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Social Media Influencers:
An exploratory approach to the relationship with SMI's followers

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Abstract

More than ever, Influencer Marketing plays a crucial role on brand's communication plan. Though, qualitative research has dedicated little attention to Social Media Influencers' relationship with their followers. This paper aims to study in detail how SMIs maintain a relationship with their followers based on trust, despite the sponsored content. Thirteen semi-structured interviews are analyzed used Gioia Method and three aggregate dimensions that helped explain the phenomenon arose from the analysis: triggers to accept a partnership, product experience and direct interaction with followers. This study concludes that the key dimension to a trust relationship relies on a selective acceptance of partnerships by SMIs. This conclusion highlights the importance of brands' managers to approach the right influencers, only a suitable partnership allows a fluid and transparent communication. Managers might use this study to better understand the SMI Phenomenon from the Influencers' perspective, comprehending various aspects, from the criteria used to accept a partnership to how they communicate directly with their followers.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers; Influencer Marketing; Sponsored Content; Followers

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, social media have achieved a significant importance in our daily lives. At the end of 2016, Facebook had more than 1.86 billion active users, holding the title of the most popular social network (Mander, 2017). Likewise, Instagram, the preferred social media platform among teenagers and young adults, accounted for 600 million active users worldwide. In USA, it is estimated that Instagram active users will increase by almost 30% until 2019 (Statista, 2017b). Over the years, social media has become one of the most important sources of information to consumers. In 2017, people spent more than 135 minutes a day on

social media, more 65 minutes than in 2012 (Statista, 2017a). In fact, more than one third of internet daily activities are spent on social networking (Mander, 2017).

In addition, to reduce the risk associated with their purchases (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996), consumers stick with the familiar product or service, instead of adopting an innovation, or, even, purchasing a new product. Thus, prior to the purchase of a new product or service, consumers gather information about the products or services, to reduce the risk of brands choices (Flynn et al., 1996). Consumers seem to consider the opinion of others more trustful than marketing sources of information, such as traditional advertising (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

With the increasing popularity of social media, consumers are more induced to share their opinions with others. Therefore, Instagram and Facebook work as the ideal tool for electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). Social Media Influencers (SMI) are perceived credible eWOM sources. SMIs stimulate a personal relation with their followers, showing them their personal and everyday lives and sharing their opinions. The illusion of a face-to-face relation reinforces the unbiased filter of “people like me” (Allsop, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007). Social media is a consumer-centric environment where users search for what they are interested in, looking for distinctiveness. The crucial factor in the relationship between consumers and influencers is transparency. Hence, consumers hold a preference for SMI’s personal content over corporate online presence.

In addition, brands face what could be called “skip-ad challenge”. With the increasing number of ad-blocking software and the advance forward to skip commercials, marketers must find a way to bypass avoidance and resistance to brand’s message. Therefore, Influencer Marketing has an important role in today’s business practices. A recent survey showed that 84% of marketers were planning on executing at least one influencer marketing campaign during 2017 (Agrawal, 2016).

This paper aims to analyze how SMI integrate their branded campaigns into their unique stories without jeopardizing the relationship established with their followers. The challenge is to selectively choose campaigns and avoiding being a “product pusher” (Agrawal, 2016).

1.1 Research Question

The purpose of studying the relation between consumers and influencers is to understand how influencers’ business, through sponsored posts affect the relationship based on an abstract concept such as trust. First, studying how SMIs choose the campaigns they take a role on and, secondly, how SMI assure credibility and an unbiased opinion besides the compensation. Consequently, the following research question was elaborated: **With the increasing number of partnerships, how influencers maintain a trust relationship with their followers?**

2. Literature Review

As companies allocate more efforts to influencer marketing through social media, it is noticed that recent research has yet to catch up with these latest movements and practices. Even though there is an effort to comprehend the phenomenon, it lags from scholarly understanding the all aspects of this fact. For the intention of this paper, it will start by analyzing the evolution of WOM, how social media is shaping this important marketing tool and, finally, the role played by social media influencers in today’s branded world.

2.1 Word-of-Mouth

For more than half-century, marketing literature has emphasized the concept of Word-of-Mouth. WOM is defined as a consumer-to-consumer brand communication (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). The first study involving WOM was conducted by Dichter (1966) in the Harvard Business Review. On his research, four main drivers of individual engagement in WOM were identified: perceived product-involvement, self-involvement (gratification of emotional needs from the product), other involvement (a need to give

something to the person receiving the WOM transmission) and message involvement (talk that is stimulated by the way the product is present in media). In 1998, it was conducted a motivational analysis about WOM communications, in which it was found that consumers engage in WOM behavior under eight motives related to consumer experience, namely, altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement, helping the company, negative WOM altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). Among the authors, there is a consensus that WOM is a powerful marketing tool and produces a much prevailing impact on consumers than other methods of marketing communication (Allsop et al., 2007; Day, 1971; De Veirman et al., 2017; Roelens, Baecke, & Benoit, 2016).

It has been said that WOM influences the vast majority of purchase decisions (Dichter, 1966), considered as “one of the most influential channels of communication in the marketplace” (Allsop et al., 2007). The internet has transformed our lives completely, from the way we communicate with each other to the way we look for information. Moreover, internet has changed the way we shop. Therefore, electronic Word of Mouth, defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003), represents today an important torrent of the literature. Contrary to traditional WOM, eWOM is not a one-to-one relation, it occurs “in a more complex computer-mediated context” (King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014), where parties maintain their relationships only via online communications and normally do not know each other. Furthermore, eWOM participants communicate with a network of people in online communities where conversations are public (Kozinets et al., 2010). On these communities, people share their interest in a specific product or activity (King et al., 2014). It is possible to divide the users in two categories, such as opinion leaders, who exert an unequal amount of

influence on the decision of others, and opinion seekers, who actively seek advice from someone that turns into an opinion leader (Flynn et al., 1996). According to Dichter (1966), the opinion seeker asks himself a few questions to appraise the opinion leader validity: “What is the opinion leader’s relation to the product? How authentic is it? Is the opinion leader’s intention to sell me the product for any material reason, or to help me with his true experience?”.

In their research, Fransen (2015) explored the consumer’s strategies for resisting advertising and how to counter it. In fact, 70% of the consumers have the sense that advertising aims to persuade people to purchase things they do not desire or need (Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). Empowering strategies more specifically social validation is about looking actively for others who share their beliefs to assure their attitudes or behaviour. This is related to “social proof”, people look for others behaviour when they are not certain how to behave (Flynn et al., 1996; Fransen et al., 2015).

2.2 Social Media Influencers

Social Media Influencers have built a “sizeable network of people following them”, crediting SMIs as trusted opinion leaders (De Veirman et al., 2017). When influencers diffuse brand messages, it helps expose the brand message to users who do not receive direct updates from the brand and influencers associate themselves with the brand message (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2017). Moreover, there is a consensus in literature which opinion seeking plays an important role in pre-purchase information gathering, as consumers seem to trust the opinion of others more than traditional advertising, specially family and friends (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Roelens, Baecke, & Benoit, 2016). Furthermore, influencers appear to be more accessible, believable, intimate and easy to relate than mainstream celebrities, because of sharing personal details of their lives with their followers and interact with them almost instantly (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

According to Colliander and Dahlér (2011), the relationship between influencers and their followers is similar and powerful as a word-of-mouth relationship. Similarly to other WOM strategies, the key factor is the identification of a suitable influencer (Araujo et al., 2017) that is liked by his audience to endorse branded products. One of the most used measure to identify influencers is the number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2015; Roelens et al., 2016). However, the influencer must take into consideration that his/her testimonials will permanently be available on the internet and spread to an unlimited number of people that the influencer might not know (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Compared traditional media with eWOM, there are two points that arise the effectiveness of influencers messages. The first is the relation between the influencer and the advertised brand and the second one is the influencer's credibility (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011).

Another important aspect to list is the commercial viability of SMI which depends on self-branding and micro-celebrity practices, that are apparently replicable but, at the same time, difficult to achieve since it implies consistency (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Additionally, a human brand is “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (Thomson, 2006) that adds their audience to the balance. While personal blogs and sites help to establish a robust online identity, social media platforms, such as Instagram, help to diffuse their message more rapidly, where recognition and reward is determined by others (Khamis et al., 2017).

All in all, as a symbolic resource for the construction and maintenance of identity, brands supply meaning and values for the consumers' personality. Hence, consumption carries a symbolic meaning whether it is consciously or unconsciously (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Elliot also refers lived experience as the practical activities and face-to-face encounters in our everyday lives, which are taken as reality.

Given the conducted literature review, contemporary research lags behind the analysis

of Social Media Influencers' Phenomenon in its full length. Partly due to academic's calendar difficulty of matching the fast pace of change in business practices today, there is a wide study gap between current business practices and the latest research status-quo.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The suggested research purposes to better understand the relationship between influencers and their followers, more concretely comprehend how influencers maintain a trust link with their followers, despite their sponsored content. First, it aims to tight the gap between actual literature and influencer marketing practice on business today. Second, understanding how influencer chooses which brand to promote. Third, it goals to enrich the discussion of comprehending the influencer effect from the SMI perspective.

For the sake of the research question formulated and to tackle the gap in literature also mentioned above, a qualitative research was employed through observation and semi-structure interviews. Initially, the observation of SMI's online behavior from what type of content shared online to how they interacted with their followers. Afterwards, semi-structure interviews were analyzed using the Gioia Methodology. The subject of this study cannot be measured in a quantitative manner. As follows, qualitative research concerns about quality and texture of the influencer's experience through first-impressions, describing in detail and possibly explaining influencer's relationship with their followers (Willig, 2011).

3.2 Data Sample

For this study, the interviewees are considered Social Media Influencers. To be consider a SMI, the most common criteria mentioned in the literature is that one must have more than 10 000 followers on Instagram (De Veirman et al., 2017). Hence, participants were selected based on two conditions: individuals with more than 10 000 followers on Instagram and have

advertised a brand or a product in the last year. The table presented above represents interviewees' demographic characteristics.

Name	Age	Sex	Number of Followers on Instagram (November 2017)	Occupation
Maria Valente	31	F	21,5K	PR Specialist
Francisca Baltazar	21	F	17,3K	Guest Service Agent
Bárbara Marques	27	F	25K	Paralegal
Carlota Santos	22	F	29,9K	Hotel Receptionist
Maria Gonçalves	27	F	19,7K	Marketing Technician
Catarina Nogueira	21	F	27K	Student, Blogger
Sofia Coelho	22	F	69,7K	Student
Sofia de Alcântara	24	F	23,4K	Student, Instagramer
Joana Moreira	23	F	20K	Coach, Youtuber
Carolina Santos	29	F	70,3K	Blogger
Carolina Gomes Silva	25	F	56,2K	Student, Blogger
Cristiana Rocha	21	F	22,1K	Working Student
Rita Nascimento	24	F	32,6K	Social Media Manager

Table 1 - Demographic characteristics of interviewees

The consistency with the research problem is guaranteed by the handy sample, the data collected deliver a detailed description of the experience and consent the observation of similarities and differences in each one.

3.3 Data Collection

A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were collected in October and November 2017. Interview questions were open-ended and non-directive. The format started with general questions and moved to more specific questions, each participant was challenged to describe their relationship with their followers in as much detail as possible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Thus, the author started the interviews by doing a short introduction of the project and of the mechanisms of qualitative research. After the brief introduction, interviewees answered, among others, the following questions.

Questions
1. Why did you created your online page?
2. How did your online page started being notorious?
3. What are the factors that you pondering when choosing brands to partner with you? And why?
4. When you do not know the product, how do you decide?
5. Do you make a visual distinction between sponsor and organic post? Why?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your followers?

Table 2 – Open-ended Questions

The interviews were audio-recorded, lasted 25 minutes on average, were conducted in a pleasant environment and were held in Portuguese. For this matter, the interviews scripts are in Portuguese as well. The author considered the translation to English one more disturbance of the original speech. See Appendix for all the 13 interviews' transcripts. All the subsequent analysis was done in English. When data saturation was reached during the analysis, no new information was being presented in further interviews (Willig, 2011). On account of non-

production of meaningfully new concepts, similarities, or variances narrative's state, the collection of interviews was interrupted and the analysis begun.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected was organized by first-order concepts and second-order themes, which later would be assembled in a structured form (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), assuring rigor in the analysis. First, on the first-order analysis, correspondent's terms were faithfully address, little attempt to distinguish categories were made and their number was overwhelming, giving the sense that the data did not hang together. Then, as research proceeded, similarities and differences started being identified among the diverse categories. Given those categories labels or phrasal descriptors, the informant terms were retained again. In the second-order analysis, the analysis verified if the proposed concepts help describe and explain the influencer's relationship with their followers. Finally, the result of the theme and concept development method reached a "theoretical saturation" (Gioia et al., 2013), the second order themes were assembled in second order "aggregate dimensions". The data structure build based on the full set of first-order concepts and second-order themes and aggregate dimensions is shown below on Results section. Having said that, each interview was analysed with the method presented.

4. Results

The diversity of responses among the various participants owns to their different experiences and different approach to their online presence. Interviews were around three aggregate dimensions explain with further detail below. To better describe participants' relationship with their followers along this paper verbatim quotations were used. Thus, these dimensions and quotations were interpreted to better comprehend every aspect of the relationship between participants and their followers.

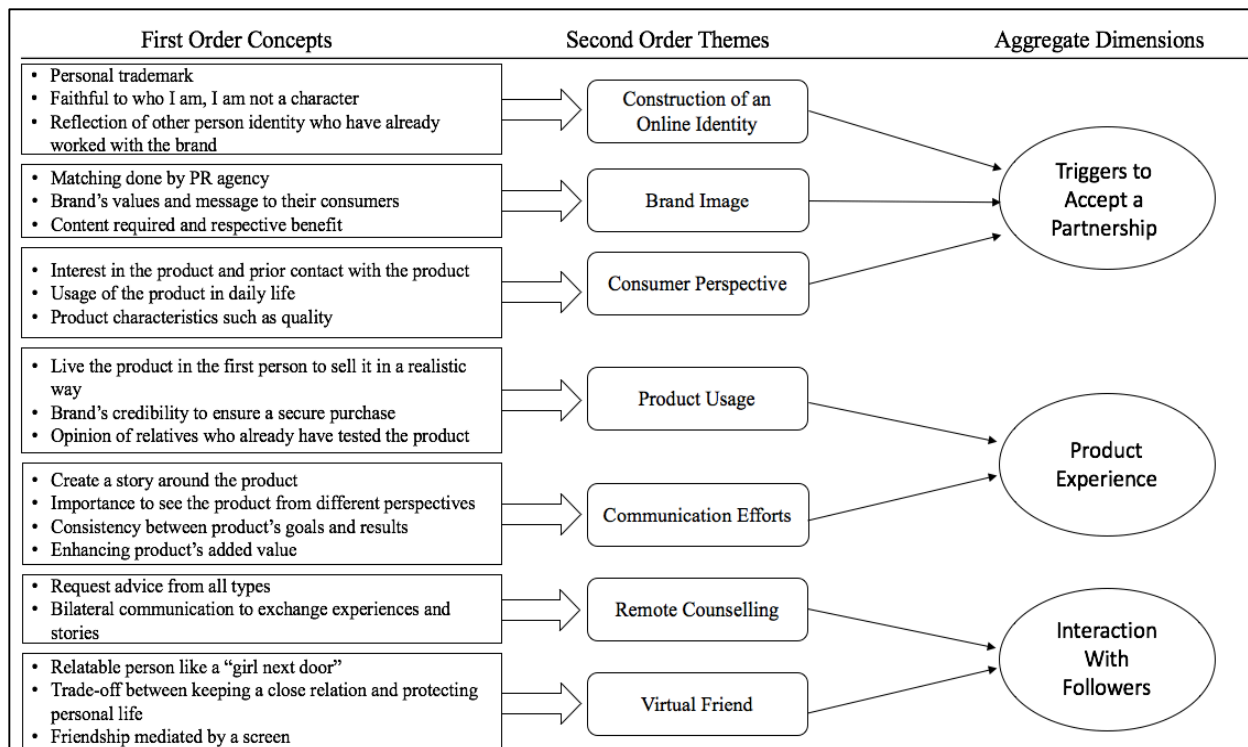


Figure 1 – Data Structure

4.1 Triggers to Accept a Partnership

Interviews began with introductory questions about how these common people began their internet journey until the point they were considered a Social Media Influencer. To almost every participant it was a natural process, which begun as a hobby and evolved into a part or full-time job. Catarina said, *“I study Information Management, that has a lot of numbers and methods. I have always been a creative person, with a passion for painting and writing. [...] It was the way to express my creativity. My creative escape become my part-time job”*.

As the interviews moved forward and the partnership issue was addressed, one more agent appeared, the PR agencies. PR agencies appeared as mediators between influencers and brands. Joana exempted that before moving on *“It is important to state that I work with an agency. They are the mediators between me and the brands. They have my media kit, my data and they keep up with my evolution. When brands reach me, it is through them.”*

Participants mentioned various criteria to accept or not a partnership, such as previous contact with it, habits, brand's values, who they are, other people who have already worked

with the brand, personality reflection, type of content requested and benefits. Though, it is not considered a linear decision as Bárbara clarified “I do not believe it is linear or objective [...]. Factors differ from case to case.”, participants made an effort to explore this topic from all perspectives. Maria G. explained, *“First of all, the type product. My blog has a theme and I like to maintain it, it has a relation with my audience and the type of products that I have already talked about. [...] Second criteria is the type of content requested. If brands asked for my opinion, is one thing. But if they asked only to talk good things about the product, is different. I cannot promise to say good things about something that I do not know if it is good or not.”*. Sofia A. continued, *“I am not going to lie. It is the compensation. If the brand pays or not. How many they pay and how many post I have to produce.”*. Besides the technicalities of the product itself, brand’s values and image is also important for some influencers. *“What I take into consideration is: the brand, what is its message, what are the brand’s values, if they are align with mine, what is the product. I might like the brand but that specific product doesn’t work for me. [...] Most the proposals, I decline because there is a mismatch with my message”* (Joana). *“What weighs most on the scale is if the brand has something to do with me, if it makes sense for me to use it or to experience it, if it suits my lifestyle.”* (Carolina G. S.). Furthermore, identity questions are also very important. The person they are as they aim to stay true to themselves as Maria V. simply clarified *“Even with brands approaching me, I keep being myself. I am not a character. I am Maria”*. Additionally, their online presence must exhibit their personal trademark. Therefore, their brand choices are based on the consistency of their trait. Sofia A. justified saying that *“I try to publicize only what I like. I do not want to do publicity in excess. It is not worthy. [...] You lose your credibility and your trademark.”*. Sofia C. went further stating that *“I want my Instagram to be my Instagram. People might understand that I have an identity and a certain style. There are people accepting so many different partnership that they look like a dummy”*.

Another question that arose in many interviews and considered by some participants as one of the most important argument is the previous people that communicate the same brand as well. *“If I saw a group of people with whom I do not identify with, I am not going to accept the partnership. I do not want to be part of that group and my audience look at me with that image.”* (Joana). Catarina reinforced the same idea, *“It does not make sense taking pictures. And, then, there is a girl with an image completely different from mine, doing the same thing. I take that into account.”*

Selecting a partnership is considered a crucial factor by the participants in their relationship with their followers as it represents the foundation of the remaining steps of their relation. Despite the briefings sent by brands and their recommendations for sponsored posts, Catarina concluded that *“The only decision that is 100% mine is the partnership acceptance.”*. This step unleashes all the further interaction with participants’ audience. A judicious partnership selection enables a good affiliation with the product advertised which leads to the creation of trustworthy content.

4.2 Product Experience

Along the interviews, the product and the experience associated with it were mentioned various times. Participants aim to replicate their experience for their audience, from purchasing the products to use them. Along these lines, one of their points is to ensure followers’ security when purchasing the item, *“I consider important transmit to my followers the brand’s credibility. If it is an online brand it is important to assure that is secure to make an order.”* (Catarina). According to them, the product usage is imperative to guarantee a fluid and natural communication. Even if that means ignoring some of the brand’s recommendations. Participants concerned about showing a realistic communication. Maria V. explained, *“It is not only sending me the product. Then, I take a picture and post it on my Instagram as the briefing requests. Most of the times, I do not comply with all the instructions because it is away too*

commercial talk. You must live it a little bit. Experience it. To sell it in a realist way.”. When describing their experience there is no right or wrong exposition, it depends from product to product. *“Every time I have to make a review about a product is to describe my experience. It is not something inflexible in the sense that I must talk about a few aspects. There are products that I talk a lot and others I only say that I like.”* (Carolina S.). On other hand, some brands that approached the participants were unknown to them. Then, they searched for others opinion to improve their message. *“I do not know all products. So, sometimes I ask my friends if they have tested before. Also, if it is a skin product, I ask my pharmaceuticals friends their technical opinion.”* (Maria V.). And, *“I also ask the opinion of people close to me, since they are a sample of my followers”* (Joana M.).

Moreover, participants expressed the relevance of the way they communicate with their audience. *“Nowadays, people discredit everything that is advertisement. There is the belief that Instagramers only do that because they are being paid. It is not my case.”* (Sofia). Hence, they try to have an effortless speech about the product as Carolina S. explained, *“...something fluid which I can make a story with the product.”*. Similarly, they argument using comparisons and analogies for their followers understand the message perfectly, *“One information that I consider important to transmit is comparing what the brand compromises and what really happens, mainly when it is a beauty product.”* (Maria G.) and how that product could help them *“That product solve a problem that I had. On my post, I try to highlight that fact. So, people would understand the product’s added value.”* (Maria V.). Relatively to clothes’ garments, is something visual, participants relied on their photos to explore the products’ potential, Sofia C. described how she works, *“I always post 4 to 5 photos with the same clothes, because it is important for people to see the same garment from different perspectives.”*.

On account of participant’s testimonials, product experience and communications efforts work hand in hand to provide a realistic product experience story. As inferred on the

previous topic, the type of communication and product's characteristics transmitted depend on the type of product. However, there is a consensus that the product experience must be described in a representative way of the reality. According to participants, the communication to their audience is transparent.

4.3 Interaction with Followers

When asked participants about their relationship with their followers, answers were diverse, mainly due to the uncertainty of how the other party received participants' contact. Therefore, they could only ensure what they look for on that relationship.

Every participant affirmed that read all comments and messages and try to response to everyone. Catarina argued, *"I put myself in other person shoes and think that if I ask someone that I admire and follow on social media something, I would love to have a response. It would make me feel special. The person read and answer. I always try to be as closest as I can and answer every question"*. The bilateral communication to exchange experience and stories help the participants to better understand their audience and what they look for on an online channel. *"I worry about what my followers want to see because this only exist because of them. Since I am going to write about a topic, at least I am going to write something that people have an interest in. Otherwise, it makes no sense."* (Carolina G. S.). Joana reinforces the idea and added *"I am almost a virtual friend. I want people to know that they can talk to me, send emails, etc. I want to receive emails because I want to know other people stories and different realities. This enriches my channel. It is a bidirectional kind of relationship."* Even the followers have the sense that can count on the participants' opinion and looks for an active role in their lives, Bárbara described their relation as follows, *"We are friends through screens. I truly believe that my readers feel they know me (sometimes send me picture of garments that I could use, ask for my opinion about looks for a special occasion or about a determined product). Above all, they can trust me because I am not going to mislead them"*.

Besides the fact of being considered Social Media Influencers, all the participants deem themselves as someone approachable, available to answer followers' questions about products, lifestyle and about Social Media features. *"Anyway, I treat everyone that talks to me as my friends and not as "I have a blog so I am better than you." NO! People approach me, I talked to them as they were my friends"* (Maria G.). Sofia A. reaffirmed *"I believe that I am a very relatable person, because of my 'girl next door' image. People relate with me easily. I do not look like a model."* On the other hand, some participants prefer to keep their private life for themselves, *"I never share anything for my private life. It is all about my relationship with the brands and my daily life, but nothing very personal. I thank the compliments. It is a close relation but never personal."* (Carolina S.). One curious aspect to highlight, maybe because of the products that are advertised mainly to a feminine public, two participants said, *"I do not answer to any man."* (Francisca). Carlota justified *"When it is men, I do not answer. Nothing productive comes from there."*

From all the topics addressed on the interviews, this one cause uncertainty and doubt among the participants. In fact, participants' relationship with their followers is a two-way street. On one hand, they are considered common people and their opinion derived from their product experience as any other consumer. But, on the other hand, participants earned a benefit to publicize that specific product. Hence, participants counterbalance sponsored content with more personal contact with their followers, such as direct messages or responding directly to comments.

4.4 Relationship with Followers Model

To explain the three aggregated dimensions that emerge from the analysis presented above, a model called "Relationship with Followers" was developed. This model explains how SMIs maintain their trust relationship with their followers.

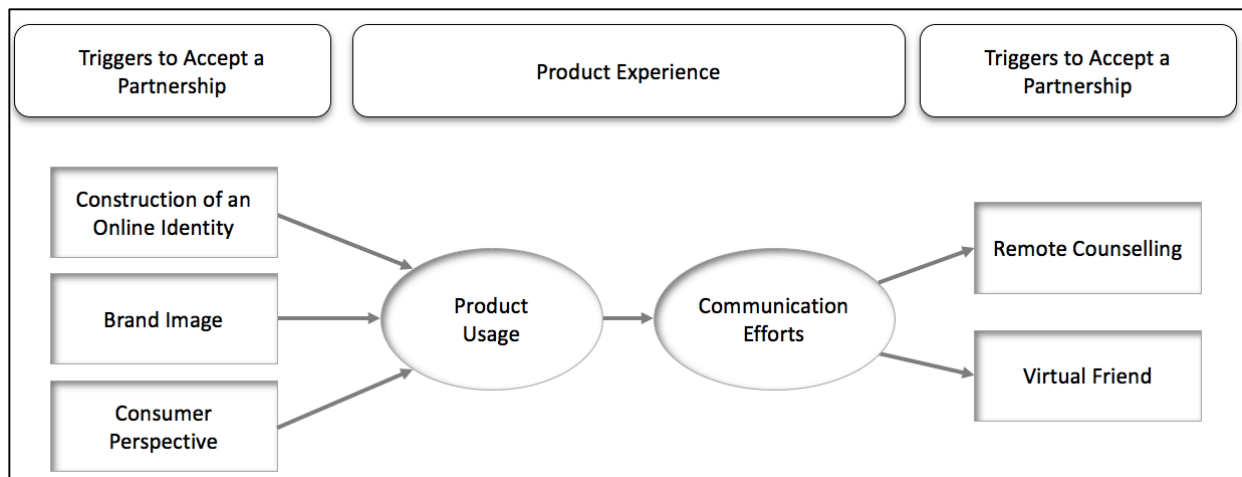


Figure 2 – Model “Relationship with Followers”

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that, across the various points of contact with audience, participants have the conscience of their opinion leader status, provided by their number of followers on social media and engagement rate with their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Araujo et al.’s findings are confirmed as participants recognizes how brands, particularly their partnerships, make them brand’s ambassadors. Thus, participants take brands’ values as theirs, helping shaping the persona they’re online (Araujo et al., 2017). Furthermore, this study goes beyond this theory and notes that brand’s values must be in full accordance with participants’, only this consonance permits a trust and transparent message, which not only transmit who the participants are, but also, their full experience with the product.

Confirming Schau & Gilly (2015) theory, participants considered themselves as someone approachable, accessible and believable, they interact with them as much as possible, answering questions about the advertised products and other doubts that they may have. Also, they try to share their day with their followers. However, some of them mentioned the desire to keep their private life for themselves, only sharing quotidian aspects of their lives but never the private ones. Moreover, the results highlight participant’s credibility (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011) through various communications strategies, such as comparing the product’s result with

what the product promises, create a story around the product usage, present the product from different perspectives and highlights the major product's advantage for the consumer.

Over and above, participants keep a real relation with the product, through prior contact with it or experiment it before advertising. Their goal is to guide their audience to the same pleasant experience as they had with the product. Despite the material reason beyond the content, participants believed they truly helped their audience to get to know new products that might be beneficial to them. Consciously or unconsciously, participants made a huge effort to their audience appraise their opinions validity based on the four questions: "What is the opinion leader's relation to the product? How authentic is it? Is the opinion leader's intention to sell me the product for any material reason, or to help me with his true experience?" (Dichter, 1966). Participants also highlighted that their benefits represent an award from all the work involved exposing the brand to their vast audience, from searching for products technicalities to answer followers' questions about them, besides that, they create the content where the product is presented.

Ultimately, the key dimension to participants' relationship with their followers is the acceptance of a partnership. This dimension assumes the leading role on all future interactions. Only a product that in fact suits participants' lifestyle and represents their values, have the capacity to assure a transparent, credible and trustful communication with their audience. Accepting or declining a partnership is a critical decision which should be pondered and analyzed with as much detail as possible, configuring a judicious verdict.

6. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The performed study enlarges insights into eWOM and opinion leadership and opinion seeking topics, through Social Media Influencers reality. The results enhance the relation with the product as a fundamental key to a successful communication and the foundation of a trustful relationship with followers is a judicious acceptance of a partnership. The proposed model

illustrates how SMI build a strong bond with their followers, balanced sponsored posts and direct interaction with them.

This study's results might be purposeful to managers who are willing to invest in influencer marketing and desire to have a perfect match between the SMI and the product advertised. PR agencies should be more careful when purposing partnerships between brands and SMIs to assure the mentioned perfect match between brand's image and the influencer's message. The perfect consonance between SMIs and brands could allow a successful communication to consumers resulting in a win to the three parts of this equation. As a result, companies improve their sales, SMI consolidate their image as a trustful taste maker and, finally, consumers get to know a product without much effort or time spending searching for it. Managers could use this study to understand the SMI Phenomenon from the perspective of the Influencer, comprehending how they work and interact with their audience.

7. Limitations and Future Research

As any other study, there are limitations that must be listed. First, all the findings are based on qualitative data retrieved from interviewing 13 young ladies with an age range from 21 to 31. Many say that it is not possible to generalize from such a sample. Although, across domains, many concepts and process are analogous, the goal was to find transferable principles. Second, given time constraints, the work project guideline is way short to organize all the interviews at the same time as doing the other assignments needed for the project. Third, this study was focused on the relationship between SMIs and their followers on a generic level. An analysis more detailed and focused on a specific type of product or niche market would be valuable to understand deeply this phenomenon.

Future research should explore the consumer side of this relation. The suggestion is to perform a quantitative research to infer at which degree consumers consider SMI message trustful and transparent. Likewise, a qualitative research approach could be implemented to

complement with meaningful insights about how content could be more transparent and what followers look for in this relation. Finally, this study could be replicated to various types of products or niche markets to improve communication efforts from brands and their ambassadors, in this case, Social Media Influencers.

8. Conclusion

This paper investigates the following research question: “With the increasing of partnerships, how influencers maintain a trust relationship with their followers?”. A qualitative approach was implemented to clarify this question and a model representative of the SMI relationship with their followers was developed. This model represents the concepts under investigation and the interrelations between them. The use of Influencer Marketing is widespread spread alongside all kinds of industries, mainly in the fashion and beauty industry. In these type of communication, the sender of the message is very important to assure credibility to the product. Therefore, sender’s personality on social media must be well defined and it should reflect consistency. The analysis suggests that the acceptance of the partnership by the SMI is the most important step in the relationship with their followers, since it is the foundation of all the subsequent communication. Besides, influencers must maintain a balance between sponsored and organic content to sustain a trust relationship with their followers.

9. References

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