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Online Engagement and the Role of Digital Influencers in Product Endorsement on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to analyze the forms of engagement generated from the endorsement of products by digital influencers on Instagram, considering the characteristics of their online posts. A qualitative approach was used to investigate digital influencers' posts based on semiotic image analysis and the critical incidents technique. The results reinforced that digital platforms enable distinct forms of engagement by establishing new configurations that affect relationship marketing and promotion strategies. In particular, on Instagram, the development of engagement can involve four participants who play different social roles, expanding the process of value co-creation.

KEYWORDS

Engagement; digital influencer; relationship marketing; Instagram

Introduction

The advent of new social media channels in recent years has changed and extended the ways individuals communicate, exchange information, and interact with others (Cheung, Lee & Jin, 2011; Holt, 2016). In a constant process of online interaction, they become more active, participating in building the perception of other users about what companies are and what they offer, influencing in favor or against products and brands to be consumed.

Many of these individuals “are gaining a large share of voice in the market” (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 184) with their online profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or YouTube, acquiring millions of followers who are willing to adapt and be engaged daily by posts, effectively causing them to be influenced in terms of choices and behaviors. These users of digital media with thousands of followers are referred to as digital influencers (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2017; Roth & Zawadzki, 2018).

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Companies already recognize digital influencers as opinion leaders who mediate the transmission of information, facilitating its dissemination to their online followers (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Therefore, they are viewed by organizations as potential brand ambassadors who convey messages seen by consumers as more trustworthy and attractive because of their more engaged relationships (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). These new celebrities become role models for their followers in a constant process of communication that affects brand equity. Despite this, academic research on social media influencers and their practical implications is relatively scarce (Almeida, Coelho, Camilo-Junior, & Godoy 2018; Godey et al., 2016).

Therefore, in this paper, the posts of digital influencers that endorsed some brand or product were investigated in an attempt to observe posting characteristics and the forms of engagement generated by them. Consumer engagement has received increasing attention in marketing studies and has been regarded as an essential research priority (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). This term has acquired different meanings over the years and in this article is understood as a multidimensional construct involving a cognitive, affective and behavioral commitment to an active relationship between a consumer and a brand (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014).

The concept of engagement can be expanded by engaging other actors when analyzing social networks. Company profiles on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as the brand communities developed in these platforms, make consumers more participatory users of the communication process, interacting with other users in the generation of online engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and participation in forums (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli & Pizzetti, 2018; Virtanen, Björk & Sjöström, 2017). In the process of online engagement between (potential) consumers and brands it is possible to have an actor mediate this relationship – in this case, a digital influencer. By acting as an endorser of brands in their online profiles, digital influencers establish engagement with followers and, at a secondary level, acting as a bridge to the establishment of engagement between the follower and the endorsed brand or product.

Aiming to analyze the forms of engagement generated from the endorsement of products by digital influencers and considering the characteristics of their online posts, we begin our inquiry with a review of prior research on social media and digital influencers and then proceed to a brief discussion of online engagement in posts.

Social media and digital influencers

Social media is a set of network communication platforms that operate thanks to the internet, including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube, and Blogger, among others (Meikle, 2016).

These platforms are highly interactive and enable people to communicate, collaborate, and share content with a global audience characterized by almost immediate response times (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Power, 2014). Consequently, social media is perceived as a channel of interaction that has convenience, wide availability and low cost for those involved (Momany & Alshboul 2016; Roth & Zawadzki, 2018; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). It is a spreadable media that generates more engagement and empowerment of individuals, especially in their role as consumers (Fuchs, 2017). It is precisely through social networks that daily virtual interactions are carried out, providing opportunities for consumers to learn about opinions, skills, and lives of others (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015) and to be more active in co-creating marketing content with companies and their brands (Virtanen et al., 2017).

Using social media to an increasing degree, consumers seek to research goods and services but also feel engaged with the brands they use and with other consumers (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). That is why companies have recognized the impact of social media on their brands and their communication strategies. Through this tool, it is possible to create relationships and interactions in the market that guide the consumption of products and the identification of consumers with specific enterprises (Booth & Matic, 2011).

In this scenario, digital influencers stand out. They have a considerable number of online followers whom they are able to mobilize by acting as opinion leaders on various topics, including consumption, mediating the transmission of information and facilitating its dissemination (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). They are potential endorsers of brands, mediating the relationship between the source (company) and the consumer, disseminating messages of persuasion (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). Digital influencers expose their daily lives on social media with photos, videos, and texts that show their consumer choices, practices, and opinions. Through regular contact with their audiences (Liu, Jin, Briones & Kuch 2012), they seem more accessible and closer to people than traditional media artists; they are seen as ‘people like us’ and ‘friends’ of their followers (Meyers, 2017).

For this reason, these influencers receive offers from companies to endorse goods and services in their posts (Almeida et al., 2018). This endorsement is a form of advertising that generates an associative link between endorser (celebrity) and brand, forming part of the strategic marketing communication process (Temperley & Tangen, 2006; Till, 1998). Digital influencers as endorsers are sponsored to represent brands and products, crediting the quality and benefits of these spontaneously and naturally (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014). In doing so, their followers are more likely to follow their recommendations by understanding that the proclaimed message is more trustworthy and attractive

(Lim et al., 2017). At the same time, digital influencers offer their images to the endorsed product, transferring their characteristics, identities, and meanings to that promoted good or service; they bring to products characteristics of an extended self, a term developed by Belk (1988, 2014) to cover the extension of individuals' identity on goods and services owned or used by them.

Digital influencers can thereby act as bridges between their followers and companies/brands, bringing their audience closer to some goods and services and guiding specific consumption patterns. Through their posts, these individuals encourage digital engagement based on four nodes: influencer, follower, company/brand, and other users. This idea of engagement is discussed in the next section.

Online engagement in posts

The concept of engagement has been examined in different academic areas, such as education (Kahu, 2013; Quaye & Harper, 2015), management (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Mone & London, 2018), public policy (Jerit, 2008), and marketing (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Gambetti & Graffigna, 2010), and there is no agreement on the dimensionality, definition, and operationalization of such a term (Cheung, Shen, Lee & Chan, 2015; Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel, 2009; Dessart et al., 2015). In consumer behavior studies, for example, three different conceptualisations can be found, which define engagement as: (1) a psychological process that leads to loyalty (Bowden, 2009); (2) a behavioral manifestation that goes beyond buying action (Van Doorn et al., 2010); and (3) a psychological state characterized by the degree of dedication, vigor, absorption and consumer interaction through a brand/company (Patterson, Yu & Ruyter 2006).

This diversity of concepts is used by Hollebeek and Chen (2014) to define the term engagement as a multidimensional construct that encompasses affective, cognitive and behavioral dimensions. This three-dimensional view has provided the basis for further development of the concept in question and is widely accepted in consumer studies, which have begun to treat engagement as an affective, cognitive and behavioral commitment to an active relationship with some brand/company/endorser (Dessart et al., 2015). Therefore, when engaged, consumers will exhibit interactional and responsive dispositions that go beyond traditional behaviors based on the logic of co-creation of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Virtanen et al., 2017).

From this three-dimensional concept, the definition of consumer engagement in online social platforms was established, being described as “the level of a customer's physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in connections with a particular online social platform” (Cheung et al., 2011, p. 3). It is active digital behavior characterized by high personal involvement with

the content, brand/company, and individual who created the post or presented in an online public space (Dhanesh, 2017). For Valentini et al. (2018), this active behavior can occur on three levels:

- Consuming: type of behavior in which the individual is limited to seeing images, videos of the brand or its products; liking the posts; following online topics; and downloading widgets;
- Contributing: type of behavior based on the active participation of the individual in the conversations involving the brand/product, commenting on social media posts, for example;
- Creating: type of behavior characterized by the highest level of engagement, portraying the action of the individual who creates, uploads and publishes content related to the brand/product, or sharing of messages and images already posted by other users.

Thus, digital engagement can be measured through various indicators that are available depending on the configurations of online platforms (Lehmann, Lalmas, Yom-Tov, & Dupret 2012). It is possible to analyze the following as engagement metrics: click-through rates (CTR), number of likes of online content, number of comments, number of followers, duration of the interaction, marking and sharing of a post, as well as its creation (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; McCann & Barlow, 2015; Valentini et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2017).

We conclude that digital platforms enable distinct forms of engagement (Calder et al., 2009) involving brands, individuals as (potential) consumers, and other users who may even develop the role of digital influencers. In this scenario, according to Segev, Avigdor and Avigdor (2018), networks are established in which users act on nodes and establish relationships, creating unidirectional or bi-directional bridges, for example, an Instagram “follower” and “friend” on Facebook, respectively. “These edges do not need to represent a long-lasting relationship; they can signal one-time engagement, e.g., a ‘like’ or a ‘comment’” (Segev et al., 2018, p. 1009).

Method

In this section, we comment on the method, describing the choice of the online platform and the digital influencers, as well as the data collection and analysis techniques.

The subjects and the research platform

This study reviews the posts of digital influencers who act as brand endorsers, aiming to analyze the process of follower engagement. From existing social networks, we opted to analyze posts on Instagram.

The social networking website Instagram consists of profiles which users and brands use to post photos or videos with short descriptions and often at least one hashtag (a keyword relating to the contents of the message, preceded by the symbol #). Users can also make use of built-in filters to edit a photo before they publish it (Roth & Zawadzki, 2018, p. 103).

This platform focuses primarily on the visual appeal from the photographs, highlighting the increasing role of visual content in consumer and social media construction (Valentini et al., 2018); it also focuses on the number of followers that each profile has, which makes it particularly efficient in B2C communication (Roth & Zawadzki, 2018). It is referred to as a visual content sharing online social network (Segev et al., 2018) that has grown in popularity in recent years.

Instagram has a higher level of use for interaction, co-creation, and engagement compared to other platforms (Coelho, Oliveira, & Almeida, 2016) and is especially suitable for posts of hedonic content (Virtanen et al., 2017). It features three social metrics of engagement: (1) number of likes, (2) number of comments, and (3) number of followers. Through likes, we can quantify the number of distinct users who appreciated the post, and through comments, we can observe a deeper level of engagement in which followers contribute to the post through their opinions and discussions about its content (Bakhshi, Shamma & Gilbert, 2014). The number of followers, in turn, represents the degree of approval of the profile, acting as a metric of engagement, recognition and reach (Virtanen et al., 2017).

To achieve the purpose of this paper, a specific profile of a digital influencer was selected following these criteria: (a) has a fitness lifestyle, (b) has more than 1 million followers on Instagram, and (c) promotes goods and services on his/her profile. These two last criteria are related to the idea of a digital influencer who requires a considerable number of followers reaffirming her or his popularity (Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) and his or her role as a brand endorser. Last, the choice for fitness style followed from the importance of the image required by this lifestyle, which makes the body a constant temple of investment. The role of digital influencers in this scenario is to show muscular, healthy, and athletic bodies that are capable of performing seemingly impossible physical exercises (Crossley, 2005; Maguire, 2002). Their bodies are avatars of brand value used to communicate products and services (Powers & Greenwell, 2017); an ideal body image is created by simply posting videos and pictures on social media that reflect the efforts and body care for the achievement of beauty, health, sensuality, transformation, and success (Goellner, 2008; Scott, Cayla & Cova 2017). In this article, we emphasize posts that contain photographs posted by these influencers; we consider such images more direct ways of communicating and experiencing human relationships and

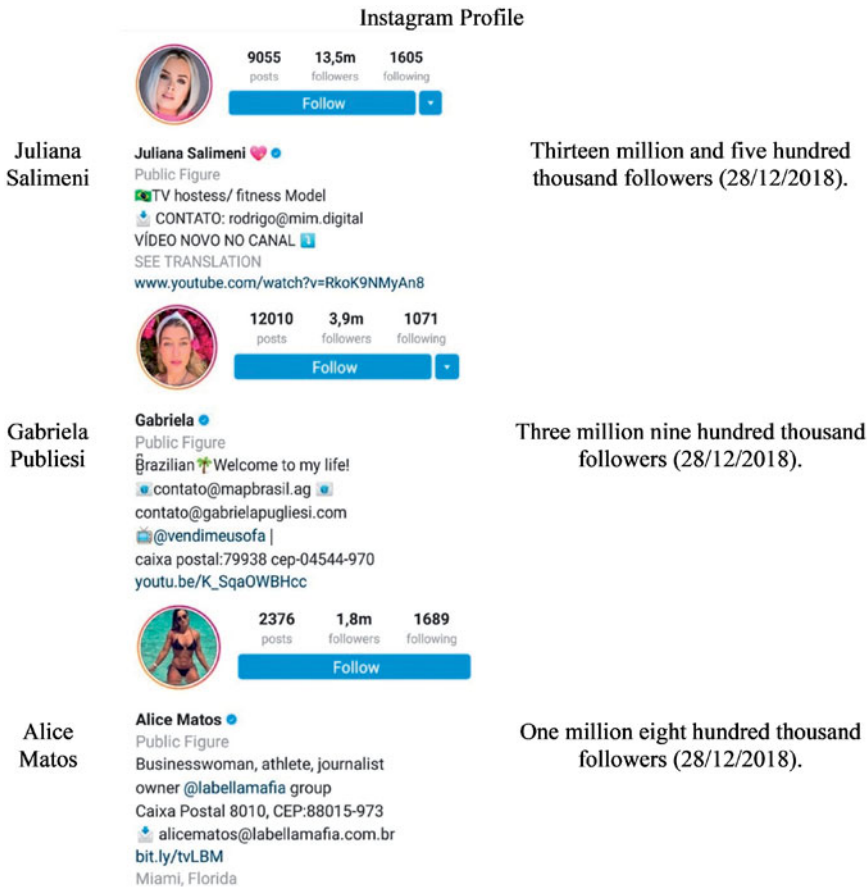


Figure 1. Instagram profile of digital fitness influencers. Source: Instagram (2018)

allowing for different interpretations of reality in visual terms (McCoy, 2017; Valentini et al., 2018).

In addition to these criteria, we sought to analyze influencers who had the same nationality and gender in order to observe possible similarities in the endorsed products, in the forms of communication and in the public that follows the influencer. Thus, three Brazilian female digital influencers who are considered to be fitness models were selected for this qualitative research: Juliana Salimeni, Gabriela Publiesi, and Alice Matos (Figure 1).

These influencers meet the criteria required by this study. Additionally, they have considerable differences in terms of the number of followers. Such a difference can be significant in the development of the communication strategies that the influencers adopt and in their attractiveness to the companies. This diversity contributes to an in-depth analysis of the forms of posts and the online interaction generated by profiles with more than a million followers.

Steps of data collection and analysis

A total of 60 posts made by Juliana, Gabriela and Alice during one month (1 October to 1 November 2018) that involved the announcement of brands and products were selected by the authors of this paper. Based on a qualitative approach, in the first step of this study, we sought to identify the characteristics of the posts. Each of them was therefore analyzed in terms of photograph and text posted by the digital influencer, as well as the number of likes and comments received in it. In particular, images and texts were analyzed using semiotic image analysis, which aims to identify the system of signs involved in the image and its description in order to determine how they produce meaning (Penn, 2000).

Following the guidelines described by Penn (2000), a dissection of the image followed by its articulation or reconstruction was performed. The steps were: (i) identification and cataloging of material elements (denotative inventory), which involved, first, the selection of the image and its textual component (texts, emojis, and hashtags), followed by the denotative description of them; (ii) analysis of higher significance levels, starting with a connotative understanding of what was described in the previous phase (i.e., this stage involves a work of interpretation or understanding of the image connotation); and (iii) elaboration of a report for the analysis of each post in tables using Excel. Figure 2 shows how the denotative and connotative descriptions were made. In the end, a mental map was developed for each influencer using Xmind 8 software to summarize the connotative aspects shown in her images and texts on Instagram. The authors acted as validation judges of the entire analysis process, arguing and adjusting the results of this step.

The next step involved analyzing the content of comments made by followers on each post. We used the critical incident technique (CIT), adapting it to an online study. CIT is a flexible method that can be used to collect data in interviews, observations and open-ended questionnaires (Fridlund, Henricson & Martensson, 2017). The critical incident is defined as a situation or event that stands out for its characteristics, which make it critical, distinct and relevant to the understanding of a given phenomenon or process (Flanagan, 1973). This work proposes the use of the idea of a critical incident to select and analyze followers' comments in these influencers' posts with an aim to observe the emotional, behavioral and cognitive responses of these subjects to the posts (Hettlage & Steinlin, 2006). For this reason, the posts' comments were collected (a total of 18,789 comments in 60 posts (Table 1)).

This stage is therefore an approach that adapts an already recognized and productive technique in science for application in an online

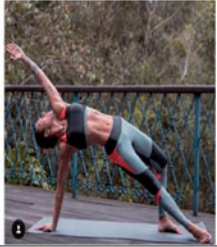
Post05 of Gabriela Publiesi	Date: 08/10/2018
Image 	Text: The silence and the contact with nature increasingly refine our attunement to the universe. We perceive our insignificance in the face of the greatness of life! Good morning (emoji of the hands together- prayer) (emoji of the plant in the earth) @bodyforsure
<p>Denotative aspect of image: Young, lean female figure in a yoga position, looks concentrated. Right hand is resting on the floor covered by a small rug, holding the body upright, raised hips, left leg slightly bent to the floor, and right leg extended, with right foot touching the floor with the rug. The left arm is lifted upward and the woman's face follows the direction of that arm (as if looking up at the sky). Hair caught, tattoos left arm the show. Tight top and workout pants in light gray, dark, black and orange coloring the slender body of the woman. The setting is apparently a wooden bridge, with "railing" in blue metal arabesques and in the background a greyish forest.</p> <p>Denotative aspect of text: Greeting followers through the good morning, use emojis and quote the brand of clothing she is using in this photo.</p> <p>Connotative aspect: Body in motion, attunement, yoga - Connection with nature, universe and with all living beings. Motivational phrase linked to the meaning of life - connection between beings, peace expressed by silence and concentration. Body as an extension of the connection with nature. Hand on the ground - approach with nature. Idea of Mother Earth - Indian culture - PachaMama. Essence of being is nature, the earth, which implies sustenance, fertility. Clothing appropriate to the occasion, it is an extension of the purpose of the activity. Clothing as second skin and tattoos as an expression of bodily freedom.</p>	

Figure 2. Example of denotative and connotative inventory for each post.

Table 1. Characteristics of posts selected for critical online incidents technique.

Influencer	Total collected posts	Collection period for posts	Total likes	Total comments
Juliana Salimenei	22	17/12/18	1,130,855	6,755
Gabriela Publiesi	23	18/12/18	958,930	4,770
Alice Matos	15	26/12/18	610,765	7,264
Total	60	X	2,700,550	18,789

environment. We refer to it as the Critical Online Incidents technique involving the following steps:

Definition of critical incidents: Critical incidents are seen as comments that received the highest numbers of likes and responses, representing extreme perceptions (positive and negative) about the post. From each post we selected the 3 or 4 most positive comments and the 3 or 4 most negative ones that had the highest index of interaction (likes and comments).

- Collection of critical incidents: Comments were collected and grouped into spreadsheets that were filled with additional information related to the number of responses and likes. The positive and negative meanings of the commentary were also described.
- Categorization of the incident: in this phase, a content analysis was performed on the incidents collected, with the data being coded into


Post03 of Juliana Salimeni	Post date: 04/10/2018
Image 	Text Today is #tbt day, so I chose this recent one but I could already miss it!! (emoji laughing and with tears) Our days in Orlando were even cooler because we had the support of @floriarentalcar who booked a huge and super stylish car for all our guys!! @Floriarentalcar is already my longtime partner and takes care of our car in all the trips that we do there!! Thanks (arm emoji straining the biceps) Number of comments: 633
Level of interactivity a. 9 likes and 3 comments b. 6 likes c. 5 likes and 1 comment	Comment Positive a. Wow, you're too beautiful!!!! Give me this body because I can't focus on the gym like that! I can only think of going under the knife for my butt (emoji with a sad face). b. Sis what are those legs?? (emojis of four hearts and two little faces with heart eyes) Top!! c. A body is a body. I should be ashamed of myself and go to the gym. (four-faced emoji crying)
a. 22 likes and 18 comments b. 0 likes and 10 comments c. 5 likes and 2 comments	Negative a. Only the face that seems to be a woman, because the body is masculine. I'm sorry, but it's what I think you should be more feminine. You're beautiful the way God made you, but not with that exaggerated musculature. b. Is she a woman?? She has man legs. c. To be perfect in a car like this is easy, I want to see in a Fiat Up!

Figure 3. Example of the application of the online critical incident technique for each post.

meaningful categories. The main topics discussed in the comments were observed and grouped according to the content covered in the texts. These categories are described in the Analysis section.

Figure 3 shows a spreadsheet detailing the process of applying the Critical Online Incidents technique to a post.

The use of these two investigative techniques enabled an integral analysis of the posts, observing the communication process that encompassed the images and texts promoted by the influencer (analyzed using semiotic image analysis) and the comments of the followers about them (analyzed using the Critical Online Incidents technique). Thus, this form of method triangulation provided opportunities to recognize the patterns of posts, as well as observe the different degrees of engagement generated from them and determine how much of that is product related.

Results

This section contains the findings of the research, which are divided into characteristics of endorsed brands and products, characteristics of posts,

Table 2. Number of brands endorsed by the influencers.

Influencer	Total brands	Most promoted brand	Product type
Juliana Salimeni	17	Chocolate Doce (8 times)	Clothing
Gabriela Publiesi	19	Body for sure (4 times)	Fitness clothing and beachwear
Alice Matos	13	Labellamafia (6 times)	Fitness clothing

and analysis of followers' comments. A subsection was also developed with the investigation's key findings, a summary form of central analysis.

Characteristics of endorsed brands and products

For one month, the analyzed influencers posted images and texts that endorsed brands and products from different segments. In total, 49 companies were covered through the demonstration of their product, its use and its description made by the digital influencer. Table 2 shows the number of brands endorsed by each influencer and the one most promoted by her. Among the digital influencers, Gabriela stands out for having more posts and endorsing more brands than the others. This element reflects the organizations' interest in having their names and products displayed on an Instagram profile, which is followed daily by almost four million people, facilitating the dissemination of information about the product (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014) and the desire to possess it with the aid of its endorser's image.

From the endorsements made by the digital influencers, 13 initial categories of announced products were established. These categories were grouped into five broad categories, showing the segments of promoted goods and services (Table 3).

Clothing was the category most endorsed by the digital fitness influencers. It is formed by products that dress and ornament the body, involving clothes suitable for exercise (fitness clothing), casual clothes, footwear, underwear and beachwear, as well as accessories such as earrings and glasses. The second most frequently endorsed category was food, represented by supplements and healthy, natural and/or organic foods without sugar, gluten, fat, oil and lactose. In third place are the esthetic and cosmetic and communication categories, in which the first category groups bodybuilding activities (personal training services) and body care from the use of goods and services aimed at the beauty market, such as hair products, beauty clinics, beauty salons, costume designers, makeup artists, and manicurists. In turn, the category of communication comprises activities for the dissemination of fitness and beauty fairs and events, media such as magazines and TV channels, and communication services such as marketing agencies. Finally, the travel category encompasses facilities and transportation services such as hotel accommodations, airfare, and luxury car

Table 3. Product categories.

No.	Broad category	Early category	Total of announcements	Percentage	
1	Clothing	Fitness clothing	10	31	39.7%
		Casual clothing	12		
		Accessories	2		
		Footwear	2		
		Underwear and Beachwear	5		
2	Food	Food supplements	6	19	24.4%
		Healthy, fit or natural food	13		
3	Aesthetics and Cosmetics	Bodybuilding services	2	11	14.1%
		Esthetic products	9		
4	Travel	Hospitality	3	6	7.7%
		Transportation services	3		
5	Communication	Beauty and fitness events	8	11	14.1%
		Communication media and services	3		
Total			78	100%	

rentals; this category of products is less frequently endorsed among the digital influencers.

Thus, all the brands and products announced by the digital influencers communicate from the endorser elements linked to body care, the cult to the beauty of form and shape, and the status generated from it (Crossley, 2005; Maguire, 2002; Powers & Greenwell, 2017). The endorsed products in the posts thereby help in exposing the fitness lifestyle, reflecting the bodily beauty, health, sensuality, and success (Goellner, 2008) of these digital influencers.

Analysis of posts

In the first stage of this study, we analyzed the characteristics of the digital influencers' posts, as well as the engagement metrics of each post. Thus, the number of likes, as a form of engagement based on the simple consumption of the information and images announced and the number of comments as a deeper engagement metric based on the active participation of the follower (Valentini et al., 2018) were observed. These analyses provided support for the definition of posting patterns that increase online engagement on Instagram, enabling a framework for how to successfully promote brands on social media using social influencers.

In general, the posts expose the body and its meanings through flashy photographs and spontaneous texts, transferring these symbolisms to the goods and services announced and bringing to the characteristics of the products an extended self (Belk, 1988, 2014). For this, the posts indicate a close relationship between product and influencer, which is not limited to its endorsement but also includes its use, giving credibility to the message communicated. Through the posts, the influencers also seek to interact with their audience, bringing them closer to the message so that they feel

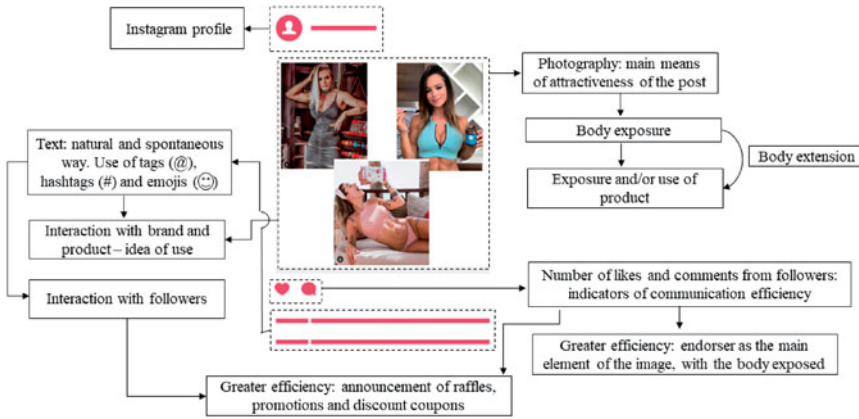


Figure 4. Mental map of posts.

active in building opinions about the post and, consequently, about the endorsed product. In the mental map (Figure 4), we demonstrate these elements that form the way in which products are endorsed by digital fitness influencers on Instagram.

The photos are the main attraction elements of these influencers' posts, reinforcing the idea of photography as the most attractive type of media for posts (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). The role of the body in the process of attraction to a photo was evidenced, acting as a powerful non-verbal communication channel (Bakhshi et al., 2014), especially by having women who adopt a fitness lifestyle as subjects of analysis. The photographs posted by the influencers that obtained high levels of interaction were those in which their bodies were shown in bikinis, lingerie, and tight clothing. These women have millions of followers in their profiles on Instagram precisely because the bodies they have are seen as a source of inspiration for many in their audience. The posts that highlight the corporeal are therefore the most liked and commented by people who encounter them virtually, generating greater virtual engagement and reinforcing the need to care for the body (Maguire, 2002), to strive to transform it (Scott et al., 2017) and to convey from it meanings such as beauty, health, sensuality and success (Goellner, 2008). Gabriela Publies's post with the highest metric of engagement - the number of likes (127,536) and comments (834), for example - brings an endorsement to the bikini Gabriela uses in photography (Figure 5a).

The way in which a product is endorsed in the posts also impacts the level of engagement. Exposed products without the presence of the influencer or exposed in photographs where the endorser is not prominent are not as useful as posts that give the digital influencer a leading role by exposing and/or using the product, which confirms the premise that the digital endorser, especially her/his body, acts as an avatar of brand value

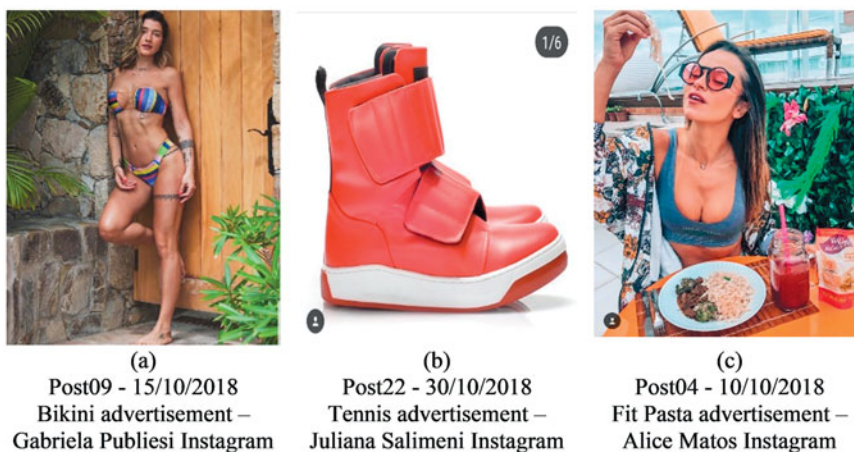


Figure 5. Post photo analytics.

(Powers & Greenwell, 2017). Photographs showing the faces of individuals increase the chances of receiving likes and comments, which significantly affects social engagement (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Valentini et al., 2018). [Figure 5b](#), for example, contains an endorsement made by Juliana Salimeni through the posting of photographs of the product without the presence of the influencer in it. This post generated the lowest level of engagement, obtaining the lowest number of likes (7,695) and comments (132) among the 22 published by Juliana on Instagram.

Additionally, many of the texts in the posts of influencers brought some emotional element of the endorser about the announced good or service apart from the tips on how to use and acquire it and the benefits generated by its use. This strategy can help the communicated message be viewed with greater confidence by followers (Lim et al., 2017), because in describing feelings such as love, happiness, desire, and dependence on products, endorsers convey the idea that they use them. These messages show the level of engagement between influencers and brands that involves cognitive, behavioral and emotional aspects (Cheung et al., 2011; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Dessart et al., 2015); this is reflected even in the photographs showing the endorser's use of the product ([Figure 5c](#)).

It is also important to consider some ways of generating interaction with followers from the posts made. All digital fitness influencers sought to use messages that led to engagement with the audience, especially in terms of contribution with comments of followers (Valentini et al., 2018), making the post more attractive, and receiving almost immediate response times (Power, 2014). Questions, motivational phrases, product instructions, invitations, promotional coupons, and sweepstakes were the strategies used. The latter in particular had great acceptance and interaction among the influencers for the benefits generated.

Thus, we identified that the more the endorsement highlights the digital endorsers, the better its acceptance and communicative efficiency. Such communication should be encouraged through images (McCoy, 2017) and texts that generate the most effective follower participation in building post success.

Analysis of followers' comments

In this second phase of the study, the comments of the followers were analyzed in the 60 posts made by the digital influencers. We understand that it is not enough to investigate the number of comments without considering their content which may reveal new results in terms of the opinions, feelings, and behaviors of the followers about the influencer and the promoted brand or product. Through comments, (potential) consumers exhibit behaviors and interactive and responsive dispositions, contributing to the logic of value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Virtanen et al., 2017). They can also encourage greater engagement by allowing other users to like and comment on the comment posted previously by the individual.

The critical incident technique was applied to the online context. It helped to identify in each post the 3 or 4 positive comments that generated more interaction (likes and comments) and the 3 or 4 negative comments that generated more interaction, disregarding those that did not address issues linked to the influencer or the product/brand endorsed and the comments of the companies themselves in the posts. A total of 18,789 comments were reviewed, and those with a higher level of interaction were copied in a spreadsheet (Figure 3) for later development of the categories. The results of this analysis are described in this section.

The reviews of the comments are divided according to each influencer in the following sections.

Juliana salimeni

When analyzing the positive comments in the 22 posts by Juliana Salimeni, three general categories were established: beauty of the influencer, desirable body and impressions of the product. In the first category, the followers praised the digital influencer for her beauty, commenting on and interacting with the others through phrases that extolled Juliana's image (Table 4).

In this category, there is no direct mention of endorsed products but rather an indirect recognition of the good or service promoted as an element that assists in the image of the influencer (Belk, 1988, 2014) in the formation or enhancement of her beauty. Therefore, the central focus of these comments is the endorser, who is seen as the ideal person for the

Table 4. Comments about Juliana Salimeni's beauty.

Level of interaction	Comments
17 likes	Post 08: A Barbie passing by on my timeline (heart and cheeky emoji with heart eyes)
6 likes and 3 comments	Post 13: Beauty and perfection have just been reenacted by Juju Salimeni
37 likes and 3 comments	Post 14: You're beautiful! I loved this look!
5 likes	Post 23: Perfect, goddess !!

Juju Salimeni Posts – Instagram (2018).

announcement of products related to embellishment, acting as a reference to her followers (Meyers, 2017). The comments praising the beauty of Juliana were those that generated more engagement, that is, more likes and comments of the other followers in comparison to the comments of the other two positive categories that will be described next.

The second category also involves comments that focused on the endorser and not directly on the advertised object. However, the focus here is more specific, because in the sentences posted by the followers the compliment is directed to Juliana's body (Table 5).

Beyond the admiration for the body of the digital influencer, these comments reveal the desire to be equal to her and to have her body. Thus, the interactions occur, observing the two developed categories, from the element of inspiration that the endorser generates to followers in terms of contemplation of the image of the influencer and the desire to bring this image closer to their reality (Meyers, 2017). Therefore, in these two categories, the influencer acts as a bridge between the follower and the promoted brand/product in this network of relationships (Segev et al., 2018), transferring her characteristics to the endorsed good or service.

In the last category, followers commented on their impressions regarding the endorsed products. These comments encompass the desire for the product, experience of use, and the feelings generated from it (Table 6).

The comments included in this category contribute to the exposure of the product and give credibility to the image of the brand, endorser, and advertising carried out. Although the level of engagement generated is lower, these comments contribute to the establishment of a higher level of confidence of the post from the descriptions of the experiences of individuals who corroborate what is disclosed by Juliana, communicating the positive results that the good or service brought and the satisfaction of its users. With this possibility, consumers of the depicted product feel engaged by the brand they use and with other consumers (Hanna et al., 2011). Additionally, there are comments describing how much the products are desired by followers. They represent a positive response to the endorsement strategies adopted, because they reveal the desire generated for purchase and use of the advertised product, guiding the identification of the follower with this specific brand/product (Booth & Matic, 2011).

Table 5. Positive comments about Juliana Salimeni's body.

Level of interaction	Comments
9 likes and 3 comments	Post 04: Wow, you're too beautiful!!!! Give me this body because I can't focus on the gym like that! [...]
6 likes and 3 comments	Post 13: Look at this woman's body... @someone ^a you want to have this woman's body, don't you? And you @someone2?

Juju Salimeni Posts – Instagram (2018).

^aFollowers can cite other people in the comments. The names of these cited individuals have been replaced by "someone".

Table 6. Positive comments about the products endorsed by Juliana Salimeni.

Level of interaction	Comments
2 likes	Post 10: Juju Salimeni, here in the countryside this coffee is being a huge success. Guys are loving it (three emojis of applause) [...]
11 likes and 1 comment	Post 16: Moroooooil [name of the supplement] is life! I take it (emoji of applause and emoji of face with heart eyes)
1 like and 4 comments	Post 16: great, I lost enough localized fat with it #perfect (two biceps).
6 likes and 3 comments	Post 20: My dream is these pants AAAAAH (emojis of two little faces with heart eyes)
1 like	Post 12: I know this brand of peanut butter through you, now here at home it is not missing! (emoji of face sending kiss with heart)

Juju Salimeni Posts – Instagram (2018).

In addition to the positive comments about Juliana's beauty and body and the endorsed products, it was possible to observe negative comments in 18 of the 22 analyzed posts. They were divided into the following categories: criticism about the product, criticism about the post, and criticism about the influencer. The first category grouped comments that describe negative aspects of the advertised good or service. They question the functionality of the product, its appearance, effectiveness and the harm to health that could be caused by it (Table 7).

These comments directly affect the image of the product/brand and the endorser, damaging their strategies of self-promotion, which can lead to the discrediting of the transmitted message. The degree of engagement they cause, however, has been low, indicating a disregard or disinterest among the other followers in such comments.

The second category is the criticism of the post. It involves comments that consider the information posted insufficient, the difficulty accessing the suggested links, and the excessive effects in the photographs. Such phrases reveal the failure of the endorser to expose information that is seen as essential for the product to be desired or acquired and the lack of a spontaneous and natural way to announce the product (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014). However, similar to the first category, these comments did not achieve high levels of engagement.

The third category included comments that criticized the endorser of the product, in this case, Juliana Salimeni. In general, they disapprove of the muscular body presented by this digital influencer in her posts (Table 8).

Table 7. Negative comments about the products endorsed by Juliana Salimeni.

Level of interaction	Comments
3 likes and 1 comment	Post 07: I use Gold [hair dye] but why does my hair look green?
2 likes	Post 02: This shirt is horrible, right? Good thing you're beautiful.
2 likes and 2 comments	Post 16: Wow, how many supplements are you taking! Don't you care about the negative consequences for your body?
1 like	Post 18: How much of a lie that your hair is tinted with @lecharmes! I believed you and bought it, but my hair is a mess! Stop lying.

Juju Salimeni Posts – Instagram (2018).

Table 8. Negative comments about Juliana Salimeni's body.

Level of interaction	Comments
22 likes and 18 comments	Post 04: Only the face seems to be a woman, because the body is masculine. I'm sorry, but it's what I think, you should be more feminine. [...]
47 likes and 13 comments	Post 06: This body looks like a man, very muscular.

Juju Salimeni Posts – Instagram (2018).

Table 9. Positive comments about Gabriela Publiesi's lifestyle.

Level of interaction	Comments
18 likes and 1 comment	Post 02: Every time I see your posts, I get a kind of energy so welcoming, so positive! I really admire this way of showing your love, joy, and connection to the things around you. I want to be like you.
2 likes	Post 05: And we will die, and we will not learn all that nature has to teach us (emoji of the heart)! Beautiful words (applause and biceps)

Gabriela Publiesi Posts – Instagram (2018).

These comments disassociated Juliana's image from the idea of femininity by highlighting the extremely muscular aspect of her body, questioning the extent to which the fit body ideal exceeds the individual's sexual identity. By awakening this controversy, the phrases generated the highest engagement among all categories analyzed at both the level of agreement (likes) and level of conversation (comments). Such messages can compromise the image of the product that receives the meanings of the body exposed by Juliana criticized by some followers.

Gabriela publiesi

Three general categories were established when the positive comments in the 23 posts of Gabriela were analyzed: the lifestyle of the influencer, desirable body/beauty, and impressions about the product. In the first category, the followers praised the digital influencer for her connection with nature and her spirituality expressed in the choices of food and physical activities (Table 9).

This category is indirectly linked to the endorsed products since the lifestyle based on natural and ecological products adopted and divulged by Gabriela imposes certain practices and forms of consumption.

Table 10. Positive comments about Gabriela Publiesi's beauty and body.

Level of interaction	Comments
50 likes and 1 comment	Post 06: This [photo] was a shot (emoji with drooling face)
12 likes and 1 comment	Post 07: A Greek goddess
26 likes and 1 comment	Post 09: Very prettyyyy
5 likes and 1 comment	Post 23: Guys and that leg? (Shocked face Emoji)
1 like and 1 comment	Post 12: Is it too much to ask for this belly for my life, @someone? (biceps emoji)

Gabriela Publiesi Posts – Instagram (2018).

Table 11. Positive comments about the products endorsed by Gabriela Publiesi.

Level of interaction	Comments
12 likes	Post 03: I think this idea [homemade manicure service] is awesome (emoji of face with heart eyes)
6 likes	Post 10: And this popcorn is also surreal (emoji of face passing tongue in the mouth - delight)
3 comments	Post 16: I've been drinking [tea] for 30 days and I'm loving it ... I'm not without it anymore. I traveled and took it with me! @desincha is life! (heart emoji)
24 likes	Post 19: I want this look now!

Gabriela Publiesi Posts – Instagram (2018).

This influencer interacts daily with her followers, providing opportunities for them to learn about her opinions, skills, and life (Vogel et al., 2015). Her posts seek to raise awareness among her followers about this style and encourage them to follow it, offering product tips for this acceptance.

The second category identified is composed of comments that praise the beauty and body of the digital fitness influencer (Table 10).

In general, the comments in this category generated the highest level of engagement among the positive phrases analyzed. They link the image of Gabriela to perfection, a deity, a facial and body beauty. As in the previous category, such comments are not product-oriented but are rather aimed at the endorser who transfers symbols of beauty to the goods and services advertised (Belk, 1988, 2014). The comments about the products were included in the last category. In this category, the phrases emphasize the quality of the products, the desire for possession, the experiences of use, and the feelings generated by them (Table 11).

These comments lend credibility to the endorser and endorsed goods because they reflect the positive aspects perceived by Gabriela's followers about the products advertised. Some comments describe the benefits of using the product and reflect consumer satisfaction. Other phrases demonstrate the admiration and desire of the followers for the products advertised, noting the efficiency of the announcement made by the endorser. Therefore, the comments of this category indicate an approximation of the follower with the product or brand endorsed in the process of interaction and identification of the person with what was announced (Booth & Matic, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011).

Table 12. Negative comments about the advertisement made by Gabriela Publiesi.

Level of interaction	Comments
5 likes and 1 comment	Post 22: But is the [coconut water in] powder natural?
52 likes and 2 comments	Post 04: This candy is made with pork skin (emoji with thumb down) [Is Gabriela vegetarian?]
8 likes and 13 comments	Post 20: Sis, are not you vegan? Because if you are, this candy is the basis of COW MILK, just to mention (emoji of three little laughing faces)

Gabriela Publiesi Posts – Instagram (2018).

Table 13. Negative comments about the credibility of Gabriela Publiesi.

Level of interaction	Comments
1 like	Post 06: Does she have any training in nutrition or physical education? Does she understand well biomechanics, kinesiology, macroabsorption and micronutrients of the human body? Please spare me. The fact that she has the beautiful body does not entitle her to have wisdom of what she speaks.
12 likes and 6 comments	Post 02: Were you invited to stay at the spa? Would you like to be clear if it is advertising or really a place that you would choose?

Gabriela Publiesi Posts – Instagram (2018).

In addition to the positive comments, it was possible to identify negative phrases in 17 posts related to the product (1° category), the credibility of the endorser (2°) and her announcement of certain products (3°). The most disturbing category among these is precisely the latter described. For demonstrating adoption of a healthy lifestyle, Gabriela is questioned by some followers because she endorses products seen as unhealthy or unnatural by them, which goes against the lifestyle proposal adopted by the influencer (Table 12).

In the comments above, the followers note the incompatibility between the ideas proposed by the endorser and the products she endorses. They question whether endorsed products are indeed natural (without food preservatives, for example), but especially if they are appropriate to be purchased by people who adopt veganism. It is important to mention that Gabriela is not vegan, but through her posts, that is the image perceived by her followers. For her followers, endorsing products that contain some animal remains is incompatible with the image of the influencer because they know about her lifestyle (Vogel et al., 2015). Through these comments, it is reflected in the choice of Gabriela as an endorser of certain goods, because for the public that follows her profile on Instagram, she does not symbolize this type of industry and therefore does not bring credibility to the advertisement (Jin & Phua, 2014).

This incredibility is also seen in the second category identified. It contains comments that question this endorser (Table 13).

This category reveals that some followers doubt that the digital influencer would use certain goods or services endorsed; some follows also doubt the

Table 14. Negative comments about the products endorsed by Gabriela Publiesi.

Level of interaction	Comments
3 likes and 5 comments	Post 16: Why is this tea so expensive?
52 likes and 10 comments	Post 20: They are really wonderful [fit sweet], but without need, as they cost almost 30 reais (emoji of sad face)
2 likes	Post 3: I've never been lucky with @singubr. I did it once and the work was horrible. The other time they cleared it. I would not recommend it.

Gabriela Publiesi Posts – Instagram (2018).

tips described by Gabriela to acquire a body similar to hers. These elements reveal distrust in the image of the endorser, thereby compromising two of the main advantages of this type of advertisement which are more confidence and attraction to the communicated message (Lim et al., 2017).

The last category includes negative comments about the product. Most of these comments criticize the high price of the good (Table 14).

Although they are products advertised as natural, unsweetened and suitable for a fitness lifestyle, followers believe that the prices are higher than expected. It is important to note that none of the posts made by Gabriela announced the prices of the goods. The public, therefore, acts as an additional source of information that reveals the price and experience with the good or service that may influence the purchase decision (Valentini et al., 2018). It is also perceived that among the digital influencers analyzed, Gabriela seems to focus on endorsing products that are aimed at a more financially selective public, announcing brands that charge a high value for the acquisition of their goods and services.

Alice matos

Alice's posts generate more engagement in terms of comments than the posts of the other digital fitness influencers analyzed. Unlike the others, Alice often responds to the phrases posted by her followers, so this form of communication is so widely used by her audience. A total of 7,264 comments can be seen in all 15 posts of this influencer. Due to the large number of comments, no phrases have been highly liked and commented on. This reveals that the degree of engagement between followers and posts is good, but the degree of engagement among followers is not high.

Concerning the positive comments, two categories were identified: beauty and impressions about the products. In the former, the followers write about the beautiful image of the endorser, which includes her body (Table 15).

This category then turns to the characteristics of the influencer and not of the advertised product. These characteristics, however, can reflect Alice's form of consumption, establishing the relation and transfer of meanings between product and endorser (Belk, 1988, 2014). The second category, in

Table 15. Positive comments about Alice Matos' beauty and body.

Level of interaction	Comments
9 likes and 1 comment	Post 11: Powerful
8 likes and 1 comment	Post 01: Beautifulllll
5 likes	Post 08: @alice you have the greatest stomach I've ever seen on a girl
7 likes	Post 09: I cry for that belly. I will be like this in the name of Jesus @someone.

Alice Matos Posts – Instagram (2018).

Table 16. Positive comments about the products endorsed by Alice Matos.

Level of interaction	Comments
2 likes and 2 comments	Post 05: It really is impossible to eat [sweet fit] a single spoonful (emoji of monkey with hands in the eyes) One of the best brands I have tasted so far! [...]
1 like	Post 07: Wow, I love the products of @nutrata (heart emoji) knowing that you trust then.
3 likes and 2 comments	Post 12: I already want to prove it [supplement], where do I find it?? (two palms)
7 likes and 2 comments	Post 13: I loved this bag [...]

Alice Matos Posts – Instagram (2018).

Table 17. Negative comments about the products endorsed by Alice Matos.

Level of interaction	Comments
3 likes and 1 comment	Post 06: Are those things you are wearing comfortable??
1 like	Post 03: Where do you purchase your bikinis?
1 like and 2 comments	Post 13: @alice this belt pack is from where?
1 like	Post 10: @alice @labellamafia I did not find these pants on the site

Alice Matos Posts – Instagram (2018).

turn, is directed to comments from followers on the goods and services advertised. They describe the experiences with the goods, the desire to own them and the feelings acquired from the post (Table 16), bringing cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements that guided and continue to guide the process of engagement (Cheung et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2015; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014).

Such comments contribute to a positive image of the brand, the product, and the endorser. They add information that encourages the purchase, crediting the quality and benefits of the advertised product (Centeno & Wang, 2017) and demonstrating the desire of followers to enjoy its proposed benefit.

The negative comments were found in 10 of the 15 posts made by Alice. They were encompassed in only one category called the post's criticism. Although the endorser is, among the other influencers investigated, the person who shared the most information about the products, the negative sentences are questions, doubts about the products that are not clarified with the information offered by this influencer or comments about the difficulty in finding the products in the announced links (Table 17).

Apart from the comments of post 06, the others raise questions about products that were not being endorsed but simply made up the scene in

the photograph and aroused the interest of followers. These products diverted the focus of the product being endorsed and may have compromised the disclosure strategy. This issue should be considered by companies and endorsers when developing posts.

Discussion: what are the key considerations for online engagement in posts?

We have discussed a new way for companies to seek online engagement with consumers through the use of digital influencers. By adopting such a perspective, we assume that online engagement can involve other actors that will determine how committed an individual will be in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral terms to a given brand or product (Valentini et al., 2018). In analyzing the posts of digital influencers who endorsed some goods or services in their profiles on Instagram, we assume that in this advertising method such influencers act as avatars of the advertised brands (Powers & Greenwell, 2017) and as bridges for such brands to reach potential consumers (Segev et al., 2018).

It is therefore a mediation process that promotes a reconfiguration of advertising consumption. An endorsement is placed in the personal platform of the endorsers, in the most natural way possible, as if it were part of their daily life, being accessible to all followers who can instantly interact with the post, in a frantic pace of relationship reflected in likes and comments. Therefore, digital influencers as mediators of the marketing message familiarize it with their followers. They normalize it, transferring meanings to brands from exposure of products to tell stories about their lives and goals expressed in the post in emotional, cognitive and behavioral terms (Cheung et al., 2011; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Dessart et al., 2015), generating more credibility, confidence and attractiveness to the announced message (Lim et al., 2017).

Our results also corroborate the premise that digital platforms enable distinct forms of engagement (Calder et al., 2009), establishing new configurations that affect relationship marketing and promotion strategies within the marketing mix. On Instagram, for example, engagement can involve four participants who play different social roles, expanding the process of co-creation of value (Coelho et al., 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Virtanen et al., 2017) through a tetrad network composed by influencer, follower, brand/product and other followers. In this network, all those involved want to be noticed; they wish to act in the construction of perception about what is being exposed. In the digital age, social actors seek virtual social visibility, striving to be involved and engaged, competing for the attention of others. Engagement metrics expose the results of this visibility.

On Instagram, for example, we could analyze two types of engagement, according to Valentini et al. (2018): the type of consumption behavior based on likes and follower count, and the type of contribution behavior involving comments. All digital influencers have a considerable degree of approval when we observe a large number of followers, reinforcing the impact and influence of these women on the opinions, feelings, and consumption behaviors of their audience. Such metrics indicate engagement but also recognition and reach achieved by digital influencers, that is, their popularity (Veirman et al., 2017; Virtanen et al., 2017).

Concerning the number of likes and comments, we could perceive the impact of the influencer's image to generate a commitment to the post. We emphasize the importance of photography as the post's primary means of attraction (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; McCoy, 2017) and the central role of the influencer in it by announcing the product. The endorser, in this case, uses her image, especially corporal, in the posted photos as a way to generate more engagement for this post, leaving the product in a secondary attraction function. Followers are interested in the influencers above all, so it is a wrong strategy to endorse the product in the profile of these individuals without their image being directly exposed in the endorsement photograph. The product advertised must corroborate the image that the follower has of the influencer. In this study, the products announced are related to the beauty, especially body, wealth and success of the digital fitness influencers (Goellner, 2008), reinforcing the hedonic content of the post (Virtanen et al., 2017). Therefore, posts with a higher level of engagement used photographs that emphasized the influencer more than the product, exposing her body, which reflects a sexual appeal but also reaffirms a lifestyle that should inspire followers to seek bodily transformation through consumption practices.

Through an analysis of comments, we identified that the lifestyle of the influencers should be considered and analyzed by companies looking for one of them to serve as an endorser in the virtual environment, especially in that person's online profile on Instagram. By following the daily life of an influencer through posts (Vogel et al., 2015), followers construct an image of a person with many characteristics beyond physical and beauty elements. Values, beliefs, and behaviors of endorsers are known and interpreted by followers so that any advertised product that disagrees with this perceived identity will be understood as a simple advertisement that does not fit with the modes of consumption of the influencer. Such a situation will negatively impact the credibility of the digital influencer and will not generate the expected results for the companies through the promotional strategy used.

Through the endorsement of products in the profiles of digital influencers, companies can still derive benefits from positive comments made

Table 18. Key findings of the discussion.

What are the key considerations for online engagement in posts?
Digital platforms enable distinct forms of engagement, establishing new configurations that affect relationship marketing and promotion strategies.
Digital influencers as mediators of the marketing message promote a reconfiguration of advertising consumption.
The digital influencers as mediators can transfer meanings to brands from exposure of products to tell stories about their lives and goals.
With the digital world, the process of co-creation of value has been expanding through a tetrad network comprising influencers, followers, brands/products and other followers.
We emphasize the importance of photography as the main means of the post's attraction and the central role of the influencer in it by announcing the product.
The lifestyle of the influencers should be considered and analyzed by companies that want one of them as an endorser in the virtual environment, especially in that person's online profile on Instagram.
The engagement can be characterized by a positive or NEGATIVE cognitive, emotional and behavioral involvement that has implications for the construction of the brand value, the perception about the product and the influencer.

by followers about their goods and services, aiding in the advertising carried out and the message communicated. Such followers identify more with the brand by being able to express their opinions about it and interact with other consumers or potential buyers (Booth & Matic, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011), thereby creating a sense of empathy and greater participation in the interaction promoted by the post.

At the same time, organizations are more exposed to negative comments that can be directed towards their products but also towards endorsers, which compromises the brand image. It is a risk that can be reduced through the correct choice of the endorser. For this, an analysis of the endorser's profile would guide the decisions to be taken, understanding that the characteristics of body exposure and their meanings are extended to the products advertised (Belk, 1988, 2014), especially in the fitness market.

From the survey results, we recognize that some engagement metrics on social networks can be a trap for organizations and digital influencers. The number of comments, for example, may reflect a high but negative personal involvement. Comments containing criticism about the influencer, the product/brand and the post itself are instances of this. The engagement can therefore be characterized by a [positive or negative] cognitive, emotional and behavioral involvement, which has implications for the construction of brand value, as well as perception about the product and the influencer. Summarizing this research, we present our key points of discussion in Table 18.

Conclusions

Our research has enabled us to better understand the forms of engagement generated through the endorsement of products made by digital influencers in their Instagram posts. The two main forms identified from this study were consumption (likes, follows) and contribution (comments), which

made it possible to indicate different levels of engagement developed from posting.

From the analyzed posts in particular, we noticed that the engagement of the actors in this relationship is significant. In addition to the connection between brand/product and (potential) consumer, two other agents emerge as having the ability to influence and be close to these two other elements, which has an impact on the image of the advertised brand and the consumer's perception about it, which in turn are represented by the digital influencers (direct subjects that determine the endorsement) and their followers (subjects that act indirectly in the construction of the post). With such an expansion in the network of relationships, more individuals participate in the process of value creation, making it more complex, challenging and equally advantageous.

Companies are adopting diversified strategies to engage consumers, such as geomarketing, multilevel marketing, and guerrilla marketing, among others, but none of these tactics has proven to be as efficient as marketing recommendations, known as word of mouth. Nothing can be more compelling than receiving input from people who comment, naturally or almost naturally, on their personal experiences with particular products; this represents a new challenge for companies and brands to deliver in an almost organic way. In this context, digital marketing comes in full force, influencers have become important agents for exposure and conversion into sales and results in real time, and companies have understood how they can benefit from the authority of these influencers to promote engagement with their brands.

In this context, we must consider that there is a weakening of traditional media on the one hand and on the other hand a new consumer who has behaved differently following the arrival of electronic social networks. People have begun to act as brands and brands as people, which seems an ideal panorama for the appreciation of digital influencers who, due to the expansion of the network, are no longer simply famous people but ordinary people who are close to us; this makes them more involved in consumers' decision making in regard to purchases. Influencers being closer to their audiences has brought a kind of "humanisation" for brands, because from a social network such as Instagram the public and the private are mixed and the opinions posted are seen as authentic, which leads to a relationship of trust and commitment.

Digital marketing is gaining momentum as we spend more time online. It is no longer difficult to make a choice at the time of purchase, since content creators and virtual celebrities have become a behavioral paradigm. In contemplating it, the brands saw a way to stand out in the market, gaining more visibility and becoming more attractive through the dissemination of their products online. Thus, with good planning, companies can reap the rewards of online presentation through digital influencers, which can

increase their relevance, proximity to the public, and the reach towards new customers. What is clear is that marketing strategies with digital influencers will increasingly depend on long-term partnerships, content co-creation and the building of nanoinfluencing communities around brands. Rather than targeting a purchase, the opinion of a digital influencer can instigate curiosity, generate needs and desires that did not previously exist, strengthen a particular perception about a brand and, depending on the case, re-signify a person's view of a company.

Finally, looking at the role of the digital influencer, we conclude that the closer the endorsement reflects the endorsers and their characteristics, the better the acceptability and the communicative efficiency of the same, which generates more engagement. Thus, a product must emerge as an extension of the influencers as a way to construct their images, making this endorsement strategy understood by the followers as a demonstration of the endorsers' usual consumption practices. In the digital age, likes and comments are the thermometers used to gauge relationships built and maintained from interaction that cannot be disregarded by marketers when developing communication strategies and online promotion.

Research limitations

The complete qualitative research protocol is long and requires investment in time, and time was a limiting factor for further deepening and process of immersion, analysis and reanalysis of the data.

Interaction between the researcher and the subjects is required in this type of research; however, as the focus was on the digital medium, we chose to make direct observations from the posts and messages in the profiles of the digital influencers.

Analysis of the narratives was circumscribed and complex, because there was a considerable amount of information. Addressing security with such narratives, and preserving the relationship, although circumstantial, among the data analyzed imposed research limitations.

The limitations noted above were an object of reflection by the researchers, but they did not prevent the study from achieving the proposed objective, which is characterized as a critical exercise of qualitative research that, we believe, contributed to this form of knowledge production in marketing.

Recommendations for future research

In looking at digital influencers as brand endorsers in this study, we recognize the diversity of roles played by these individuals who act not only as

advertisers of brands and products, but as determining agents in the development of new forms of consumption, needs and desires of individuals.

This diversity can be further analyzed in future studies in order to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this area of marketing that is still recent, as indicated below:

- Direct research with digital influencers and their followers through interviews and focus groups to further deepen engagement issues;
- Cross-cultural studies to verify interactions between influencers and their followers based on cultural differences between countries;
- Quantitative studies to verify the impact of digital influencers on consumers' purchase behavior;
- Analysis of possible differences in levels of engagement between men and women as followers of digital influencers.

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