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ARTIGOS

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCERS IN THE PURCHASE DECISION PROCESS: A STUDY APPLIED TO THE FASHION CONSUMER

O PAPEL DOS INFLUENCIADORES DIGITAIS NO PROCESSO DE DECISÃO DE COMPRA: UM ESTUDO APLICADO AO CONSUMIDOR DE MODA

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, we live in a society in constant evolution, marked by accelerated technological advances and now we are going through another social transition born from the third industrial revolution, also known as the digital age that was originated in the mid-twentieth century, the digital transformation that has transformed society in the way of thinking and acting. Since technology is increasingly present in our daily lives, more and more digital professions have emerged, as is the case of digital influencers, these professionals manifest themselves in different ways and through different social networks, such as bloggers, Instagrammers, and Youtubers. These have been playing a key role when it comes to promoting brands and products, helping companies to grow, and having a significant impact on consumers' lives. This study aims to understand the impact of digital influencers on the purchase decision process applied to fashion consumers. The methodology used in this dissertation is qualitative in nature and combines the carrying out of semi-structured interviews of an exploratory nature with digital influencers and the execution of a focus group for consumers. The results show that consumer decisions, in general, are influenced by digital influencers.

Keywords: fashion marketing; influence marketing; digital marketing; digital influencers; consumers.

RESUMO

Hoje vivemos em uma sociedade em constante evolução, marcada por avanços tecnológicos acelerados e agora estamos passando por outra transição social nascida da terceira revolução industrial, também conhecida como a era digital que teve origem em meados

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do século XX, a transformação digital que transformou a sociedade na forma de pensar e agir. Como a tecnologia está cada vez mais presente em nosso cotidiano, mais e mais profissões digitais têm surgido, como é o caso dos influenciadores digitais, estes profissionais se manifestam de diferentes maneiras e através de diferentes redes sociais, como blogueiros, Instagrammers e Youtubers. Estes têm desempenhado um papel fundamental quando se trata de promover marcas e produtos, ajudando as empresas a crescer e tendo um impacto significativo na vida dos consumidores. Este estudo visa compreender o impacto dos influenciadores digitais no processo de decisão de compra aplicado aos consumidores de moda. A metodologia utilizada nesta dissertação é de natureza qualitativa e combina a realização de entrevistas semi-estruturadas de natureza exploratória com influenciadores digitais e a execução de um grupo de foco para os consumidores. Os resultados mostram que as decisões dos consumidores, em geral, são influenciadas pelos influenciadores digitais.

Palavras-chave: marketing da moda; marketing de influência; marketing digital; influenciadores digitais; consumidores.

1 INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly digital and technological world where most of our time is spent in front of a screen and we are constantly influenced by what we hear and see, either through social networks or the people around us. With the evolution of technology, marketing is increasingly present in our days, being a fundamental tool for companies. Digital innovation in several sectors is an important motivation for better planning, promotion, and marketing. The influences of technology in fashion events are increasing across the world (ANJO *et al.*, 2021).

Digital innovation has been widely implemented in tourism events to minimize

costs, increase operating performance, and, most significantly, improve service quality and experience. Digital innovation also aids in the evaluation of alternative events as well as making comparisons and contrasts of available options (ALVES; SOUSA; MACHADO, 2020). The main goal of digital innovation, which brings together tools to facilitate growth, usage, and knowledge sharing, is to make tasks easier and to solve many of the problems of several situations. In 1935, one of the first concepts of marketing appeared through the American Marketing Association, defining marketing as the performance of business activities that conduct the flow of goods and services from production to the consumer.

With technological advances, different types of marketing have emerged, especially digital marketing, fashion marketing, and influencer marketing. In this way, companies began to invest in digital channels to reinvent their marketing strategies through digital influencers. From this perspective, the communication strategies of brands and companies are appropriate, in which the focus is directed to consumers who best fit the characteristics of the brand/campaign and who have influence over potential consumers. In the fashion and lifestyle, sector brands are changing their focus, betting mainly on digital media and leaving traditional media behind.

The pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation in tourism and there has been a surge in new, innovative digital initiatives to help fashion businesses. This paper provides a comprehensive treatment of the nature of fashion and practices in the digital context. This study aims to understand the impact of digital influencers on the purchase decision process applied to fashion consumers. The methodology used in this dissertation is qualitative in nature and combines the carrying out of semi-structured interviews of an exploratory nature with digital influencers and the execution of a focus group for consumers.

2 FASHION AND DIGITAL MARKETING

The concept of fashion is defined as a succession of short-term trends or novelties (GASCÓN; ARRIAGA; NIETO, 2012) and essentially means change. Nowadays, fashion must respond adequately to the demands of consumers, who are increasingly informed and aware of fashion trends (WIEDMANN; HENNIGS; LANGNER, 2010). For instance, brands recognize and seize the marketing opportunity that arises from society's environmental distress. There is an increase in the use of environmental appeals in advertising in times of acute environmental crises (e.g., nuclear disasters), suggesting that the rate of green advertising is linked to society's sentiment on environmental concerns (SAILER; WILFING; STRAUS, 2022).

Despite growing pressure on brands to align their practices with their policies, they shirk responsibility by claiming that it is the consumer's responsibility to make the right purchase decisions (HARTMANN, 2018). In fashion, marketing should be a guide connecting the different processes of creation, production, distribution, communication, promotion, marketing, planning, and control. We should always take into account that fashion is a very dynamic and diversified sector, the tools and strategies must be adapted to each specific market (JIN; MUQADDAM, 2021). Borges *et al.* (2019), considers that fashion marketing can be defined as the management of markets so that the exchanges, process, and relationships of a proposal to create value satisfy everyone involved in the process.

According to Gascón, Arriaga e Nieto (2012), the fashion marketing process is formed by four stages:

- a) knowing the market: This involves collecting all the appropriate data and information to successfully enter the market. For this, fashion marketing must respond to several requirements, such as which product lines should be

created, launched on the market to be produced in the different seasons, to which market segment directs the offer, what qualitative level should be offered, what quantities of the product should be produced, at what price it should be sold, what consumer wants and needs should be satisfied, and what distribution channels should be used to sell the product;

- b) planning: It consists of defining and planning the design, production, collection launch, sales, distribution, communication, promotion, and research activities for new products;
- c) acting: It is being consistent with the planning process and acting in the market;
- d) organize and Control: In this phase, all processes of design, production, launch, sale, distribution, communication, promotion, or demand of new products must be organized and controlled.

The leading role they play in engaging fashion consumers has been underlined in academic research (MILANESI; KYRDODA; RUNFOLA, 2022; DESSART *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, social media use transcends different consumer generations. The use of social media has been recently investigated by looking at the impact of the visual dimension and therefore the use of images to convey messages (HIGHFIELD; LEAVER, 2016; PEARCE *et al.*, 2020). From a business perspective, this has been related to the growing use of image-based social media, such as Instagram (JIN; RYU, 2019), and the need for companies to effectively use visual features in social media.

Among the numerous digital marketing strategies that exist, Faustino (2018) highlights those that he considers being the most important and, therefore, most frequently used by marketers:

- a) content marketing- this strategy aims to arouse interest in a certain product or service by using content. The

- creation of content can aim to sell, educate or inform about something related to the business or company;
- b) search engine optimization (SEO) - there is no point in having a good content marketing strategy and not knowing how to optimize it for search engines. The optimization process aims to optimize the content to help Google's robot more easily understand the hierarchy of that content;
 - c) social media marketing- it is essential to include social media in any kind of digital marketing strategy regardless of what it is;
 - d) e-mail marketing - e-mail continues to be one of the main working tools for businesses. It allows closer communication with customers and the creation of different types of communication strategies;
 - e) pay-per-click (PPC) - it is a strategy that aims to drive traffic and sales through paid ads in digital media such as social networks, Google sponsored links, etc;
 - f) affiliate marketing – to increase the sales volume through affiliates, paying them a commission every time they generate a sale of a certain product or service;
 - g) conversion rate optimization (CRO) – The target of any digital marketer is to improve the conversion of campaigns all the time, this process is called CRO (conversion optimization);
 - h) digital influencers - with the growth of social networks digital influencers emerged. They are people or professionals with a high number of followers in their profiles and who can influence other people's buying decisions;
 - i) influencer marketing - it is considered one of the most powerful marketing strategies, and involves partnerships

between brands and digital influencers to influence consumers.

Contrary to popular belief, influencer marketing did not start with the Internet. The ability to influence people has always existed. However, over time they have been increasing, this is due to the attention of brands (RAPOSO, 2020).

The history of influencer marketing is made up of three phases. The first one started around the 19th century. In this phase, brands discovered that influence could be done by other people that are not famous, such as fictional characters.

The second phase occurs when electronic media became popular around the world. The third phase occurs in the digital era, the era known through social networks, where it was possible to establish a direct relationship between brands and digital platforms. It was in the third era of influencer marketing that brands turned to digital influencers, in the first phase to the famous and later to those considered micro-influencers. Later on in this article, social networks and digital influencers themes will be explored more clearly.

According to Belanche *et al.* (2021), influence marketing is one of the main tools to establish the connection between brands and the target audience, this will develop with the help of the new content creators also known as digital influencers.

3 SOCIAL NETWORKS

The concept of social networks can be defined as a set of two elements, the authors representing people and the connections (ABBADE *et al.*, 2014). The emergence of social networks has caused the way we communicate to change becoming easier and easier to communicate with everyone. On the internet, social networks are the interpersonal relationships measured by the computer and happen through social interaction in search of communication (ROSA; CASAGRANDA; SPINELLI, 2017). There are several existing

social networks, however, the ones that stand out the most are Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube. Marketers want to increase membership on their social networks brand pages because the membership can enhance consumer engagement in the brands, facilitate viral marketing, and increase the brands' return on investment (JEONG; PAEK; LEE, 2013).

3.1 INSTAGRAM

Instagram is a photo and video capturing and sharing social networking service, launched in October 2010 and today owned by Facebook, which has quickly emerged as a new medium in the spotlight in recent years. Instagram offers its users a unique way to post pictures (filter manipulated) and videos using smartphones, thus it favors the use of images at the expense of textual descriptions (MARWICK, 2015). At the beginning of 2020, Instagram had 1 billion users who use the platform monthly and about 500 million who use it every day. Due to the fast growth of Instagram, its high engagement rate, and its role in generating communities around influencers and brands (KLOSTERMANN *et al.*, 2018), academic research is showing a growing interest in this social network (CASALÓ *et al.*, 2018; MILANESI; KYRDODA; RUNFOLA, 2022). Instagram has the potential to be a powerful tool for companies to communicate their sustainability, which is one relevant aspect of corporate social responsibility (CSR). More in general, it has been widely recognized that social media allow companies to solidify their CSR policies with their engaged audience (ALI *et al.*, 2015).

According to Marques (2018), Instagram is a must-have social media for sharing photos, but also videos. It offers the possibility to create and share videos for up to 60 seconds, with or without sound, and filters can be added, just like in photos. It allows us to capture and share moments of our daily life simpler. The photos are published via your smartphone, allowing you to use hashtags and identify people or

places. It also allows connecting to other social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. Whenever necessary, it allows you to send messages directly in private mode.

3.2 FACEBOOK

Facebook, an American company, based in Menlo Park, California, offers online social networking services. The social network Facebook was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. Facebook is an important social networking website used by firms to reach potential customers and to inform, persuade, and remind users about various products and services (PRIYANKA; SRINIVASAN, 2015). Many organizations upload their advertising content to attract target audience and obtain reviews of products or services on Facebook because it provides two-way communication through which marketers avail the opportunity of advertising and customers can analyze, react and purchase products or services (PARVEEN; JAAFAR; AININ, 2015) advertised there.

This social network was initially created for students at Harvard University, where they could share information about their personal lives. Soon this social network became popular and soon students from other universities were allowed to join it. Facebook is used for both professional and personal purposes, through this social network it is possible to contact anyone anywhere in the world at no cost.

3.3 YOUTUBE

YouTube officially created on February 14, 2005, was founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim. The video-sharing platform was created when the internet bandwidth size started to increase. Any user can share videos and view them. This platform is used by companies and digital influencers to share products and content as a form of entertainment.

A good presence on Youtube, besides increasing you or your business notability, can bring visits to your website and better results in your digital strategy.

Content creation is possible through social media, which is the main tool used to influence consumers. However, certain users can have a greater influence on consumers than others by having a significant percentage of influence, these are called digital influencers. A digital influencer is an individual who, with the help of digital content production, will appeal to people on the other side.

Nowadays, many brands use digital influencers to get in touch with consumers indirectly, either through a video or publication of a certain product. Digital influencers are opinion leaders with the ability to persuade their followers through their identification, that is, through interaction, credibility, and intimacy (ABIDIN; OTS, 2015).

Digital influencers promote behaviors and create new consumption patterns, dialoguing directly with their followers and enhancing brand convenience in a useful and less intrusive way (GAMMARANO *et al.*, 2020). These have a great influence on consumers' purchasing decisions, which can lead to being influenced in a certain way, to the point of becoming a trend or a must-have fashion (SUDHA; SHEENA, 2017).

Digital influencers can become a very effective means of reaching the target audience (SCHINAIDER; BARBOSA, 2019). These are considered a new type of gurus that through Word of Mouth influence the attitudes of consumers.

Digital influencers have a high ability to establish strong connections with other people, they can influence based on the number of followers they have.

What characterizes an influencer is what they create around them, from a loyal audience where they exert an influence on their opinions and attitudes. It is considered a good influencer someone who performs highly in terms of reach (ABIDIN *et al.*, 2021).

There are several types of digital influencers, namely bloggers, Youtubers, and Instagrammers.

3.4 BLOGGERS

Schmidt (2007) defines blogs as sites that are frequently updated and where content is posted regularly. The first fashion blogs appeared in the late twentieth century and are characterized by personal or collective publications related to trends, beauty products, lifestyles, and brands.

According to Chittendem (2010), bloggers managed to capture the attention of consumers and brands by sharing photographs of products they used.

3.5 INSTAGRAMMERS

The term Instagrammer means someone who uses Instagram, that is, all the people who use this social network, and some have higher visibility and become known.

Instagram is one of the social networks that has grown the most over the years. Instagrammers are known as users that with their publications can capture the attention of other users and have a good audience and good content. There are two types of Instagrammers, those who are already known outside the internet and those who use Instagram to have more contact with the public.

3.6 YOUTUBERS

According to Djafarova and Matson (2021), Youtube is a platform that allows interaction between users by sharing videos in digital format. It is an information dissemination tool for businesses, as the public turns to this platform to clarify doubts about various subjects.

Consumer behavior is defined as the state of the units purchased and the exchange processes involved in the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods, services, experiences, and ideas (MOWEN; MINOR, 2008).

Several factors influence consumer behavior, namely cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors.

Consumer decision-making consists of the set of processes involved in recognizing problems, finding solutions, evaluating alternatives, choosing among options, and evaluating the results of the choice. It is a constructive process, that is, consumers make decisions continuously and the process employed is influenced by the difficulty of the problem, knowledge, consumer characteristics, and the characteristics of the situation (MOWEN; MINOR, 2008).

The decision-making process consists of five stages, problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior.

4 METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION

Based on a qualitative approach, to understand the role of digital influencers and the process of influencing digital consumers, we did 2 interviews with digital influencers and a focus group with 10 participants.

4.1 INTERVIEWS

Two interviews were conducted with digital influencers from the fashion and lifestyle industry. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the role that digital influencers have in consumer decision-making.

Interviews are essential when we wish to map specific universal practices, beliefs, values,

and systems, where conflicts and contradictions are not spelled out (DUARTE, 2004).

The purpose of interviews is to explain the participants' point of view, and the way they think, interpret or explain their behavior in the natural context under study (COUTINHO, 2011).

In the interviews, the same questions were asked to each of the digital influencers so that it was possible to make a comparison about the working method of each one, concluding that both digital influencers take into account the interests of consumers and know them.

4.2 FOCUS GROUP

The main goal of the focus group is to understand in what ways they are influenced by social media and digital influencers.

The participants in this focus group are in an age range between 18-30 years old, with male and female participants and different geographical locations.

According to Malhotra (2001), a focus group is an interview naturally conducted by a trained moderator with a small group of respondents. The main purpose of focus groups is to gain deep insight by listening to a group of people from the appropriate target audience. Typically, a focus group consists of 8 to 12 members, and this group is homogeneous in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

During the focus group, several questions were asked to understand how consumers are influenced by digital influencers or digital media, some of these questions and answers are mentioned below.

Table 1 - focus group illustrative phrases of participants

What is digital influence for you?	
Participant H	“From my perspective digital influencing is make me change my personal opinion based on the opinion of others and this content is passed on to me through social media. It’s the change of behavior based on another’s behavior that is influenced by the digital medium.”
Participant E	“Digital influence is all the external opinions and attitudes that we receive from what surrounds us, that we receive in the form of information through digital platforms and that will influence the way we think, act and say things relative to something in a digital way.”
Participant I	“For me, digital influence is a person influencing people they don’t know. For example, being able to influence people to buy a product using the internet because they say it’s good, because to have digital influence you must have the trust of the people who are on the other side, and in that way, digital influence is people trusting my word not knowing me directly or personally.”

Source: authors.

Table 2 - focus group illustrative phrases of participants

Before buying something, do you consider other people’s opinions?	
Participant F	“Rarely, when I want to buy something I just try to evaluate the product and do a little weighing before I buy it.”
Participant D	“Always, especially if it’s online shopping I always need to know other people’s opinions to see whether or not I’m making a good choice about the product or service I want to purchase.”
Participant G	“Yes, in certain situations I always end up asking other people for their opinion, either from a close friend or through Youtube videos.”

Source: authors.

Table 3 - focus group illustrative phrases of participants

Do you feel that by following digital influencers you become more consumerist with a product they show and sponsor?	
Participant E	“No, although I am aware that following digital influencers greatly influences people to be more consumerist for all the products they sponsor.”
Participant H	“I think that we can take a simpler perspective on this issue. Whenever the word consumerist or consumer is generated, people immediately think of superfluous goods like clothes and games, but often what happens is that we are influenced by the little things, for example, changes in eating habits, often simple things that are instilled in us through social networks.”
Participant I	“No, I feel like I’m a more objective consumer, instead of looking for what I want, I already know what I want and usually I have already a formed opinion about the products.”

Source: authors.

Table 4 - focus group illustrative phrases of participants

How do you think digital influencers have impacted your life?	
Participant F	“Currently, because of the whole pandemic situation we are in, I feel that digital influencers have had a very positive impact on the mental health of the younger population by the content they create to entertain us.”
Participant H	“I think that they end up being too present in everyone’s life. They indeed end up having an impact on everyone, because everyone wants to know about other people’s lives and social networks serve to do just that, even those who are against it always end up knowing because the information passes in front of our eyes and here there are two options, ignore or absorb.”
Participant E	“The influencers that I follow are people who make me grow and expand, and in that way impact my life.”

Source: authors

Table 5 - focus group illustrative phrases of participants

Do you consider that today digital influencers can influence more than traditional Media such as television and radio?	
Participant C	“No doubt about it, radio not so much, but television has moved into a third tier, social media first, followed by radio and then television.”
Participant H	“It ends up happening so much, in a crazy way, influencers make it into professions that they’re not even meant to have, many of them didn’t even study for that, but because they are good digital influencers television ends up getting a hold of them and wanting them to be a part of it 24/7. Influencers are an easier form of television and radio because it’s simply on the small screen that is the screen of our cell phone and that we take everywhere.”
Participant J	“Yes, and that’s because digital influencers at least the ones I know have their autonomy and say what they want on social media. Traditional media are controlled by people and hierarchies.”

Source: authors.

Table 6 - focus group illustrative phrases of participants

How do you think the profession of digital influencer is seen? Do you think it is a futile profession or a profession like any other?	
Participant G	“From my perspective, I would like to make a comparison because many of these digital influencers end up being freelancers - I say this from the point of view that one month the income they can take out ends up being a value that for them can even be a high value and the following month they can’t have a forecast of what they will earn at the end of the month. I consider it a profession because, from the moment they manage to generate income and pay the bills, it’s a profession like any other. It requires some financial management, but it always ends up being uncertain the next month.”

Participant I	“I think there is a lot of taboo around this profession because many people don’t think it is a profession. I think it is not a futile profession, it is a profession that brings influence to many positive and good things in the world. We don’t see much of the work that is behind this profession, because there is work and there needs to be work, I don’t see the digital influencer as a person who only uses a cell phone, that’s not the case, because people have lives. In my opinion, it’s not a futile profession and I even think it’s an undervalued profession right now.”
Participant F	“I consider it to be a useful profession like any other, this one has advantages such as recognition and easiness in some areas. However, it also has many disadvantages, such as its salary and hours not being fixed.”
Participant H	“This is a difficult question, I even think I can consider being an influencer as a profession, but from my perspective, it’s a very facilitated profession, it’s thankless for a viewer to see and try to achieve a more solid and stable profession and these people end up building their profession on digital content that ends up being more facilitated.”
Participant B	“I have a different opinion here, a lot of times we think that the digital influence factor ends up making their life easy and we end up looking at a lot of them and we want to have that, we want to have that life, but that’s not easy. We have to have a lot of consistency, a lot of work behind it, and not just make it look like it’s easy.”

Source: authors.

5 CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

Marketing is a very complex and diversified area and is increasingly present in the daily lives of people, brands, and companies. It is composed of several types of marketing, namely fashion marketing, digital marketing, and influencer marketing that were addressed throughout this dissertation. Digital influencers are a fundamental key in this area, as they are a tool to promote brands and communicate with consumers. These are distinguished by Instagrammers, Youtubers, and bloggers. These concepts originated through the platforms they use to hold influence over their followers.

In the scope of this study, two analyses were carried out: one from the influencer’s perspective and the other from the fashion consumer’s perspective. From the digital influencers’ perspective, through semi-structured interviews directed to digital influencers in different areas of fashion and

lifestyle, it was obtained an insight into the marketing practices adopted, specifically in terms of orientation to fashion marketing, influencer marketing, and digital marketing. Regarding the interviews, two digital influencers from different areas were asked the same questions so that it is possible to analyze and compare the preferences and working methods of each one.

From the fashion consumer’s perspective, a focus group was set up to study the impact of social networks and digital influencers on the purchase decision-making process.

With this focus group, we conclude that digital influencers are undoubtedly determinants in the buying decision process of fashion consumers. They have a high influence on their consumers, influencing the way they act. In the questions developed in the focus group, all agreed on what concerns were being influenced by the influencers more than what they wanted, however, they have different opinions regarding this profession.

Being a profession still recent in Portugal some consider that it is not a useful profession and that it is futile not recognizing all the work and programming that is behind the final result, on the other hand, some recognize this profession as a normal profession that requires work, planning, dedication as all existing professions.

In future research, it will be fundamental to opt for a mixed methodology, of quantitative and qualitative nature simultaneously, through semi-structured interviews with digital influencers and fashion brand representatives, focus groups with digital consumers, and administration of surveys to consumers of different gender, ages groups, and geographic locations.

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