Brands and Digital Influencers: Agencies managing influencer advertising campaigns.

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Abstract

Communication carried out through digital channels, has proved to be quite effective when compared to traditional advertising, exerting a great influence on the purchase decision, which constitutes a challenge and opportunity for brands. In this way, there has been a change in the creation of brand value, now determined by recommendations, mainly on social networks carried out by digital influencers.

The present study explores the role of agencies working with influencer advertising, specifically how brands can have better results, and benefit from agencies managing campaigns and influencers, instead to establish a direct relationship with digital influencers.

Given the relevance of the topic but its novelty as a field of study, was followed a qualitative approach, namely interviews with agency managers and influencers.

It was possible to detail the emergence, what is currently happening between brands, agencies, and influencers, what constitutes the basis of the business, and how their relationship is structured.

Keywords: Influencer marketing; Advertising Agencies; Digital Influencers Agencies; Brand Management

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the evolution of the digital world and the emergence of new social media platforms, new forms of communication have been developed. Social networks are increasingly being used by consumers to connect with each other, but also with brands and vice versa (Voorveld et al., 2018).

Influence Marketing has exploded in less than a decade especially driven by digital influencers, the new opinion leaders in social networks who accumulate many followers and engage with their community (Tanwar et al., 2022). The consumer follows the digital influencer in one or several of the platforms for which it creates content, it is because it identifies with the themes addressed and with their lifestyle (Ju & Lou, 2022) and consequently recognizes it as a reliable source of recommendation (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this process of influence, there are thus variables prior to the content created by the influencer and received by the consumer, which is defined by the brands and/or agencies that outline the campaign itself.

It is therefore pertinent to address this relationship of agencies with brands and digital influencers, and their role in digital marketing strategic plans. This is a current theme, which has shown an exponential evolution in recent years (Tanwar et al., 2022), with a growing number of content creators, the emergence of new ways of analysing real-time data, increased brand investment in influencer marketing, and consequent increase in the reach and audience of its publications (Gräve, 2019).

When communicating their brand through this type of strategy, companies must be careful when implementing it. The influencer must have the voice of the company and, with this, be aligned with its values and beliefs, otherwise, both parties will lose credibility with their audiences. That is, the followers of the influencers will evaluate the brands, products, or services that they are communicating, considering whether they are in line with their typical usual content (Belanche et al., 2021).

Recognizing the difficulties and challenges faced by companies and brands, when considering following an influencer marketing strategy, this research wants to deep into the universe of agencies, and the following research question was stated "How does agency intervention benefit the brand in managing campaigns with influencers?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INFLUENCER MARKETING AND BRANDS

Influencer Marketing is not a recent concept, it is just used differently today. Bloggers already exerted a great influence on the market with their opinion articles, usually written, expressing themselves on the most diverse topics (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Today, this concept has undergone some changes. This type of strategy has been following developments and adapting to new technologies (Martínez-López et al., 2020).
This concept emerged through the lack of opportunities to advertise on social media. In this way, professionals saw influencers as an effective strategy to communicate their brand to the right audiences (Hudders et al., 2021). The fine line between paid content and organic content is what makes this type of marketing strategy so powerful. Consumers are more willing to react to this type of communication when it is done through trusted people rather than traditional company advertisements (Feng et al., 2021). Social networks thus promise a meaningful engagement between the brand and the consumer. However, an influencer is needed to bridge the gap between both parties. This type of strategy allows reaching a greater number of people who, in certain cases, are reluctant to communicate with certain brands (Martínez-López et al., 2020).
 In fact, it appears that, by using this approach, brands can be more impactful, achieving, for example, a great increase in notoriety (Childers et al., 2019). Influencer marketing seems to be the best strategy to build stronger, more meaningful, and lasting relationships, compared to traditional media, insofar as it offers a sense of proximity to customers (Belanche et al., 2021).
In addition, influencer marketing presents some challenges that must be considered in strategic planning when communicating in this way. Current generations are increasingly critical as they are informed. This can represent greater skepticism towards influencer marketing campaigns (Belanche et al., 2021; de Jans et al.,

2020). Consumers feel the need to identify with brands, with what they offer, and with the influencer communicating it. In fact, the audience can understand when the communication, on the part of the influencer, is not being organic, natural, and authentic (Belanche et al., 2021; Ju & Lou, 2022).

2.2. THE INFLUENCER MARKETING STRATEGY

It is common to refer to an influencer as someone who uses social networks, where he has a large number of followers, for a narrative about his personal lifestyle, generating involvement with those who identify with his principles (Ye et al., 2021). It should be noted that, according to the number of followers, can be made a distinguish between micro-influencers (up to 10,000 followers); meso-influencers (from 10,000 to 1,000,000 followers) and macro-influencers (over 1,000,000 followers) (Ye et al., 2021). However, it should be noted that these data depend on country to country and their number of inhabitants.

In fact, a digital influencer is also a consumer with the difference of having greater experience and knowledge in the universe of social networks. This makes their followers consider their opinions on certain topics (Belanche et al., 2021). On a spectrum between celebrities, but with high proximity to their audience, this new category represents a great opportunity for brands to establish themselves in the digital world. They are recurrently referred to as "microcelebrities" who bring a new approach to marketing. Unlike so-called celebrities, who reach audiences globally, influencers direct their efforts to more targeted niches, which makes them more "human", making their communications seem more authentic, conveying trust. By focusing on more specific segments (fashion, lifestyle, sports, among others) social media users can be more selective in the content they consume, so their aspirations are very much in line with what influencers are transmitting, revealing themselves to be fundamental for future purchase decisions (Belanche et al., 2021).

In this sense, it is necessary to consider the costs that each influencer represents in the budget and in the brand management process. Working with macro-influencers can be more expensive, however, managing the relationship becomes simpler (Kay et al., 2020). On the other hand, partnering with different influencers can even become more profitable and sometimes reach even more people. The truth is that sometimes managing so many influencers can become a difficult obstacle to overcome (Haenlein et al., 2020).

In order to outline a strategy, it is necessary to measure results and define KPIs so that it meets the objectives set by the brand and so that they can be reformulated and adapted along the way. Whatever the type of media used in brand communication, marketers always work around the numbers associated with campaigns (Woods, 2016). And this fact explains why still today, the key performance indicators used to evaluate an influencer advertising campaign, follow the same rules or traditional metrics but are adapted online (Navarro et al., 2020). Park et al., (2021, p. 597) even say that seems to be "an obsession in marketing to simply focus on reach as the only key performance indicator", which lead some brands to prioritize macro-influencers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Based on the theoretical approach presented, the research developed around influencer marketing is somehow limited, mainly due to the still recent novelty that constitutes this area. As this is a current topic, the present work intends to compare the perspective already developed around brands and influencers, and even some that consider advertising agencies, but adding an emerging element to it, which is the case of influencer marketing agencies.

It was appropriate to employ the qualitative paradigm. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) define the qualitative approach as the study of things in their natural state, considering the interpretation of the facts and the meanings people attach to them, providing a complete picture of a particular phenomenon and its environment. It has, therefore, an inductive approach, which examines the way individuals portray the social environment (Bryman & Bell, 2011). So, it is possible for the observer to focus on a small number of cases, seeking to understand them in depth (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2002).

For the collection of qualitative data, interviews were carried out. These allow to formulate flexible questions, leaving the direction of the interview open-ended considering the interviewee (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2002). Thus, according to Flick (2018), in this type of study with an exploratory character, the interviews are crucial

to understanding the process and, in this case, to achieve the goal of understanding how campaigns between brands and influencers work, and how influencer agencies operate in this context. Also, in the context of advertising, scholars have in the past used interviews in qualitative studies to better deep drive on professionals' experiences and know-how in the sector (e.g. Childers et al., 2019; Haley et al., 2014).

The interviews were carried out with specialists involved in the process: agencies and influencers. The interviews were semi-structured, that is, they were based on a script of pre-standardized questions, but to allow their adaptation during the interview to enhance the interviewee's responses. This guide was created, based on the research question and literature review, and with themes outlined with the intent to help further analyses and discussion.

Two agency managers and three digital influencers were interviewed. The interviews had an average duration of 30 minutes and were conducted in person, entirely recorded and transcribed, with the consent of the interviewees.

For reasons of confidentiality, the identification of agencies and the name of the interviewees were omitted and coded to allow their distinction and use in the topic of analysis and discussion of results (Table 1).

Table 1 – Characterization of interviewees

Gender	Type of Agency/Influencer	Size	Location	Agency Cargo	Reference Code
Female	Influencer agency	Medium	Local _Portugal	CEO	AG1
Male	Marketing Influencer agency	Large	International	Country Manager	AG2
Female	Travel and Photography	+10.000 followers	Local Portugal	Digital Influencer	IN3
Female	Parenting and Wellness	+50.000 followers	Local Portugal	Digital Influencer	IN4
Female	Travel and Fashion	+ 100.000 followers	Local _Portugal	Digital Influencer	IN5

4. RESULTS

To interpret the qualitative data, the thematic analysis method was chosen. The themes were previously defined after the literature review and allow the semi-structured interview structure definition. According to Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and describing patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79)

To helps to answer the question that drives this research "How does agency intervention benefit the brand in managing campaigns with influencers?", the "intervention" was approached through the process of structuring an influencer marketing campaign, and the relationship between brands-influencers-consumers.

The analysis allowed the organization and structure of the results of this study, considering three specific thematic areas: Campaign Design and Contact; Content Creation and Analysis of Campaign Results.

4.1. CAMPAIGN DESIGN AND CONTACT

 Brands that prefer to use influencer agencies to establish these partnerships do so mainly for convenience and trust, as highlighted by interviewee AG2 "*The first point, because any company uses an external entity, is the convenience of the operation.*"

Specifying the "convenience" can be related to the access to the strategic components, tools, and knowledge of the application of metrics, which in-house do not have; it could be about the knowledge and particularity of the negotiation, or even it could be a shift in the product offering of the agency you are working with.
In Portugal, as also mentioned by the influencers interviewed, the method of working with agencies is the most used. IN5 says that it is normally contacted "*In Portugal through agencies, internationally through their*

own brands (in general)", which demonstrates where the national market is. Influencer IN3 also confirms this fact: "*Usually contact via agencies is much more frequent."*

However, even the work with influencer agencies is quite vast. There are several types of agencies, described by AG2, such as representation agencies, agencies that work with affiliation models, and strategic consulting agencies like the one where he works (see **Erro! A origem da referência não foi encontrada.**).
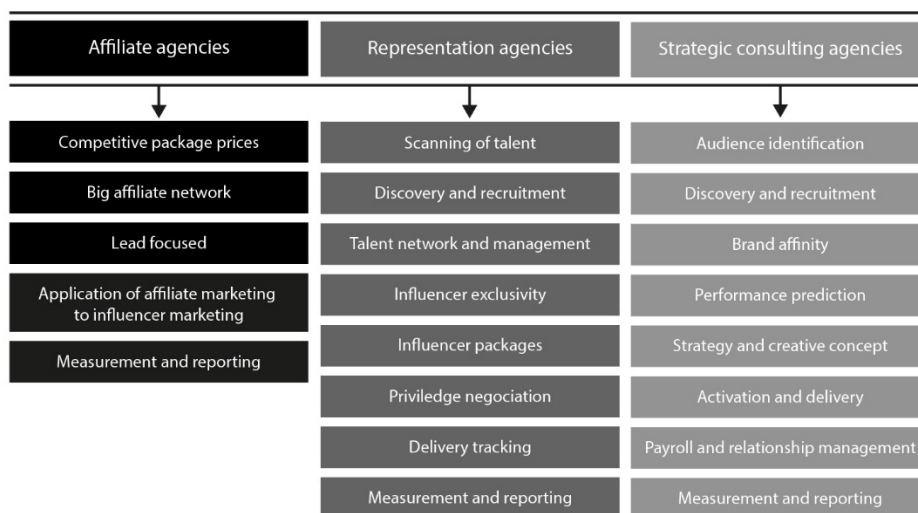
Figure 1 Agencies types and characteristics. Source: Own elaboration based on Interviewer AG2

In this way, the work with agencies can be very comprehensive and adaptable to the marketing strategy of each brand. This strategy is then defined through KPIs that can come from the brand itself or also from the agency.

In the case of AG1, which agency works as a representation agency, considers that the main characteristic for choosing influencers is consistency and regular work.

Therefore, it is necessary to work, have consistency and regularity. At AG2, which works in the field of consultancy, these criteria are not only different, but can also start from the brand "*It depends (...) the maturity that the brand has in this field, or not just the brand, attention. We also have many clients who are agencies. But it depends on the maturity that the client has for the definition of these KPIs. (...) "The metrics or measurable issues, that a content creator, influencer, must have in order to participate in a campaign, are KPI's that are defined from the outset between us and our client, because they are variables."*

In this work with agencies, the briefing and design of the campaign is based on the brand or is defined between both parties and can be as simple as a coverage criterion as explained by AG2, and this is the most basic level of all. Or as complex as the briefing be very specific and then the agency has to translate it into metrics and find the influencers that fit the campaign by negotiating with them. For this reason, the design of the campaign often ends up being on the side of the agencies. It is also at this stage that the need for external partnerships such as producers and photographers is considered, for the creation of content, also for the brand's networks. The two agencies provide two different perspectives of the business, also allowing the definition and understanding of the different types of agencies structured that exist in this influencer advertising and content creation world.

4.2. CONTENT CREATION

Once the negotiation with influencers is concluded, content creation begins. The networks for disseminating these contents can be varied depending on the strategic nature of the campaign. The two agencies have similar experiences, reporting, having in the same proposal, the influencer and the brand sharing content on their social media platforms, since the ultimate goal is the same, reach your audience.

AG1 reinforces that the exposure of the product in the influencer's channel is much more advantageous in the sense that the public to which it is being presented is faithful to the diffuser of the message, producing better results, and, later, closing this link in the company's social networks. brand, also directing the consumer to them.

IN5 confirms that "I'm usually asked to share photos/videos on my platforms. Despite considering both methods important.", such as IN3: "Of the campaigns I did, in all of them, I had to share content to my own platform with brand/product identification."

As for the networks, on which the content is broadcast, they have different purposes. AG1 says: "Now in terms of social networks it's like this: more and more our effort in the market has been for brands to work with, effectively content creators. (...) because they have originality and authenticity, which is necessary to do this work."

The use of assets from the brand itself to support the creation of content was also an aspect highlighted, these assets thus enhance the creation of content, especially by AG2.

Finally, and because influencer marketing is originally digital, it was necessary to understand at what point, or not, an extension of these campaigns to traditional marketing means would exist. AG1 confirms that there is already a need in the market to transpose content to other media, although always with the focus on digital.

"Our focus is totally digital, but luckily the market has come to us, and we made a digital campaign, and suddenly we encompass all other media. (...) We, from the beginning, were always available and very open. For example, radio, which has used influencers a lot to leverage audiences, has used a lot. I think the radio, and some television channels, have also done this. But radio is an example of success."

4.3. ANALYSIS OF CAMPAIGN RESULTS

After carrying out the campaign, it is essential to analyse the results of the campaign to measure the return on investment, and there are several methods and metrics to do this. AG1 confirms that it is precisely this analysis and metrics that has made the agency grow, as it is the basis of any negotiation:

The use of metrics that already exist in the digital marketing market, to measure these results, is very recurrent in the influence marketing market, as confirmed by AG2, although he does not consider them the most appropriate: "80% of the cases in the ROI application models in influencer marketing, at least the same type of metric logic is used that is used in any type of digital performance marketing." This is the way to provide information to brands, in metrics that they know to calculate ROI, since characteristics such as positioning, and awareness created by the influencer are not easily measurable. However, AG2 considers that through these metrics it is possible to obtain some interesting data, and in his agency, they cross them through their own platform There are platforms that are easier with visible metrics or not, but we ask for everything possible, with clarity, with veracity and proof of the veracity of those data. He also explains some more metrics for measuring reach and feedback, such as the AVE, which he considers one of the most interesting, but which does not have a totally fixed criterion.

"*Based on the crossing of all this, some interesting things can be taken away for the ROI. The issue of traffic, the issue of some affiliation processes, and even sales processes. There is always the issue of coverage, the notion of positive, negative, or neutral feedback about the brand.* Another metric that is a bit inherited from public relations, but which has its own value and that is sometimes an interesting value for brands is called AVE, the Earned Media Value or Advertising Equivalent Value, which is nothing more than trying to make the parallelism between the number of impressions generated, or the number of interactions generated, or for the traffic generated, or the clicks generated by the organic part of the campaign, how much would it be necessary to invest in paid media to achieve the same results.

The opinion of influencers is unanimous. Brands and agencies do not always ask for data for analysis, as IN5 says, but when they do, they ask for reach and impressions. IN3 agrees, adding the interactions through each platform. These interactions, as seen earlier, are what provide information about positive, negative or neutral feedback about the brand or product.

As for campaigns in affiliation models, AG2 explains that measuring ROI is much simpler, subjugating influencers to their sales performance.

The financial return has always been the trading drive between brand and agency. Having a mediation and being able to make these numbers valuable in negotiation, gives brands more security. Agencies deliver analysis and feedback reports before the establishment of the final accord definition.

5. DISCUSSION

It is concluded that the first step of these campaigns involves the design of the campaign and the contact. Smaller brands with fewer resources choose to use their know-how for the realization of campaigns, being able to use online platforms, but most brands in Portugal use digital influencer agencies. Convenience and trust stand out as reasons factors for choosing influencer agencies as outsourcing, since the Influencer marketing is a very new object and brands, especially the larger ones, tend to gain confidence with the market or with a new operation within of the media mix, using external entities before making them in-house.

There are, however, several types of agencies that are distributed among agencies of representation, where there are clusters of agency influencers who can offer package prices and privileged negotiation with these influencers, agencies that combine affiliation to content creation, which are characterized by working with large sets of micro-influencers, and strategic consulting agencies, which given their methodology or technology make it possible to reduce the risk of contact. The partnership with agencies, adapting to the marketing strategy of each brand, can thus be quite advantageous for brands who want to work on a large scale. KPI's for each campaign can be defined exclusively by the brand, but also in conjunction with the agency.

There are several criteria for choosing influencers, adaptable to each campaign. However, it was possible to perceive that there is space for both micro and macro influencers. The latter have a much higher range, but the former have more engagement and reach a more segmented audience.

The campaign briefing, like the KPIs, can be defined by the brand or by both parties, then moving on to negotiation with influencers. As for the creation of content, the networks for its dissemination can be varied, and depend on the strategic character of the campaign. However, Instagram stands out as the most requested for campaigns with digital influencers, but with great prominence also for Youtube and Tik Tok, which were referenced by all the participants of this study as networks in growth, and with more direct content, where influencers are considered producers and content creators, and where the connection with their audience is very close. It is noticeable that sharing the content on the influencer's social networks is important because this is the only way to get the message across to an extremely loyal audience and position the product or service linked to the content distributor. This can, however, be shared in the brand's networks and, in this way, the link is closed and the public of the influencer for your channels. Affiliation models can be defined for these publications, but they can also be paid in consideration, both monetary and in terms of products or services. The use of assets belonging to the brand itself for the creation of these contents is also an aspect to be stand out, by elevating the content to resources that it would not have otherwise, as well as, by transpose these campaigns to traditional media, which was pointed out as a necessity from the market.

Finally, regarding the analysis of the campaign results and its ROI, it is possible to opt for different methods and metrics, highlighting CPM, AVE, reach, engagement, impressions, and interactions, as well as negative or neutral positive feedback given through reactions, as they are metrics that already exist in the digital marketing market and thus, already known by the companies. In the affiliation models, the ROI is much simpler subjugating publications to their direct sales potential. These metrics were considered by some of the professionals to be insufficient to measure the entire influence marketing dimension, thus suggesting this measurement of results as topic for future research development.

The conclusions about the agencies role and the current structuring and design of the campaigns of influence marketing in Portugal resulted in Figure 2 presented.
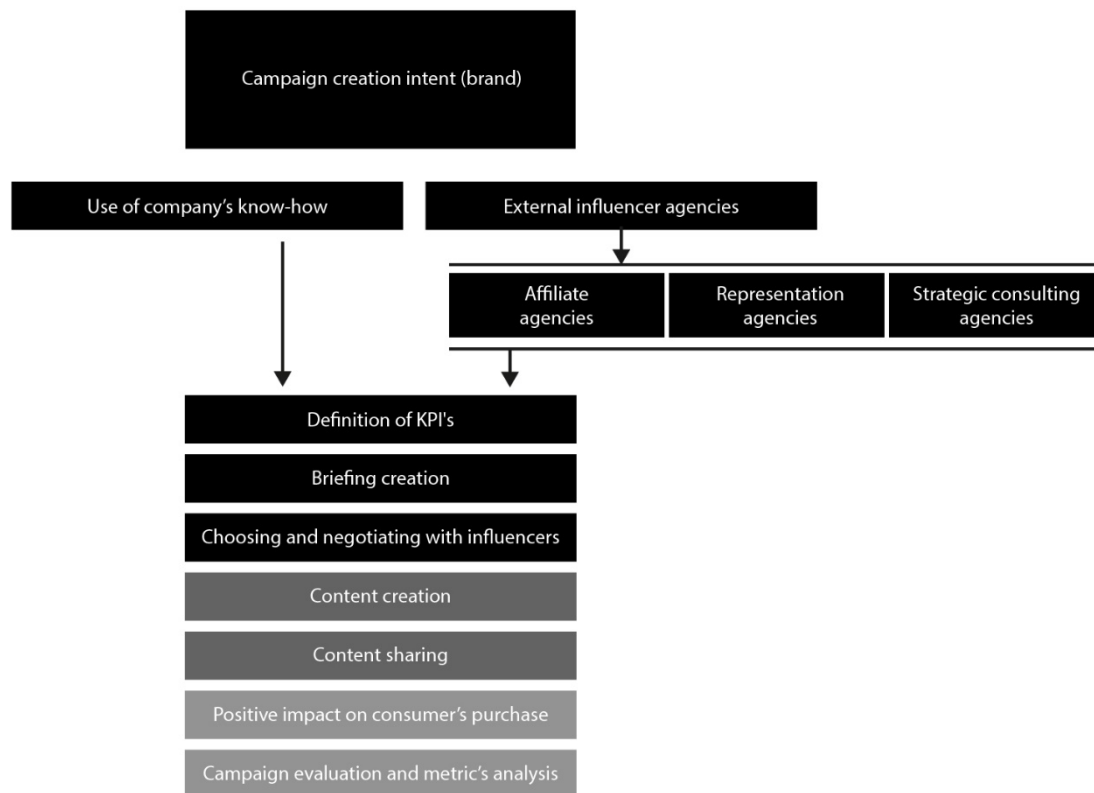
Figure 2 The current structuring and design of influencer marketing campaigns.

Source: Own elaboration

6. CONCLUSIONS

During this study, one of the aspects of influencer marketing in Portugal was analysed, its campaigns and the business inherent to them, with the main objective of understanding how the intervention of agencies benefits the brand in the management of campaigns with influencers.

Despite the small sample, having agencies with different business models and influencers with different dimensions of influence, allow a significant advance in the knowledge considering the specificities of the context studied.

The conclusions allowed a deeper understanding of this theme, providing important information about the process of structuring influencer campaigns, in which marketers and brand managers can support their strategic adaptation and review decisions, investing in content created by digital influencers.

The study was done in the context of Portugal, a small country, where the expressivity of agencies and influencers has low expression than in other countries even in Europe. One of the main conclusions is the possible association between the size of the market and the use of agencies to mediate influencer campaigns. Seems that in international markets or in the case of brands that operate internationally, the use of inside resources to contact influencers and directly structure campaigns is more common.

This study does not exist without limitations, namely the lack of responses and availability of brands and agencies to participate in the study. For example, one major cosmetic global brand has inclusively accepted to reunite with the researchers but does not give permission to reproduce the conversations or use any of the content. Issues related to strategic aspects and the impact of following this strategy became a constraint in the acquisition of information related to brands.

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