are actively involved in the fitness industry. This inclusion aims to provide a more practical and contextualized understanding of the subject matter.

In the subsequent chapter on empirical study, the results of these interviews are explained. They provide a more personal and direct insight into the digital influencers' strategies, the challenges they face, and their underlying motivations.

The study concludes with a critical discussion of the findings providing an integrative analysis that interweaves theoretical constructs with the practical applications of influencer marketing in the context of the Portuguese fitness industry. It builds bridges and forges connections, providing valuable insights that could guide marketers toward more effective strategies to engage their target audience and enhance brand equity. The paper culminates by delineating the research limitations proposing directions for future inquiry and aiming for a more practical and contextualized understanding, interviews were conducted with Portuguese influencers actively engaged in the fitness industry. These interviews provide a more intimate and direct perspective on the strategies, challenges, and motivations of these influencers, allowing the study to address both the theoretical and the actual practice of influencer marketing in the Portuguese context of the fitness industry.

The insights garnered from this research can guide marketing professionals in developing more effective strategies to engage their target audience and enhance brand equity.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen a marked transformation in digital marketing, particularly in the interactions between businesses and consumers (Li et al., 2021a). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube lead this change. More than just venues for social interaction, these platforms now serve as digital arenas where users actively discuss and share their experiences with companies and products. Given this shift, businesses are now compelled to prioritize positive engagements, as negative feedback can swiftly spread on these platforms, influencing potential consumers' perceptions (Govindan & Alotaibi, 2021).

2.1 DIGITAL MARKETING

The globalized world, combined with increased internet usage, has played a crucial role in transitioning from traditional to digital marketing strategies. The rapid evolution of information technologies has transformed lifestyles, business operations, shopping habits, and recreational activities (Melović et al., 2020). With the accelerated development of the internet and the emergence of new social platforms, businesses are compelled to adapt their strategies promptly. There is a growing necessity for innovative business models to maintain a competitive advantage. This shift underscores a transition from tangible to intangible resources, highlighting the importance of creativity, collaboration, and intellectual capital as fundamental elements of success (Melović et al., 2020).

Digital marketing, defined as the promotion of products or services and engagement with consumers through digital channels, has become crucial in achieving and maintaining a competitive edge. The Digital Marketing Institute describes digital marketing as utilizing digital technologies to create an integrated, targeted, and measurable communications strategy to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them (Jarvinen, 2016; Melović et al., 2020).

In today's interconnected world, many enterprises recognize the value of digital marketing, advocating for a balanced approach that integrates traditional and digital strategies to meet customer needs. Digital marketing offers a more interactive, consumer-centric approach, enabling marketers to engage directly with their target audience, gather data, and foster a deeper understanding of customer needs, preferences, and behaviors. This approach not only enhances brand visibility and increases traffic but also builds customer loyalty (Melović et al., 2020).

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Given the staggering figure of approximately 4.7 billion active social media users (Statista, 2023), marketing via social media platforms has emerged as one of the most potent growth mechanisms in today's marketing landscape. This reality has led numerous small enterprises to gravitate towards these platforms, utilizing them as primary conduits for promoting their products and services and engaging with prospective customers. On these platforms, individuals create networks, share information, and voice their opinions—all within a context that is inherently marketing-oriented. These platforms radiate dynamism and promote a sense of global interconnectedness, cultivating an egalitarian and interactive environment (Li et al., 2021b).

Presently, the most prevalently used social networks include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok stand out as the premier social platforms for photo and video sharing, and many market-leading companies exploit these platforms to their advantage. Infante & Mardikaningsih (2022) posit a direct link between the intensity of a business's engagement on social media and its subsequent perceived growth. They argue that not only is social media marketing more cost-effective compared to numerous traditional advertising approaches, but its efficacy is also remarkably higher. Social media has unlocked unprecedented levels of interaction, feedback acquisition, and partner communication, presenting a tangible competitive advantage for firms. In particular, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have nurtured enhanced interpersonal connections, bridging the gap between influencers (or content creators) and their audiences through shared interests and values.

The strategic utilization of these platforms empowers companies to garner deep insights into consumer preferences. This, in turn, facilitates market research endeavors and fosters the generation of innovative ideas directly from the audience. Such insights equip marketers with invaluable data, enabling them to hone their strategies for optimal results (Gnizy 2019; Li et al., 2021).

2.2.1 INFLUENCER MARKETING

The ascendance of social media, paired with growing marketing investments in the sector, has catalyzed the emergence of influencer marketing as a dominant strategy. Contrary to common misconceptions, influencers are neither traditional celebrities nor average individuals. They are distinguished personalities who have meticulously established a distinct presence online, primarily by curating and disseminating content on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The essence of their influence is often rooted in their aptitude to resonate with followers via their unique

perspectives and insights. They frequently exhibit expertise in areas such as wellness, travel, gastronomy, lifestyle, or even fashion and beauty (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In the contemporary digital age, an individual's status as an "influencer" is largely gauged by their expansive follower count on social media. Recognizing the potential of this extensive reach, brands are increasingly forming strategic alliances with influencers to relay branded content to a broader demographic, encompassing both the influencer's audience and the brand's target market (Lou & Yuan, 2019). These partnerships manifest in various forms: some influencers receive products for unbiased reviews, others earn remuneration for promotional endeavors, and yet others engage in affiliate marketing, securing commissions on generated sales. Fundamentally, influencers endeavor to sway their audience towards acquiring the promoted commodities.

In recent times, influencers have established their role as modern facilitators, amplifying brand visibility. Their strategic positioning has rendered them indispensable within brand-marketing dynamics (Govindan & Alotaibi, 2021). Consequently, influencer marketing has paved the way for avant-garde strategies, endowing marketers with sophisticated tools to comprehend their audience and craft compelling, innovative content.

Govindan & Alotaibi (2021; page 233) delineate the multifaceted roles of influencers as follows:

- Bloggers: They create authentic content, frequently disseminating photos, text, or commentaries on social media. Their content spectrum spans information dissemination, inspirational quotes, life stories, and insightful thoughts.
- YouTubers: Through YouTube, they foster engagement via videos. Their offerings range from personal vlogs and challenges to Q&As and topical discussions.
- Instagrammers: Famed for high-quality photo/video content, they engage their audience with posts, stories, and live sessions, facilitating a more intimate connection.
- TikTokers: Through concise videos, they navigate trending challenges, dispense tips, showcase daily routines, and a plethora of content driven by creativity.
- Celebrities: Already renowned personalities, celebrities leverage social media to foster closeness with their fandom and facilitate interactions.

Govindan & Alotaibi (2021; page 234) further categorize influencers into:

- Mega-influencers: Leveraging their real-world fame, they elevate brand awareness among their millions of followers.
- Macro-influencers: Boasting 100,000 to 1 million followers, they owe their prominence to dedicated quality content creation.
- Micro-influencers: With 1,000 to 100,000 followers, they engage a smaller yet loyal audience. Their affordability, juxtaposed with engagement rates, often renders them an appealing choice for brands.
- Nano-influencers: Typically having fewer than 1,000 followers, they exert significant influence within niche communities, often yielding peak engagement.

However, as the influencer marketing industry continues to evolve, it grapples with challenges related to the balance between the quantity and quality of posted content. Here, quantity refers to an influencer's reach, gauged by their follower count, while quality assesses the efficacy of brand message delivery and its potential profitability (Brauer & Schmidt, 2018).

2.2.2. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Influencers have a pronounced ability to influence consumer choices on social media platforms. Even with a broad understanding among followers that influencers frequently receive compensation for endorsing products or services, these online personalities are still largely regarded as trustworthy figures. This perception of trustworthiness originates from the consistent rapport and credibility influencers have cultivated with their audiences over time (Dahlqvist et al., 2018). Consequently, even when content is sponsored, it retains a perception of authenticity. A significant portion of consumers are inclined to believe that influencers genuinely advocate for the products they endorse.

In their comprehensive review, Lou & Yuan (2019) synthesized findings from various studies to shed light on the intrinsic value of advertising. Through their analysis, they discerned three pivotal dimensions characterizing online advertisements: informational, entertainment, and irritating. The way consumers perceive these advertisement categories directly impacts their subsequent reactions to them. Advertisements emphasizing information prioritize the conveyance of pertinent product or

service specifics, aiming to augment consumer purchase intention. Conversely, advertisements with an entertainment slant captivate their target audience through engrossing content. Both these advertisement approaches stimulate positive cognitive and affective responses in consumers. However, the irritating advertisement category, often viewed as intrusive or manipulative, can detract consumers from their primary objectives or even evoke feelings of annoyance. Such advertisements frequently elicit adverse reactions from consumers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Given the profound connection influencers share with their followers, their content frequently melds the informational and entertainment dimensions harmoniously. Through their experiential reviews and trials of products or services, influencers craft narratives that adeptly provide both, informative insights and entertainment value to their audience.

2.2.3 TRUST IN INFLUENCER MARKETING

Platforms like Instagram, with their capabilities for real-time sharing, have played a crucial role in enabling influencers to cultivate deeper, more personal connections with their followers. Initially, these relationships were characterized by an unquestioning trust from the consumer's side. However, as the digital landscape has evolved, becoming more commercialized and saturated with influencers, a sense of wariness has permeated the consumer base. Questions regarding the authenticity of content have become commonplace: Is this content genuinely organic, or is it a paid promotion? This shift highlights the burgeoning issue of trust in influencers, a critical aspect underscored by Ki et al., (Ki et al. (2022).

To critically evaluate the efficacy of influencer marketing's efficacy, a nuanced understanding of the foundational elements that contribute to the establishment of follower trust. Pertinent literature consistently highlights three seminal dimensions of trust: benevolence, integrity, and competence (Lou & Yuan, 2019a).

Expanding on this, Bora Semiz & Paylan (2023) advocate in their research that "the perception of legitimacy towards influencers positively influences brand trust, which in turn affects consumers' attitudes towards the brand" (Bora Semiz & Paylan, 2023, p.12). Their findings delineate the undeniable influence of an influencer's credibility and the veracity of their content on engendering consumer trust. While cognitive legitimacy does not notably influence brand attitude, other facets of legitimacy demonstrably do.

Recognizing the profound impact influencers wield over consumer behavior, marketers continue to emphasize the importance of leveraging influencers' narratives. This strategy capitalizes on the established credibility influencers have with their audience, aiming to bolster follower engagement with the brands they represent (Alboqami, 2023). In practical terms, this means that if an influencer's message is perceived as lacking in trustworthiness, it is likely to leave their followers unconvinced. In a digital age, information seekers prioritize content that they perceive as unbiased, verifiable, and rooted in concrete facts. If influencers fall short in establishing this level of credibility, their followers might adopt a skeptical stance, becoming resistant to their persuasive attempts (Alboqami, 2023).

2.3 FITNESS INDUSTRY

The health and fitness sector has garnered immense attention in recent years, a trend that was notably amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. As individuals grappled with mental health challenges and adapted to prolonged periods of home confinement, there was a marked surge in online demand for both engaging content and guidance on maintaining an active lifestyle within domestic confines. This shift catalyzed a wave of content creators who eagerly capitalized on this trend, prominently on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. These individuals, ranging from personal trainers offering virtual classes to nutritionists providing dietary advice, shared photos and videos detailing productive at-home routines and wellness tips. In doing so, they leveraged their expertise to influence and assist others during these trying times, showcasing everything from fitness routines to the latest in activewear fashion (Juhlin et al., 2018a).

Such content dissemination presented substantial opportunities, prompting marketers to recognize the mutual benefits accessible to influencers, companies, and consumers alike. Increasingly, individuals embodying a 'fitness lifestyle'—characterized by healthy eating, regular exercise, and a focus on mental well-being—began sharing their journeys through vlogs and photos on social media (Juhlin et al., 2018). Through their shared insights on diet and exercise, they aimed to guide their followers toward achieving their health aspirations. This not only galvanized their audiences, particularly the younger demographic, to emulate such a lifestyle but also presented a prime opportunity for fitness brands. In this landscape, brands within the fitness industry found a golden opportunity to amplify their growth and client acquisition through influencer marketing. By strategically utilizing influencers, they could not only promote products and services but also deliver innovative content to a targeted audience in a relatable and effective manner.

The current climate sees a continuous rise in the number of influencers engaged in the market, a testament to the tangible results yielded by influencer marketing. Concurrently, an increasing populace on social media platforms is willing to collaborate with brands, seeing it as an avenue to both monetize their influence and receive products (Govindan & Alotaibi, 2021). This symbiotic relationship between influencers and brands serves as a driving force in the modern fitness industry, illustrating the transformative power of influencer marketing.

3. OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

This chapter delineates the methodological framework employed in this study, which is twofold: a systematic literature review complemented by a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews. This dual approach was meticulously designed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research question by integrating empirical data with a broad analysis of existing scholarly work. The methodology is grounded in a pragmatic research philosophy, recognizing the value of combining various methodological perspectives to enrich the research findings.

The systematic literature review serves as the cornerstone of this study. It was conducted following a structured protocol to identify, screen, and appraise relevant literature (Santos et al., 2022). This rigorous process ensures an unbiased and reproducible search, leading to the extraction of pertinent data from a body of evidence regarding the strategies adopted by digital influencers. The review aims to map out the existing knowledge, identify gaps in the current literature, and provide a contextual background against which the primary research findings can be evaluated (Paré et al., 2016).

To complement the breadth of the literature review, and to supplement the fitness industry part, in-depth interviews were carried out to deepen the data collected. These interviews offer a rich and descriptive insight into the experiences and opinions of key players in the field, providing a nuanced understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation (Coelho et al., 2018). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select interviewees who have a direct or indirect impact on influencer marketing in the fitness industry, ensuring that the study captures a diverse range of perspectives.

The following sections explain the detailed procedures of the systematic literature review and the qualitative study, describing the specific steps taken in the data collection and analysis phases. The robustness of this combined methodological approach aims to strengthen the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions, ultimately contributing to the existing body of knowledge with empirically grounded insights.

3.1. SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

To comprehend primary strategies in influencer marketing, this research will highlight the diverse definitions and perspectives surrounding the term “Influencer Marketing”. It will also explore research trends, theories, and paradigms that have shaped prior research. Additionally, the study will

delve into the connection between the fitness industry and influencer marketing, emphasizing the strategies employed by influencers on social media platforms.

Following the guidelines proposed by Templier & Paré (2015a), and to ensure transparency and consistency of results, the process consisted of six stages: (1) formulation of the problem, (2) search process, (3) selection based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, (4) quality assessment, (5) data analysis and (6) synthesis of the results obtained from the data.

3.1.1.PROBLEM FORMULATION:

Nine research questions were identified to guide this investigation:

RQ1: How has influencer marketing been conceptualized in the literature?

RQ2: In what contexts has this topic been addressed?

RQ3: What kind of practices are worked in Influencer Marketing?

RQ4: Which methods have been applied in previous studies?

RQ5: What theories have been used to support previous studies?

RQ6: What dimensions have been addressed in influence marketing in previous studies?

RQ7: What strategies are applied in Influencer Marketing?

RQ8: What are the consequences for brands when collaborating with influencers?

RQ9: How has the topic of Influencer Marketing in the fitness industry been explored in existing literature?

3.1.2. SEARCH PROCESS:

A systematic literature review was conducted, starting with an automated keyword search on two prominent electronic databases: Scopus and Web of Science. The progression of the search process can be visualized in Figure 2.

The keywords used in this study were "Influencer Marketing Strateg*" OR "Social Media Influencer Marketing Strateg*" OR "Social Media Marketing Strateg*" OR "Social Media Influencer Strateg*" OR "Digital Influencer Strateg*" OR "Online Influencer Strateg*" OR "Influencer Advertising" OR "Influencer Marketing" OR "Influencer Collaboration". Given the wide range of documents related to

the topic, the search was limited to article titles. This yielded 269 articles from Scopus and 174 from Web of Science, resulting in a total of 443 articles.

Figure 1 illustrates that the prominence of Influencer Marketing began around 2015. Consequently, a time filter was applied to restrict articles from 2015 onward. This refined the pool to 437 articles: 264 from Scopus and 173 from Web of Science.

Figure 1: Marketing de Influência studies evolution



Source: Google Trends, 2023 1

After the application of these filters on the platforms, the research focused on documents classified as articles, reviews, and conference papers. Additionally, only those written in English or Portuguese were considered.

On the Scopus platform, the selected areas encompassed Business, Management, and Accounting; Social Sciences; Computer Science; Economics, Econometrics, and Finance; Medicine; Psychology; Decision Sciences and Multidisciplinary.

For the Web of Science platform, the areas chosen were Management; Business; Communication; Computer Science Information Systems; Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism; Psychology Multidisciplinary; Computer Science Theory Methods; Economics; Telecommunications; Psychology Applied; Public Environmental Occupational Health; Business Finance; Computer Science Artificial Intelligence; Computer Science Interdisciplinary Applications; Education Educational Research; Psychology Experimental Nutrition Dietetics and Robotics.

The initial search gathered a total of 443 articles. The application of a temporal filter, which restricted the selection to articles published from 2015 onwards, brought the count down to 437. Subsequent refinement, based on document type, subject area, and language criteria within the search platforms, resulted in a narrowed pool of 350 articles. To remove duplicates, these articles were imported into Mendeley, a reference management tool, which reduced the collection to 254 unique articles. Due to access constraints for some documents and a meticulous review of abstracts to assess their relevance, the final corpus of articles deemed eligible for this study amounted to 66 articles.

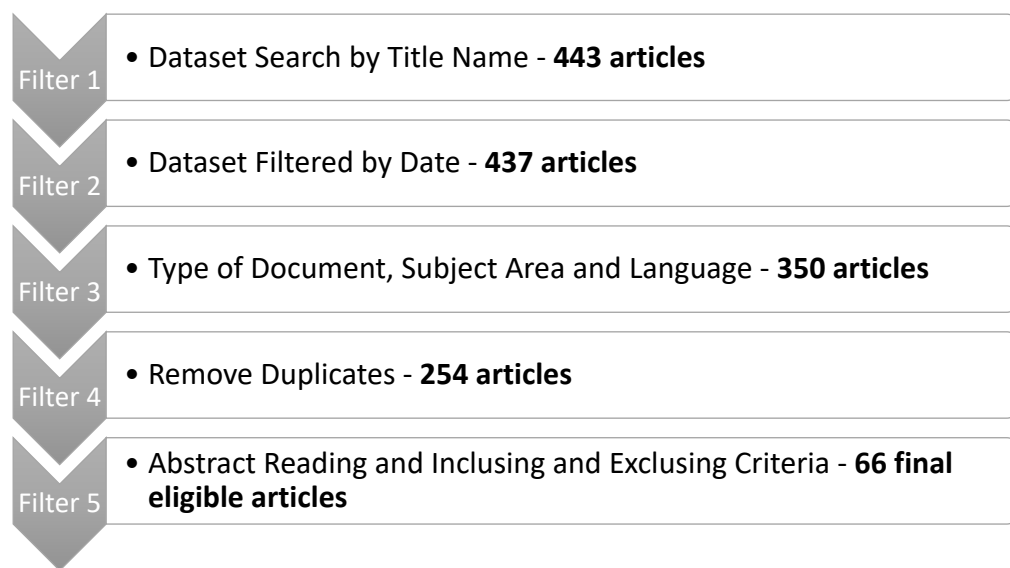


Figure 2: Search Process

3.1.3 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA:

After reviewing the abstracts of the refined articles, specific exclusion criteria were set to align the research more closely with its primary objective: delving into influencer marketing strategies,

To maintain the focus and integrity of the study, certain areas were deliberately excluded. Studies that exclusively examine niche concepts like Avatar Influencer Marketing were omitted. Likewise, research concentrating solely on one gender was set aside, considering the comprehensive gender spectrum of the fitness community. Additionally, studies targeting specific age groups, such as children or maternal communities, as well as those confined to particular countries or regions, were excluded due to potential cultural discrepancies that do not align with the study's core objectives.

Conversely, the research leaned towards articles that addressed influencer marketing strategies, explored consumer purchasing decisions, examined brand partnerships, or analyzed consumer responses to influencer advertising.

This selection ensures that the articles chosen resonate closely with the central theme of this investigation.

3.1.4. QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The quality of sourced documents is ensured by their origin in peer-reviewed journals. The peer-review process validates the reliability and academic integrity of research which justifies the absence of additional quality criteria.

3.1.5. DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, a total of 66 articles were analyzed to obtain the necessary information to address the proposed research questions. Based on the analysis of the most frequently referenced journals, and thus of significant relevance to this research, prominent mentions include the *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, the *Journal of Business Research*, and the *International Journal of Advertising*. Figure 3 further showcases other journals from which two articles each were incorporated into this study.

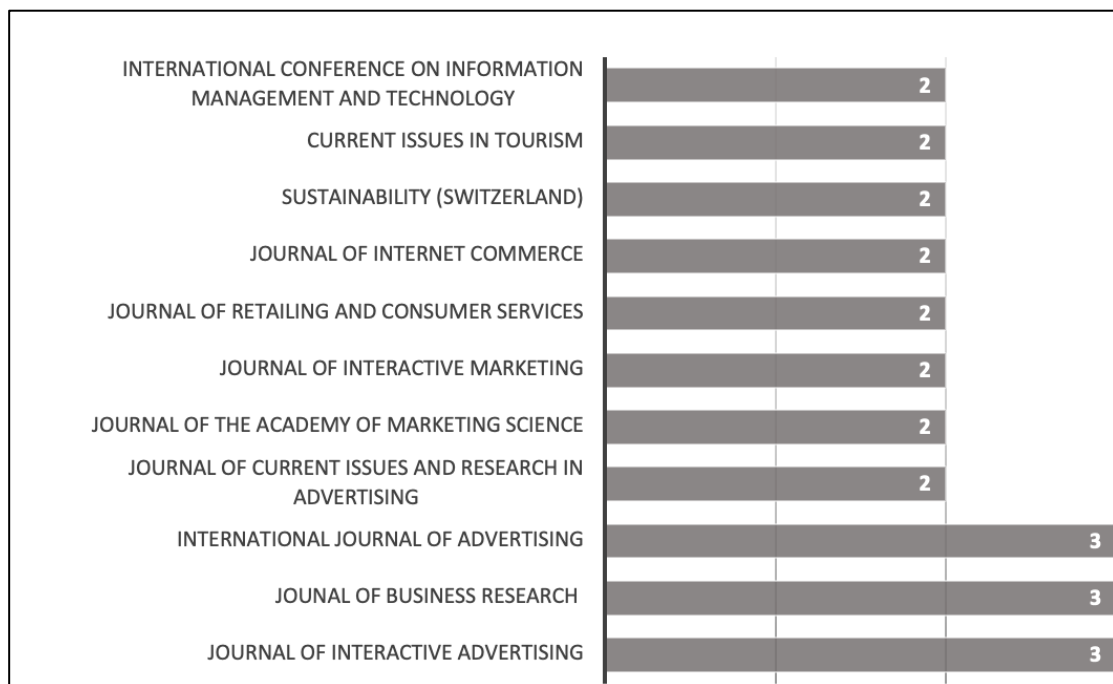


Figure 3: Top journals used

Regarding the publication years, as seen in Figure 4, we observe that the majority of the articles used were published in 2022. This aligns with the observed trend in Figure 1, indicating an increase in the number of studies over the years.

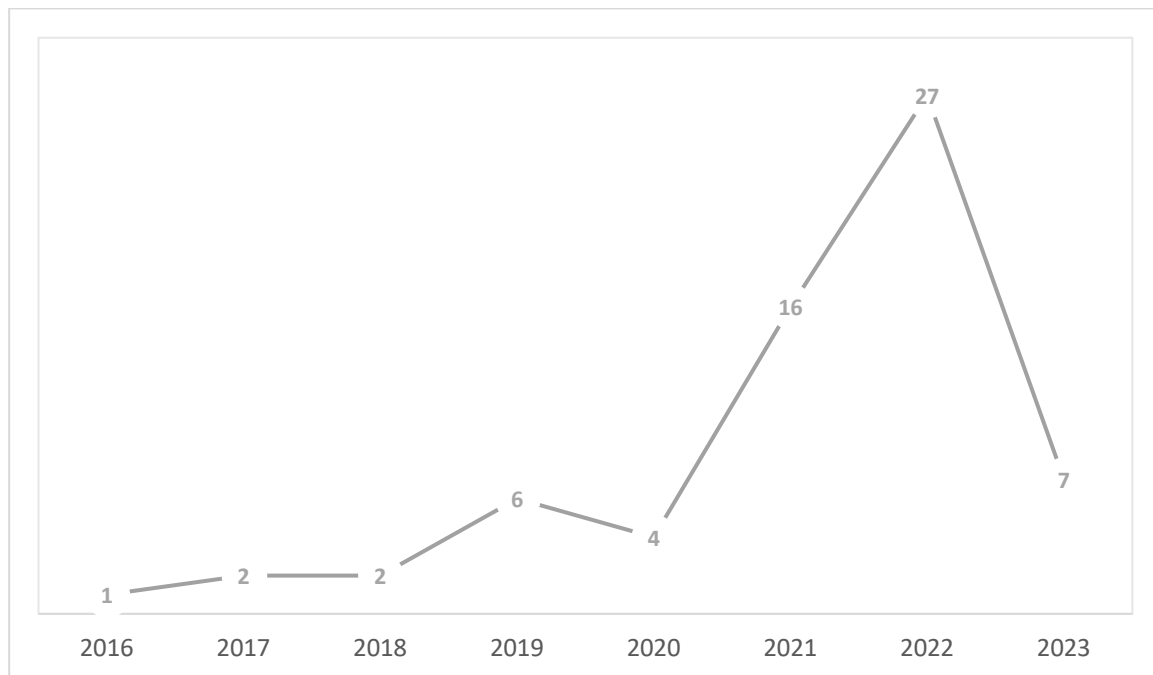


Figure 4: Publication years

3.1.6 RESULTS

RQ1: How has influencer marketing been conceptualized in literature?

The field of influencer marketing has witnessed a dynamic evolution over time, with various studies and researchers offering a range of definitions that hinge upon specific contexts, industries, or the focal points of research (Hudders & Lou, 2023). These influencers, through their symbiotic partnerships with brands, not only co-create content but also cultivate trust and credibility among their followers—effectively swaying opinions and steering consumer behavior (C.-W. ' . Ki et al., 2020).

Several scholars, including Jin et al. (2021), articulate influencer marketing as a strategic collaboration within social media platforms where influencers endorse brands, products, or services to their audience, aiming to boost brand visibility and escalate sales. Additionally, influencer marketing is recognized as a modern iteration of traditional word-of-mouth marketing where consumers often lean on online reviews, product ratings, and personal narratives shared across social networks (Oraedu et al., 2021). In essence, an influencer leverages their digital platforms to mold and sway the perceptions, attitudes, and purchase-related behaviors of their audience by

generating content that is not only authentic but also resonates deeply with their followers (Jansom & Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2021).

From a strategic perspective, certain researchers, including Ki et al. (2020) argue that brands deploy influencers as a tactical communication conduit to enhance the impact and reach of their messaging. This strategic utilization is predicated on establishing credibility and trust as a means to endorse products or services, thereby influencing consumer behavior and driving the intended outcomes (C.-W. ' . Ki et al., 2020).

RQ2: In what contexts has this topic been addressed?

Influencer marketing within social media has been extensively explored and implemented across diverse contexts. This strategic approach has been embraced by businesses and organizations spanning multiple sectors, leveraging its power to captivate and engage target audiences through various social media platforms.

In the realm of fashion and beauty, influencer marketing stands as a pivotal tool for showcasing the latest products and trends. It serves not only as a showcase but also as a source of style inspiration and influence for consumers, guiding them through the dynamic world of fashion (Jansom & Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2021; Jin et al., 2021b; Jin & Muqaddam, 2021; Le & Aydin, 2022; S. Lee & Kim, 2020; Liu, 2022; Rungruangjit & Charoenpornpanichkul, 2022; Sultani & Kahani, 2022)

Within the food and beverage sector, influencer marketing plays a key role in introducing new products, disseminating recipes, and enticing audiences to explore novel dining experiences and establishments (Abell & Biswas, 2023; Coates et al., 2020; De Jans et al., 2021).

The travel industry capitalizes on influencer marketing to highlight exquisite destinations, disseminate valuable travel advice, and promote accommodations and resorts, thereby enhancing the allure of tourism. (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022; Jang et al., 2021; Zhang & Huang, 2022).

In the fitness and wellness sector, this marketing strategy is instrumental in advocating for healthful living, publicizing fitness regimes, and marketing wellness products, contributing to the burgeoning culture of health consciousness.

The technology sphere employs influencer marketing to introduce novel products and services, illustrating their integration and utility in everyday life, thereby bridging the gap between advanced technology and the consumer (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017; Fernando, Ikhsan, et al., 2021; Fernando, Melinda Syahbani, et al., 2021; Surjandy & Agatha, 2022).

Lastly, influencer marketing within the nonprofit sector is increasingly being utilized as a force for good—raising awareness on pressing social issues and rallying support for philanthropic causes, demonstrating the versatility and expansive reach of this modern marketing avenue.

RQ3: What kind of practices are worked in Influencer Marketing?

Influencer marketing, recognized for its multifaceted nature, is dissected in scholarly studies through various prisms such as influencer selection, content creation, audience targeting, and the crucial phases of measurement and analysis (Vrontis et al., 2021a). The process of influencer selection entails meticulous research to pinpoint the most suitable influencer for a specific brand initiative, taking into account elements like the influencer's audience demographics, shared interests, and the depth of user engagement.

Audience targeting is a critical facet that focuses on customizing content to captivate the intended audience. This could involve choosing influencers whose follower base mirrors the brand's target demographic or devising content that resonates with the audience's predilections. Measurement and analysis are about the empirical assessment of a campaign's efficacy, quantifying success via indicators such as engagement rates, overall reach, and sales impact (Vrontis et al., 2021a).

Additional dimensions that are inherently tied to social media platforms include platform selection, follower engagement, metrics, and analytics, the stipulations of partnerships, creative collaboration, as well as ethical considerations and regulatory compliance (Blanchette et al., 2021). Selecting the right platform is a strategic decision that hinges on where the brand's target audience is most active and what the brand's goals are.

Engagement between follower and influencers is engendered through genuine interactions, where influencers engage with their community by responding to comments, answering queries, and fostering dialogue, thereby nurturing a connection that transcends mere followership.

The creation of content is central to influencer marketing, involving a partnership where brands and influencers collaborate to craft content that not only highlights the brand or product but does so in a compelling way. This collaboration is pivotal in ensuring the content's alignment with the brand's messaging, thereby maximizing its relevance and persuasiveness. The resulting content can manifest in diverse formats, including social media updates, video content, blog posts, or articles (Vrontis et al., 2021b).

Given that influencers engage with their audience predominantly through content, the role of metrics is crucial in conceptualizing the efficacy of influencer marketing. These metrics enable brands to gauge a campaign's success through various indicators such as engagement rates, reach, impressions, conversions, brand mentions, and the return on investment (ROI).

Lastly, the terms of the partnership ought to be unambiguously established, encompassing aspects like compensation, ownership of content, and adherence to disclosure requirements, including exclusivity and campaign timelines (Belanche et al., 2021).

- **RQ4: Which methods have been applied in previous studies?**

Following a systematic literature review on the topic, this study has identified a variety of methodologies employed to examine the multifarious dimensions of influencer marketing. The predominant approach, as evidenced in works by Assimakopoulos et al. (2017), Beckert & Naderer (2023), Jandrokovic et al. (2022), Theocharis & Papaioannou (2020), and Wu et al. (2020), has been the utilization of surveys. These surveys, administered both online and face-to-face, sought to amass quantitative data concerning consumer perceptions and behaviors about influencer marketing, engaging substantial participant samples for a broad data scope.

In the domain of quantitative research, experimental designs are frequently leveraged to assess the efficacy of various influencer marketing tactics or to juxtapose influencer marketing with alternate marketing modalities. Such methodologies involve the deliberate alteration of one or more independent variables to observe the resultant impact on a dependent variable, as demonstrated in the research by Barta et al. (2021), Holiday et al. (2021), Stubb et al. (2019) and Sundermann & Munnukka (2022).

Complementing these quantitative approaches, qualitative research via interviews has been conducted, as seen in the studies by Coco & Eckert (2020), Konstantopoulou et al. (2019), and Leung et al. (2022), facilitating the procurement of detailed perspectives from consumers, influencers, or brand representatives regarding their personal experiences with influencer marketing.

Content analysis emerges as another valuable research approach, wherein social media posts, videos, and other influencer marketing materials are scrutinized to extrapolate themes, trends, and patterns. Employed by researchers such as Rocha et al. (2019), this technique is instrumental in decoding the content creation and messaging tactics of both influencers and brands.

Lastly, the case study method, a qualitative form of inquiry, has been represented in the scholarly contributions of Arnesson (2022), Ortová et al. (2023), and Rohde & Mau (2021). This in-depth exploratory strategy, which can incorporate interviews, observations, document reviews, and occasionally focus groups, offers a comprehensive understanding of specific brands, influencers, or marketing campaigns, shedding light on their distinctive strategies, the challenges encountered, and the resultant outcomes.

- **RQ5: What theories have been used to support previous studies?**

The scholarly examination of influencer marketing has incorporated several theoretical frameworks to substantiate research findings. Commonly invoked theories in these studies include:

- **Social Influence Theory:** This posits that individuals are shaped by the influence of those around them, affecting their attitudes, behaviors, and decisions. Within influencer marketing, this theory posits that consumers are inclined to be swayed by influencers whom they deem trustworthy, credible, and relatable, echoing the characteristics or preferences of the consumers themselves (H. J. Kim & Chan-Olmsted, 2022).
- **Social Identity Theory:** This theory holds that people form aspects of their self-concept based on their affiliation with various social collectives, such as ethnicity, gender, or shared interests. Translated to influencer marketing, it implies that consumers are more susceptible to influence by personalities who embody their own social identities or represent the social groups they aspire to join (Farivar & Wang, 2022).
- **Information Processing Theory:** According to this theory, how individuals assimilate information is influenced by their cognitive capacities, level of motivation, and the focus of their attention. In the sphere of influencer marketing, it suggests that consumers are more likely to engage with content that is pertinent, engaging, and comprehensible, facilitating a smoother information processing journey (Lou & Yuan, 2019b).
- **Source Credibility Theory:** This theory asserts that the persuasiveness of a message is significantly tied to the perceived credibility of the source. In the realm of influencer marketing, it suggests that influencers who are perceived as knowledgeable and authoritative in their niche are more effective in engaging with and influencing their audience (Dhun & Dangi, 2022).

- **RQ6: What dimensions have been addressed in Influencer Marketing in previous studies?**

Understanding the multifaceted nature of influencer marketing requires delving into several key dimensions.

Credibility stands out as a central dimension, often highlighted for its significance. It is gauged through consumers' perceptions of the influencer's expertise and authority as a source of information (Shamim & Islam, 2022). Influencers deemed highly credible are more likely to exert influence over their audience, shaping positive attitudes and behaviors towards the brands or products they promote. When followers regard an influencer as credible, it bolsters trust, engagement, and the intent to purchase (Koay et al., 2022).

Trustworthiness is another pivotal dimension, as it profoundly affects the perceived credibility and overall effectiveness of influencers (Saima & Khan, 2020a). Studies within this domain scrutinize elements that forge trust between influencers and their followers, such as authenticity, transparency, reliability, and consistency. Authenticity and trust are closely intertwined; consumers generally trust recommendations they perceive as genuine. This sense of trust is fortified when the audience senses sincerity from the influencer and perceives their actions and content as transparent. Transparency is characterized by influencers' openness about their brand collaborations, sponsorships, and any potential conflicts of interest (Balaban et al., 2022; Karagür et al., 2022b). Expertise and knowledge also play a vital role; influencers showcasing specialized knowledge in a particular area are deemed more trustworthy (Masuda et al., 2022). Moreover, influencers who deliver consistent, high-quality content that aligns with their personal and brand values tend to garner trust from their audience (Rohde & Mau, 2021). A personal connection with followers, achieved through interactive communication and community-building efforts, further cements this trust (Rungruangjit & Charoenpornpanichkul, 2022).

The dimension of source attractiveness evaluates the impact of influencers' physical appeal, likability, and relatability (Masuda et al., 2022). It assesses how these attributes affect consumer perceptions and behaviors. Influencers who are considered physically attractive are often found to be more persuasive, capturing attention and leaving a positive impression (C. W. Ki et al., 2022b). Additionally, influencers who share common interests, values, or demographics with their followers create a sense of connection and familiarity, making them more compelling to their audience.

The dimension of social influence examines the extent to which influencers mold consumer behavior and purchasing decisions. It considers the mechanisms of influence, such as identification and social proof. Identification occurs when individuals align themselves with an influencer, aspiring to emulate

their characteristics or lifestyle (J. K. Lee, 2021). This alignment leads followers to adopt similar opinions, values, and behaviors (Masuda et al., 2022). Social proof, on the other hand, suggests that people are inclined to emulate the actions of others, particularly when those actions are endorsed by influencers they respect. This can manifest when influencers share positive experiences or endorse products, thereby creating an impression of social endorsement that can influence the behavior of their followers (Rohde & Mau, 2021).

- **RQ7: What strategies are used in Influencer Marketing?**

The social media landscape has been shaped by evolving market trends and strategies in Influencer Marketing. A systematic analysis reveals a spectrum of strategies that brands can employ:

1. **Sponsored Posts:** Brands often collaborate with influencers by compensating them to create content that promotes their products or services. Typically, influencers are given guidelines or key messages to integrate, along with the creative liberty to craft content that highlights the brand's offerings. This may include sponsored posts, product review videos, or blog articles elucidating the advantages of a brand or product. Such content harnesses the influencer's reach, fostering brand exposure and potentially boosting sales (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022);
2. **Product Reviews:** Influencers, upon receiving products, test them and provide candid feedback, offering recommendations based on their experiences. By focusing on the benefits or distinctive features, this approach cultivates public trust, as the audience values the perceived objectivity of the influencer. Product reviews are particularly potent in sectors like beauty, fashion, and technology, where consumer decisions are influenced by the credibility of the influencer's insights (Bahtar & Muda, 2016);
3. **Storytelling:** An effective narrative can enable influencers to build trust, forge connections, and endorse products or services. By sharing personal experiences, challenges, and achievements, influencers can create emotional resonance with their audience, which can be both relatable and inspiring. Through storytelling, influencers can also demonstrate how certain products or services have been integral to their narratives, enhancing the authenticity of their endorsements. This technique is especially valuable for fitness influencers aiming to educate and motivate their followers (Laurell & Söderman, 2018).

4. **Influencer Takeovers:** By allowing influencers to assume control of their social media accounts temporarily, brands offer a novel perspective to their audience. These takeovers can inject fresh content into the brand's channels, heighten engagement, and attract new followers (Penttinen, 2023).
5. **Influencer Collaboration:** Co-creating content, products, or campaigns with influencers can yield a partnership that resonates with the values and aesthetic of both the brand and the influencer. These collaborations can enhance brand visibility and generate mutual revenue, especially since followers often place high value on influencers' recommendations (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022);
6. **Giveaways and Contests:** Engaging influencers to host giveaways or contests can invigorate brand engagement. Participants typically engage with the brand's social media platforms as part of the contest, which can amplify brand recognition and potentially lead to increased conversions (McCullough, 2020);
7. **Influencer Events and Experiences:** Brands can invite influencers to events or experiences, from product launches to exclusive brand-sponsored trips. Influencers sharing these experiences can generate buzz and elevate brand awareness through their reach and influence, fulfilling various marketing and media objectives (Mikus, 2018);
8. **Affiliate marketing:** This strategy creates a symbiotic relationship where influencers earn a commission on sales made through their unique affiliate links or codes. This arrangement provides influencers with a financial incentive to promote the brand and allows brands to compensate based on actual sales, optimizing marketing expenditures (McCullough, 2020; Silvia, 2019)

- **RQ8: What are the consequences for brands when collaborating with influencers?**

Collaborations between brands and influencers come with a spectrum of potential outcomes, encompassing both rewards and risks. Engaging with influencers can enhance consumer purchase intentions, particularly when there is a strong alignment between the influencer's following and the brand's target market (Nguyen et al., 2022). The lure for brands lies in the opportunity to tap into vast new audiences, magnifying brand recognition through the influencer's captivating content, which can stimulate conversations and engagement among their followers.

Influencers, with their authentic approach and distinctive content creation, can offer fresh perspectives that might be beyond the traditional scope of brand-conceived marketing. This not only maintains the brand's resonance with consumers but can also foster brand loyalty.

Nonetheless, the distinction between genuine advocacy and perceived contrivance is subtle. If endorsements come across as forced or insincere, followers may become skeptical, potentially diminishing their intent to purchase. Brands must also navigate the pitfalls of influencers who may be seen as overly promotional due to numerous brand partnerships, which can dilute the perceived authenticity of their endorsements. Such scenarios can erode the trust that followers place in both the influencer and the brands they represent (Beckert & Naderer, 2023).

The congruence of values between an influencer and a brand can solidify the followers' connection to the brand, engendering trust and a communal sentiment (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, a misalignment of values can alienate the audience. Moreover, any adverse events involving influencers can inadvertently tarnish the brand's image, necessitating adept management of public relations.

While influencers can significantly boost a brand's profile, the risk of saturating the audience with excessive promotion remains. For brands, the challenge is to ensure that partnerships are perceived as genuine and not merely transactional to safeguard their reputation (Beckert & Naderer, 2023).

Ultimately, while effective influencer campaigns can result in considerable returns on investment, particularly in terms of sales and brand engagement, success is not guaranteed. Brands may face obstacles such as value misalignment, audience skepticism, or financial shortfall if partnerships lack strategic direction or proper execution. Hence, meticulous planning, transparent communication, and authentic engagement are essential ingredients for a fruitful brand-influencer partnership.

- **RQ9: How has the topic of Influencer Marketing in the fitness industry been explored in existing literature?**

The synergy between the fitness industry and influencer marketing has fostered a mutually beneficial relationship, rendering fitness one of the most adept sectors in capitalizing on influencer marketing to amplify product and service promotion (Kim & Kim, 2021). Fitness influencers, typically athletes or individuals with substantial social media followings and expertise in fitness and wellness, have ascended to prominence and wield considerable influence within the industry (Janssen et al., 2022). Utilizing platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, they share their workout routines, fitness advice, and health-centric lifestyles, significantly influencing consumer behavior and setting industry trends (Tschirpigg, 2020).

Fitness brands have tapped into the potential of these influencers, who command sizeable and engaged audiences that trust and value their recommendations. These influencers frequently post sponsored content or product reviews, covering a spectrum of items including workout apparel, supplements, fitness equipment, and wellness plans (Bektas, 2021). They also curate fitness-centric content, narrate their fitness journeys, offer workout tutorials, and disseminate personal insights and advice (Tschirpigg, 2020). Through these collaborations, brands gain access to an influencer's loyal following and benefit from the credibility and rapport influencers have cultivated.

This evolving relationship has revolutionized fitness brand marketing strategies and their engagement with target audiences. Fitness influencers provide an authentic avenue for brands to reach potential customers, leveraging their expertise and influence (Janssen et al., 2022).

Furthermore, fitness influencers implement several engagement strategies to promote products and services. They often initiate fitness challenges or workout programs that invite follower participation, setting specific exercises, routines, or objectives that foster engagement and community involvement. Additionally, by sharing workout content, training tips, and exercise demonstrations, they position themselves as credible authorities, offering valuable information to their audience.

Product endorsements are a cornerstone of influencer marketing within the fitness realm. Influencers advocate for fitness-related products such as attire, supplements, and equipment, often incorporating these products into broader content themes like nutrition and healthful recipes (Bektas, 2021; Janssen et al., 2022). By presenting healthy eating plans and dietary advice, they illuminate the advantages of particular products, guiding their followers toward informed health and lifestyle choices (Bektas, 2021).

Narratives of transformation are also integral, as influencers document their own or their followers' fitness progressions, underscoring physical, health, and well-being enhancements. These transformative tales, replete with before-and-after visuals, progress markers, and introspective reflections, serve to inspire and motivate their audience.

Moreover, affiliate marketing is prevalent in this sector. Fitness influencers generate revenue through discount codes or affiliate links, providing a financial incentive for their followers to make purchases and simultaneously supporting the influencers' endeavors (Syrdal et al., 2023).

These diverse strategies are pivotal to the dynamic interplay between fitness brands and their ability to effectively market their offerings and forge connections with their intended demographic.

Article	Influencer Dimensions	Consequences for Brands	Marketing Strategies
“Influencer Marketing collaborations between sports supplement brands and social influencers” (Bektas, 2021)	Authentic communication Credibility Trust Expertise Brand loyalty Knowledge transfer Positive communication Alignment of values	Investment in human resources Improved authenticity Credibility in communication Alignment of values Increased brand awareness Consumer confidence	Single payments Affiliate Links Product Reviews Discount Codes Free products/services Regular supply of supplements
“Influencer Marketing and its Impact on Consumer Behavior – Instagram Influencer in the Fitness Industry” (Tschirpigg, 2020)	Collaboration Content sharing Co-creation with brands	Increased audience reach Brand awareness Impact on brand image (positive or negative depending on execution)	Takeovers Competitions and Giveaways Membership Storytelling SEO improvements
“Rise of Social Media Influencers as a New Marketing Channel: Focusing on the Roles of Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Social Responsibility among Consumers” (J. Kim & Kim, 2022)	Frequent interaction Self-disclosure Perceived friendship Trust Loyalty Involvement Authenticity	Loyalty Perceived social responsibility Trust	Entertaining content to enhance the psychological well-being of consumers Promote perceived friendship and psychological well-being through frequent and authentic interactions Focus on social responsibility

"Influencer advertising on Instagram: Product – influencer fit and number of followers affect advertising outcomes and influencer evaluations via credibility and identification" (Janssen et al., 2022)	Product - influencer - number of followers fit Effective "micro-celebrity" influencers in brand advertising	Influencer endorsement effectiveness is influenced by product compatibility and number of followers Influencers more effective than celebrities Credibility e identificação	Product Offer Exploring the impact of influencer interaction and perceived likeability
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Tabela 1: Synthesis of Articles About the Fitness Industry

3.2. QUALITATIVE STUDY

A qualitative analysis was conducted through interviews with influencers in the fitness industry to gather critical and contextualized insights necessary for a better understanding of the dynamics of influencer marketing in this sector. This method is central to capturing the complexity and depth of individual experiences and perceptions, providing a detailed understanding of their motivations and strategies, and offering a more practical viewpoint to the research.

3.2.1. DATA COLLECTION FOR INTERVIEWS

The data collection for this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for the exploration of participants' perspectives on the subject of Influencer Marketing in the fitness industry. This qualitative method was carried out as a flexible conversation, where the interviewees could freely express themselves, addressing all relevant topics related to the research questions.

The selection of participants was intentionally made based on their relevance in the fitness industry as influencers and their potential to provide rich and diverse insights on the subject. The saturation of information was evaluated to determine the point at which no new information or themes emerged (Coelho et al., 2018), which served to establish the sufficiency of the sample size, resulting in a total of 15 interviews.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes each. To transcribe everything accurately and with the participants' consent, these interviews were scheduled at their convenience and conducted via Zoom to record the conversation.

The in-depth interviews conducted for this study provided a nuanced understanding of the research topic, contributing to a comprehensive analysis of the phenomena under investigation.

Interview	Current position	Online Presence	Starting Year	Total Number of Followers
1	Influencer fitness with a different career	Instagram & TikTok	2022	41k
2	Influencer and personal trainer	Instagram & TikTok	2021	65k
3	Influencer, sports student, and member of a fire station	Instagram & TikTok	2021	45k
4	Influencer and personal trainer	Instagram, TikTok & YouTube	2020	30k
5	Influencer & Calisthenics Athlete	Instagram & TikTok	2019	49k
6	Influencer fitness with a different career	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube & Twitch	2021	214k
7	Influencer Fitness with a Different Career	Instagram & TikTok	2020	102k
8	Influencer and Personal Trainer	Instagram	2020	172k
9	Influencer and Personal Trainer	Instagram, TikTok & YouTube	2021	83k
10	Influencer and Personal Trainer	Instagram	2018	124k
11	Influencer and Personal Trainer	Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest & YouTube	2018	84k
12	Influencer and Personal Trainer	Instagram & YouTube	2019	32k
13	Influencer Fitness with a Different Career	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube & Twitch	2021	20k
14	Influencer Fitness with a different field of study	Instagram & TikTok	2021	28k
15	Influencer Fitness with a Different Career	Instagram & TikTok	2020	57k

Tabela 2: Information from Interviewees

3.2.2. SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

The interview script was formulated based on the findings of the systematic literature review to ensure consistency across the interviews, with open-ended questions tailored to procure comprehensive narratives. It aimed to explore the beginnings of each influencer's journey within the fitness domain, examining their professional qualifications, academic grounding, and experiential insights. The guide was also designed to juxtapose the prevailing dynamics of influencer marketing in the fitness sector with other industries and its evolution in an international context.

The guide's architecture was established to facilitate an in-depth examination of influencers' content creation tenure, platform preferences, and most effective strategies for engaging with their audiences. It explored influencers' selection criteria for brand partnerships, the range of marketing strategies employed, and the resulting effectiveness in terms of converting followers into consumers. It also sought to uncover the range of challenges faced by influencers in this niche, including the communication hurdles they face.

In addition, the script looked at the perception of influencers' brand partnerships from their audience's perspective, questioning the authenticity and transparency of their endorsements and the resulting impact on consumer trust and influencer credibility.

Finally, the script assessed the implications of such brand collaborations for the companies involved and encouraged the influencers to reflect on the future development of influencer marketing within the fitness industry.

3.2.3 DATA ANALYSIS:

The data collected from the interviews underwent a careful process of analysis to distill key insights and effectively address the research questions. To ensure the integrity of participants' responses, each interview was transcribed verbatim. This thorough transcription provided a robust basis for the subsequent analysis (Fawcett et al., 2014).

Analysis of the responses highlighted key phrases and contexts of discussion to facilitate comparison and a better understanding of the convergences and divergences in influencers' experiences and perceptions.

Accuracy and fidelity to participants' intended meanings were paramount, so interpretations and emergent themes were validated by cross-checking with participants. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the analysis process, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for the influencers' perspectives, thereby maintaining the scientific integrity of the research (Fawcett et al., 2014).

3.2.4 RESULTS

- **Why did you think you had a place as an influencer in the fitness industry?**

The analysis of responses revealed a spectrum of motivations and reasons for influencers entering the field. The prevailing sentiment among the majority was that their journey as an influencer was not premeditated. Rather, they were inspired by others and started to post content without any expectation. Some of them identified a gap in the Portuguese market for fitness content—a niche they felt compelled to fill to promote healthier lifestyles and combat prevalent issues such as cardiovascular disease and obesity. This organic approach enabled these persons to share their journeys and inspire those in the early stages of their own, seizing the opportunity to offer unique and relevant content.

For some participants, entering the fitness industry was also intertwined with personal growth and professional development. While some embraced content creation as a way to explore their passion for sport and fitness, others saw it as a way to further their existing careers. Many of these individuals were already fitness professionals sharing their expertise, while others pursued formal qualifications in response to market demand, recognizing the opportunity to share their knowledge and expertise to help followers on their journeys and potentially convert them into customers.

A subset of fitness influencers with careers in diverse fields chose to enter the industry to demonstrate the feasibility of a balanced and active lifestyle and to support and connect with a community seeking guidance and motivation. They believed there was room for anyone who could create an authentic connection with their audience, setting themselves apart from those who simply showcased an impressive physique.

These influencers shared a common desire to make a positive social impact by helping people improve their lives through fitness. They wanted to inspire change in those who felt unmotivated, whether they wanted to lose weight, gain weight, or adopt a healthier lifestyle. Thus, they recognized their influential role as crucial in guiding those unable to afford professional advice.

- **How do you see the current state of influencer marketing in the fitness industry compared with other sectors?**

The insights gathered revealed a spectrum of observations and concerns from the influencers interviewed.

A recurring observation was the perception that some brands are taking a scattergun approach to influencer marketing in the fitness industry. Interviewees emphasized the need for more discerning

influencer selection, noting that the quality of partnerships outweighed their quantity. It was felt that the lack of rigorous criteria has led to an oversaturation of influencers, undermining those who are genuinely committed to supporting and working with brands.

Concerns were also raised about the tendency of some brands to select influencers solely based on follower numbers, disregarding the influencer's alignment with the brand's content and ethos. This practice, as noted by some influencers, could be detrimental to brand credibility, particularly if influencers with no fitness-related content were selected to represent fitness-related products or services.

In particular, there was a consensus that there was no brand in Portugal that respondents felt accurately represented the fitness sector. They emphasized the importance of authentic and relevant representation of the sector, rather than a superficial approach that chases fleeting trends.

- **How do you see the current state of influencer marketing in the fitness industry compared with other countries?**

When compared to international markets, influencers observed significant differences in brand investment and approach. Abroad, brands tend to invest more heavily in influencers, recognizing their influence within their communities and using more strategic methods to build long-term relationships. Conversely, some Portuguese brands were seen as less focused and strategic, often working across categories rather than focusing specifically on fitness.

Several influencers pointed out that few brands invest in influencers with smaller followings, resulting in the acceptance of lower compensation offers, allowing brands to capitalize on this dynamic.

In addition, respondents highlighted that the influencer market is still in its infancy in the Portuguese fitness sector, with much progress still to be made in recognizing the market significance of fitness influencers. It was suggested that brands could engage more actively with influencers to promote higher quality and more authentic content.

In Portugal, the market is comparatively smaller, with few brands supporting influencers, leading to the observation that it is more difficult for fitness influencers to rely solely on brand partnerships for income. As a result, influencers are diversifying their content into other areas due to the limited opportunities within the fitness niche alone. This contrasts with other countries where fitness influencers can dedicate themselves entirely to the field.

Overall, the responses indicate that Portugal is at a less mature stage in influencer marketing within the fitness industry compared to other countries where the recognition and representation of influencers are more pronounced. Influencers expressed frustration at the lack of recognition and value given to Portuguese brands, in contrast to the recognition given to their international counterparts.

- **On which platform do you think you will be able to build a better relationship with your followers?**

When asked which platform offered the best opportunity for influencers to cultivate a strong relationship with their followers, Instagram was prominently mentioned as the best place to build meaningful connections.

Influencers emphasized that while TikTok is effective for organically reaching a broader and more diverse audience, Instagram is perceived as the platform where follower loyalty and engagement are most pronounced. This is attributed to Instagram's features that facilitate deeper interactions, such as stories and direct messages (DMs), which foster greater affinity between followers and content, as well as a sense of closeness to the creator.

However, some influencers also praised TikTok as a valuable conduit for authentic connections, noting that the platform encourages a more relaxed and authentic presentation in videos. Live sessions on TikTok were highlighted as an opportunity for followers to engage with the more authentic sides of influencers. However, it was acknowledged that TikTok's format of short videos has inherent limitations in conveying the full range of an influencer's personality.

It was also noted that TikTok's algorithm plays a crucial role in distributing content to a wider, more diverse audience. However, this broad reach can also make it difficult to establish a consistent connection with followers, as the platform often exposes content to a random audience.

In addition, some influencers pointed to YouTube as a platform conducive to forming deeper connections due to its longer-form videos, which allow for more in-depth exploration of topics and more detailed communication.

In summary, the findings highlight that the optimal platform for engaging with followers depends on the personal preferences of the influencer and the characteristics of their target audience. Instagram

was consistently recognized for facilitating personal interactions, while TikTok was recognized for its extensive reach. Each platform offers unique benefits and challenges, prompting influencers to tailor their strategies to their individual needs and goals.

- **When collaborating with brands, what marketing strategies have you used and found most effective?**

Influencers provided a wealth of insight into what they've found most effective in their unique contexts.

Events: Many influencers noted that hosting events is a powerful brand promotion strategy. Not only do events increase brand visibility, but they also strengthen the bond between brand partners and influencers. This direct engagement with the brand and other influencers can encourage ongoing brand advocacy and, as a result, drive sales.

Giveaways: While some influencers acknowledged that giveaways can be instrumental in gaining visibility, there were concerns that overuse or lack of proper targeting could attract followers more interested in free items than genuine engagement with the content and brand. To achieve long-term conversions, it is crucial to ensure that participants have a sincere connection with the brand, beyond the allure of the giveaway.

Reviews: Influencers emphasized that reviews are most effective when there is a foundation of trust between them and their followers. Authenticity is key; if followers perceive that an influencer is endorsing a product or service solely for financial gain, the strategy may fail. Conversely, when influencers share their genuine appreciation for products they use and endorse, it can have a positive impact on their followers' perceptions and behaviors.

Storytelling and personal transformation: Strategies involving storytelling and personal transformation narratives were cited as highly persuasive, especially when promoting services. Influencers found that interweaving storytelling with product reviews by relating items to real-life situations or everyday occurrences fostered deeper identification with followers. This creates an emotional connection and increases the credibility of the review, making it easier to move from interest to purchase.

Paid posts: Some influencers indicated that paid advertising is not a common strategy in the fitness industry, as followers may be skeptical of paid endorsements. Such strategies tend to

be more effective when there is a long-standing relationship and trust between the influencer and their audience, ensuring that recommendations are seen as genuine.

Affiliate marketing: Influencers considered affiliate marketing to be very beneficial, especially for brands, as influencers typically earn modest commissions while the brand receives valuable advertising and sales. Some influencers noted that any investment in influencers in Portugal tends to be profitable, as many emerging influencers are willing to accept less favorable offers or terms due to limited competition. This can create a pattern of reduced costs that is attractive to brands.

From an influencer's perspective, this marketing strategy is useful for evaluating product or service performance and creating targeted content. Being associated with a brand can enhance an influencer's credibility, especially if the relationship is successful and the influencer is endorsing products or services that they truly value. Affiliate marketing was recognized as an effective means of converting followers into customers, with influencers able to track how many followers make purchases using their affiliate codes, benefiting both the brand and the influencer.

However, they emphasized the importance of having the freedom to promote products or services. When brands allow influencers to promote in a way that is authentic and relevant to their audience, the strategy is more effective.

- **What are the biggest challenges for you as an influencer in this industry?**

Influencers shared some challenges they face in their careers. These challenges include the need to create quality content recognizing that poorly crafted or low-effort content is noticed by audiences and can damage trust and credibility. This forces them to invest time and effort in creating valuable content, which can be difficult to balance with work study, and other commitments.

In addition, there is constant pressure to innovate and produce consistent results, as engaging content must be created to keep followers interested. Creating content in Portuguese can limit international visibility and collaboration with foreign brands, posing a challenge for influencers looking to expand their global presence and grow on social media platforms.

Communicating effectively with audiences is challenging as well, especially amid misinformation surrounding health and fitness topics. Influencers need to be able to debunk false information, which can be difficult given the sheer volume of content available on social media.

Respondents reported that originality and creativity are also challenges in their efforts to stand out. Several accounts touched on the unpredictability of social media platforms' algorithms, which are perceived as volatile and constantly changing, making it difficult for influencers to understand what will work in terms of reach and engagement.

Inconsistent income is a concern as well. They struggle to earn enough from brand partnerships and often need to supplement their income with other jobs.

- **In your opinion, what is people's perception of your relationship with brands?**

Answering this question, influencers emphasized the importance of authenticity and transparency in their relationships with brands. They claim that followers place greater trust in their recommendations when they sense that the influencer is sincere and open. Followers appreciate influencers who are not afraid to share their true experiences, even if it may result in negative feedback.

Many influencers pointed out that trust is not an attribute that can be acquired instantly. It is believed that a robust relationship with followers needs to be cultivated over time. This includes sharing authentic and relevant content before pursuing brand partnerships. Followers are more likely to trust influencers with whom they were familiar before they started endorsing products.

It was also recognized that an overload of advertising could damage followers' perceptions of an influencer's relationship with brands. Excessive advertising or partnerships with multiple brands can lead followers to question the authenticity of the influencer and see them as simply "selling products". For this reason, some influencers stressed the importance of aligning themselves with brands that genuinely resonate with them. They believe that by being selective and only promoting products and services that they use and recommend, their followers are more likely to trust their recommendations.

- **In your opinion, what are the consequences of these partnerships for the brands?**

When asked about the impact of these partnerships on brands, respondents emphasized the positive aspects.

"Influencers play a role in humanizing brands" (Interview 9). They add an authentic face to the brand, which can help followers identify with the brand more, thereby increasing trust. If an influencer endorses a product or service, followers are likely to trust their opinion and be more inclined to buy

from the brand. Furthermore, if followers have a positive experience with the promoted products, they may develop brand loyalty and become repeat customers.

Many influencers also believe that partnerships offer brands an effective form of advertising at a lower cost than traditional advertising. Brands can reach a broader and more targeted audience through influencers at a lower cost than investing in traditional media advertising.

On the more cautious side, some respondents stressed the importance of choosing the right type of influencer, as associating with influencers who do not share a brand's values or ethics can damage its image. Brands need to strike a balance between the profit motive and maintaining their reputation and values. Influencer partnerships should be strategic and aligned with the brand's vision and ethics.

- **In your opinion, what will be the future of influencer marketing in the fitness industry?**

Regarding the prospects of influencer marketing within the fitness sector, there was a consensus among the respondents, except the first. This particular interviewee expressed concerns about potential market saturation in the fitness influencer sector. They were concerned about the growing volume of content and partnerships that could lead to an over-saturated market. Such a scenario, he fears, could pose significant challenges for new influencers trying to enter the market and could lead to a stagnation in the dynamics of influencer marketing in the future.

The remaining responses suggested that influencers who invest in creating quality content will continue to thrive as audiences become more demanding. This could include a move away from partnerships for one-off paid posts in favor of longer, more in-depth collaborations with brands. Several influencers expressed a desire to be seen by brands in the same light as influencers in other areas, such as fashion and beauty, but feel there is still a long way to go in terms of changing perceptions and gaining recognition from brands. However, they believe that brands will increasingly recognize the value of partnering with fitness influencers, especially as traditional advertising declines and social media becomes the dominant marketing platform.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the theoretical aspects from the systematic literature review and juxtaposing them with the empirical component through perceptions and experiences gathered from interviews with influencers in the fitness industry, an in-depth understanding of the current landscape of influencer marketing in Portugal and its main strategies can be achieved.

It is noticeable that the vast majority of the influencers interviewed started creating content for social networks relatively recently, within an average period of 3 years, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a greater awareness of a more active and healthy lifestyle among the population.

There is an alignment between the literature review and the interview responses where the relationship between influencers and brands is highlighted. The perception that authenticity and transparency (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Karagür et al., 2022a; Saima & Khan, 2020b) are fundamental to building trust between influencers and followers reiterates the importance of these concepts in the practice of influencer marketing.

The interview emphasizes the need for alignment between the brand's values and those of the influencer, supporting the idea that the effectiveness of partnerships depends on context and relevance to the target audience. This strategic alignment is critical for brands seeking authentic and impactful collaborations.

The literature review identifies key practices such as influencer selection, content creation, and performance analysis (Vrontis et al., 2021a). The interviews reflect these practices, with influencers discussing the effectiveness of different strategies to engage followers. The congruence between theory and practice highlights the complexity of influencer marketing and the need for a careful approach.

Brands need to evaluate an influencer beyond the number of followers. They analyze the level of engagement a particular influencer has with their community and understand whether they will be a good channel for selling or promoting a product or a service. A smaller but highly engaged community can lead to far more sales than just a large number of followers. For example, a brand that wants to stand out in the fitness community for its fitness-related products or services should be

associated with fitness influencers and athletes, even if it is attractive to be associated with a non-fitness celebrity just for the potential reach. Mainly for ethical reasons, to be consistent, and to increase brand trust and credibility.

In terms of the strategies itself, paid posts, and product reviews, both literature and interviews highlight that these are powerful forms of advertising. The literature suggests that posts should be aligned with the brand's key messages (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022), with influencers agreeing as long as they are given creative freedom. Interviews also emphasize the need for trust and authenticity in product reviews. Both sources agree that the credibility of the influencer is crucial in influencing consumer decisions.

Personal narrative - storytelling - is valued in both literature and interviews as a means of creating an emotional connection with the audience. Influencers use their personal experiences and transformation journeys to endorse products in a way that resonates with followers, highlighting the importance of authentic and engaging marketing. However, all interviewees agreed that this type of strategy works better for services as there are no “miracle products” and they would compromise their credibility and ethics by recommending something that does not work independently.

Giveaways and events are emphasized in the literature as a strategy to engage and increase brand awareness (McCullough, 2020). The interviews complement these findings by noting that such strategies should be used with moderation and proper targeting to ensure genuine connections and long-term conversions. Giveaways are a good strategy for initial brand awareness. Still, the majority agree that the audience obtained through this strategy may not be the most appropriate and may stop following the brand and influencer after the giveaway just to chase the prize. Giveaways that require a purchase with the influencer's codes are already more beneficial for all parties. There is the conversion to a sale that may have come from a moment of indecision, and the existence of this giveaway has encouraged that purchase. The influencer receives a commission from the sale, and the brand receives sales and potential loyal and repeat customers. If they like the purchased product, they repeat the purchase. However, some strategies are more beneficial and provide a greater return on investment, such as affiliate marketing.

Affiliate marketing is highlighted in both, literature and interviews, as a beneficial strategy for brands and influencers (McCullough, 2020; Silvia, 2019). According to the interviewees, this strategy is the most beneficial for the brand as it can focus on the audience and get a lot of sales by giving only a small part to the influencer. The brand gets a lot of exposure and is highly focused at a meager cost. The influencer also benefits by seeing statistics and understanding the extent to which they can

convert their followers into buyers and create targeted content. Once again, influencers emphasize that they understand the needs of brands but need creative freedom to create quality content without being overly promotional. If a follower perceives something as “just advertising” they will be more skeptical about making a purchase, and it can have the opposite effect than expected, causing saturation and 'irritation' in the consumer.

A brand needs to select influencers who align with its values and measure their performance against concrete metrics. For this type of strategy, brands and influencers must work together to create campaigns that not only achieve marketing objectives but also resonate authentically with followers. Influencer marketing strategies must be tailored to the specific context of the brand and influencer, considering the need for authenticity, public engagement, and strategic alignment to ensure a successful partnership.

Brands and influencers that successfully navigate the complexities of deep strategic alignment, deep engagement with a focus on authenticity, and building genuine relationships with followers will be able to harness and reap the rewards of this type of digital marketing. As the fitness industry grows, strategies are expected to improve, becoming more integrated, measurable, and aligned with consumer values and expectations.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORKS

This dissertation has conducted a thorough exploration of influencer marketing strategies within the Portuguese fitness industry, synthesizing theoretical perspectives from a systematic literature review with practical insights gained from interviews with active influencers in the sector. This study has revealed a complex and multifaceted landscape where theoretical principles are interwoven with real-world practices, unraveling the nuances of contemporary influencer marketing. In terms of theoretical analysis, this research has highlighted a conceptual shift in the measurement of digital influencers' influence. Current theoretical discourse often emphasizes quantitative metrics, such as the number of followers, as indicators of an influencer's potential impact. However, this research has uncovered evidence that argues for a paradigm shift towards a more qualitative assessment, supporting theories that take into account the richness of engagement and the depth of relationships between influencers and their followers.

The alignment between a brand's values and those of the influencer is theoretically recognized as fundamental to the authenticity and effectiveness of marketing collaborations. The emphasis on authenticity and trust, as articulated through the practical experiences of influencers during the interviews, is grounded in theoretical frameworks such as Social Influence Theory and Source Credibility Theory. The reinforcement of these constructs is central to the theoretical understanding of the triadic consumer-influencer-brand relationship. From a practical perspective, brands should adopt sophisticated selection processes that go beyond traditional and superficial metrics. This involves developing internal guidelines and analytical tools to assess the fit between the influencer and the brand, based on the quality of engagement, audience demographic, and the relevance of the content to the brand's ethos. Professionals are encouraged to promote ethical endorsement strategies, in line with the theoretical implications of the importance of authentic endorsements. This includes ensuring that influencers only endorse products they use and believe in, avoiding the promotion of 'miracle products' that may mislead consumers.

In terms of content creation, brands should allow for flexibility in their guidelines to allow influencers to authentically integrate the brand's message into their content, which in theory increases the audience's perception of a sincere message.

In practice, brands should prioritize strategies that promote long-term engagement and community building, such as affiliate marketing, which is consistent with the theoretical understanding that sustainable relationships with influencers contribute to lasting brand value.

The use of strategies such as storytelling or personal sharing is highlighted as a practical way for influencers to create emotional connections with audiences. Therefore, brands need to

use this strategy carefully, ensuring that influencers' narratives are aligned with the services offered and that ethical marketing practices are maintained.

When working with influencers, both the brand and the influencer should moderate the amount of overtly promotional content to avoid brand follower fatigue and a decline in long-term engagement with the influencer. Brands need to balance these strategies with content that provides real value to the audience and supports the theoretical stance.

Finally, such collaborations should support the development of campaigns that are not only strategically aligned but also tailored to specific audience demographics, ensuring that each partnership is evaluated against concrete metrics for success.

As the fitness industry continues to grow and integrate new technologies and consumer trends, influencer marketing strategies must adapt to remain effective. Brands and influencers must work closely together to create campaigns that not only achieve marketing objectives but also foster authentic and lasting relationships with audiences.

In conclusion, this thesis reinforces the belief that influencer marketing, when conducted with ethics and strategy, has the power not only to shape consumer behavior but also to cultivate an engaged and informed digital community. The strategies outlined here serve as a guide for both academics and marketing professionals who wish to explore the depths and possibilities of this vibrant and ever-evolving field.

5.1 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This dissertation has illuminated various facets of influencer marketing within the fitness industry, but it also highlights certain limitations and inconsistencies that exist within the field. A primary limitation stems from the generalizability of research findings. Many studies focus on specific contexts or populations, which may not be universally applicable. Factors such as cultural differences, different social media platform preferences, and unique follower demographics can significantly influence the effectiveness of marketing strategies.

Some of the limitations included the defined keywords and criteria for conducting the systematic literature review inherently limited the scope of the results obtained. Variations of the search parameters might have yielded a broader range of findings, thereby influencing the interpretative angles and overall trajectory of the study. In addition, there was a notable lack of literature specifically related to the fitness industry. This lack of specialized research material limited the potential for in-depth comparative analysis and the formulation of conclusions that were closely aligned with the unique dynamics of the sector.

The selection of influencers for the interview process was also a significant limitation. The choice of a diverse range of influencers could have enriched the study with a more diverse set of insights and experiences, which in turn could have influenced the study's findings and theoretical deductions. In addition, the limited availability of certain influencers posed a significant challenge. The inability to interview several relevant influencers, due to non-response or scheduling conflicts, affected the breadth and representativeness of the perspectives collected. Consequently, these limitations suggest that the findings and conclusions of the study should be interpreted with a degree of caution, recognizing that alternative methodological strategies or different participant samples might have led the research to different conclusions.

In addition, there is a notable lack of information on the effectiveness of different content types - such as images, videos, or infographics - in influencing consumer behavior when promoting fitness-related products or services. This indicates a gap in the literature that requires further investigation to understand how different content formats can influence consumer engagement and decision-making processes.

The ethical implications of influencer marketing practices also warrant additional scrutiny. While concerns have been raised about disclosure, authenticity, and the potential for deceptive practices, the extent to which influencers adhere to ethical guidelines - and the impact of these guidelines on consumer behavior - remains under-researched. This area of research is particularly important given the influence that fitness marketing can have on health behaviors and outcomes.

Finally, the tendency for influencer marketing studies to adopt a short-term lens - focusing on immediate metrics such as purchase intention or brand perception following exposure to influencer content - highlights a gap in long-term empirical research. There is a paucity of research that examines the lasting impact and sustainability of influencer marketing strategies in terms of achieving lasting behavioral change and health benefits.

5.2 FUTURE WORKS

The domain of influencer marketing has been extensively studied, yet it remains an emerging topic, particularly in the context of the fitness industry, where there is still considerable scope for research. As previously stated, the majority of research has focused on the immediate repercussions of influencer marketing campaigns. To advance this line of inquiry, future studies could embark on longitudinal research to monitor consumer behaviors over extended periods. Such studies would be invaluable in elucidating the lasting effects and viability of influencer marketing efforts over time.

In addition, future research could explore the cultural differences that shape consumer perceptions and responses to influencer marketing strategies. Exploring these differences is essential for international companies seeking to tailor culturally congruent marketing strategies that resonate with diverse consumer bases.

As the landscape of influencer marketing continues to evolve, subsequent research should also examine the ethical dilemmas faced by influencers, brands, and consumers alike. This includes an assessment of the ethical implications and regulatory frameworks that govern this modern marketing practice. A nuanced understanding of these ethical considerations is critical to developing standards within the industry and ensuring responsible marketing practices.

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ANNEXES

Interview script:

Guião de entrevista:

1. Porque achaste que tinhas espaço como influencer na indústria fitness?
 - Sentiste que tinhas algo a acrescentar? És profissional da área? Tens estudos sobre isso? Tens experiência?
2. Como é que vês a situação atual do marketing de influência no fitness comparado com outras áreas?
 - achas que está evoluído em comparação à moda e beleza por exemplo? Achas que existem várias marcas a investir nesta área?
3. Como é que vês a situação atual do marketing de influência no fitness em comparação com outros países?
4. Há quanto tempo fazes conteúdo como criador ou influencer?
5. Que plataformas usas?
6. Em que plataforma sentes que consegues criar uma melhor relação com os teus seguidores?
7. O que te faz escolher uma marca ou produto para publicitar?
8. Que estratégias de marketing já usaste em colaboração com marcas? Qual sentiste que foi mais eficaz?
 - Posts pagos, reviews de produtos, story telling, takeover, colaborações com marcas, giveaways, eventos/ experiências
 - Já partilhaste alguma experiência ou transformação física com os teus seguidores? Achas que esse storytelling pode ajudar na promoção de uma marca?
 - Fala-me um pouco de cada estratégia e o que achas de cada uma relativamente à conversão do seguidor à compra
9. Já usaste o marketing de afiliado? Como foi a experiência? Achas que é mais benéfico para a marca ou para ti? Que benefícios tem?
10. Na tua opinião, quais são os maiores desafios para ti, sendo influencer nesta indústria?
 - Apresentas dificuldades em expressar? Em converter seguidores à compra? Criar conteúdo para marcas? Meios de comunicação das plataformas? Algoritmos? Falta de confiança por parte do seguidor?
11. Como achas que as pessoas veem a tua relação com as marcas?
 - As pessoas acham que estás a tentar impingir ou realmente a recomendar algo que gostas e te identificas? És totalmente transparente no que recomendas? Como achas que fica a perceção do consumidor relativamente à tua credibilidade? Achas que confiam nas tuas recomendações ou que tens um conteúdo excessivamente promocional?
12. Na tua opinião, quais são as consequências para as marcas destas parcerias?
 - Sentes que quando publicitas uma marca os teus seguidores passam a identificar-se com a marca? Que se tornam mais leais a essa marca? Com mais confiança na marca? E achas que se tornam mais suscetíveis a comprar produtos ou serviços dessa marca?
13. Como achas que vai evoluir o marketing de influência na área do fitness?