The role of influencer marketing: A case study in the Gas and Fuel Sector

Catarina Parracho[1] & Sara Santos[2]

[1] ISCA-UA, catarina.pio@ua.pt
[2] ISCA-UA, saracsantos@ua.pt

Abstract

Currently, consumers look for much information about brands on the Internet, specifically through the disclosure made by digital influencers. Understanding this behaviour, brands seek to create partnerships with influencers (celebrities, macro, micro and nano) to attract consumers and provoke high engagement with brands online. In this context, brands create partnerships with influencers to increase their reach, generate more significant interaction and consequently improve brand value. However, there are still few studies on influencer marketing in the fuel and energy sector. This study aimed to analyze the role of different influencers in a communication strategy in the gas and fuel sector. The study comprised a quantitative analysis through a questionnaire with a sample of 143 individuals. The results showed that most participants considered influencers specialists in their work area and used shared content as a source of information.

Keywords: influencer marketing; influencers; types of influencers; social media engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

All Companies have increasingly used influencer marketing to reach their target audience more effectively. Over the years, this strategy has evolved significantly, from celebrity sponsorships, through a simple collaboration between a brand and an influencer, to a sophisticated practice involving data analysis, audience segmentation and performance metrics. With the estimated growth of the influencer marketing industry to 21.1 billion dollars in 2023, digital influencers have become a powerful force in the marketing world, leading companies to continue to believe in the potential of this strategy and to increase the number of campaigns with digital influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). This study presents the antecedents that shaped the evolution of influencer marketing and the definition of this practice according to several authors and its relevance. Additionally, influencer marketing will be explored as a communication strategy for companies, the importance of meticulous selection of influencers and measurement of results. For this study, the social network Instagram will be used as the primary reference since this platform is one of the preferred networks to work with influencer marketing (Moreira et al., 2021). This work aims to analyze the role of different influencers in a communication strategy in the gas and fuel sector. This article consists of four main parts. This chapter briefly introduces the topic and its relevance. In the following section, a literature review is carried out to present the main concepts underlying influencer marketing and its components for the business context. The third chapter describes the methodology of the small study carried out on influencer marketing in Portugal's fuel and gas sector, carried out through a questionnaire. In chapter four, the results of the study carried out are discussed. In the final chapter, some important conclusions to be drawn from the literature review are described, together with the study carried out.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INFLUENCER MARKETING

In January 2023, Portugal had 8.05 million social network users, equivalent to 78.5% of the Portuguese population (We Are Social et al., 2023). 22.1% of active users on social networks, aged between 16 and 64, state that Whatsapp is the social networking platform they use most, followed by Facebook (83.9%) and Instagram (81 .6%) (We Are Social et al., 2023). In addition to being an easy and effective way of keeping in touch with friends and family, 34.5% of individuals between 16 and 64 in Portugal admit that they use social networks to find inspiration, both in entertainment and buying products. Already 20.5% say they use social networks to follow celebrities or digital influencers (We Are Social et al., 2023). With these numbers' significant and constant growth, companies look to social media platforms as marketing opportunities to reach a broader audience. However, there is a noticeable change in the behaviour of online consumers, which has brought growing criticism and scepticism towards traditional and direct advertising by brands. These behavioural changes have driven the growth of influencer marketing, making digital influencers a reliable and safe alternative due to the use of their narratives and authenticity in the content developed with brands (Leung et al., 2022).

Thus, all these factors contribute to the spread of this promotion alternative, as it is more accessible in terms of budget and because it observes very satisfactory sales and return on investment (ROI) results. Many authors consider influencer marketing a new strategy which has developed rapidly in recent years due to increased interactions between digital influencers and social network users (Farivar & Wang, 2022).

These digital influencers, better known as influencers, are individuals (or even virtual avatars) who have managed to establish a vast network of followers on social networks and who are considered digital opinion leaders, as they have a significant influence on their network of followers, which acts as its faithful community (Leung et al., 2022). These influencers generate a high number of interactions with their audience on different social media platforms through the publication and creation of various types of multimedia content such as videos, photos, "stories", and tweets, among others (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022).

The promotional content, which they make in order to advertise a particular product or brand, appears on their social network accounts and, in general, falls within their familiar environment, corresponding to the

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format of the content they usually publish, as the influencers integrate parts of their narratives, such as their name, characteristics and personality, to create more original publications (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). From the point of view of the digital influencers themselves, components such as the aesthetics and quality of publications, and the consistent publication of content, contribute significantly to their success. Also, using narratives and personal experience when conveying a message is essential to consider and help inform and involve their followers more effectively (Farivar & Wang, 2022).

This influencer marketing approach is a strategy in which the company meticulously selects digital influencers to complement its marketing campaigns and encourages them to engage their followers on social networks to promote their offerings. Thus, companies take advantage of the unique resources these influencers provide (such as their level of exposure, engagement rate, creativity, etc.) to improve the campaign's overall performance (Leung et al., 2022).

Brands have been finding it increasingly challenging to create captivating content for their followers on their social networks. This phenomenon happens more prominently when it comes to advertising content, where consumers consider the information shared by brands invasive and unreliable for their purchase decision. On the other hand, digital influencers are experts in producing content with which consumers interact and identify, helping these contents to be more credible and organic and have greater exposure, having more possibilities of reaching the intended target audience (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Zniva et al., 2023).

Through an influencer marketing strategy in their campaigns, companies can expand their online presence and reach a more diverse audience and specific market niches that would not be possible to reach with a typical marketing strategy (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Influencer marketing ends up becoming a component of companies' digital marketing strategies because, through experience with partnerships with influencers, many brands believe that this new marketing approach is effective in improving important metrics and generating higher profits (Ki et al., 2020).

2.2. INFLUENCER MARKETING AS A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Influencer marketing is a communication strategy that has gained prominence in recent years. With the growth of social media, digital influencers have become a powerful voice in promoting brands and products, creating a more authentic and emotional connection with their followers. Influencer marketing as a communication strategy can benefit the brand in terms of organic reach, positioning, segmentation, engagement, creativity and building trust with consumers. It can also help with content control and customer retention (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Leung et al., 2022). Engagement between the consumer and the brand is essential in brand branding, as it reflects all the bonds created by the touchpoints of the consumer's journey. One of these contact points is the digital influencer who triggers likes, shares, comments and messages from his followers through his content and influence. These constant interactions between influencers and consumers are more noticeable on social networks, which makes these individuals interesting to integrate into a brand's digital marketing strategy. However, brands must select digital influencers according to their target audience, image and brand values while optimizing the investments made in this strategy (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023).

2.3. SELECTION OF DIGITAL INFLUENCERS

In order to design influencer marketing campaigns effectively, it is necessary to make a meticulous selection of influencer profiles to choose from, taking into account relevance and creating authentic, creative and captivating content for the target audience. By selecting digital influencers consistent with the brand to be promoted and reliable in their way of working, a greater sense of confidence is developed on the part of the consumer and, consequently, a positive reaction is achieved in terms of engagement with the publications and the final objective of the campaign, such as increased sales (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). This profile screening is a significant step for companies, as it is imperative to select digital influencers who have a personality and content compatible with the brand to be promoted, who best fit the image and values of the brand, and who are transparent and ethical in their communication (Zniva et al., 2023).

According to Gross and von Wangenheim (2022), companies choose and select influencers based on several criteria, one of the most important being the engagement rate they obtain on their social networks. This metric is critical, and it is following this that brands evaluate and compensate digital influencers. Thus, engagement is seen as a crucial performance indicator (KPI) to measure the success of publications made in partnership with influencers.

Another aspect to consider for the success of influencer marketing campaigns is the authenticity and credibility of the digital influencer. In a constantly growing market, consumers are bombarded with publications from influencers they follow or that are suggested by the social networks themselves. Brands must adapt to this market to be relevant in their campaigns. One way to achieve this relevance and prominence is by choosing an influencer whose published content is perceived as sincere and genuine in the eyes of their followers (Zniva et al., 2023).

2.3.1. TYPES OF INFLUENCERS PROCESS

One of the most crucial steps in choosing a digital influencer for an influencer marketing campaign is choosing the type of influencer to hire. In the initial phase, a specific value is attributed to digital influencers through their number of followers, which indicates their broad reach. However, a more extensive analysis should be carried out, and other sources of value should be considered, such as engagement, organic reach, consistency and quality of publications on social networks (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

As for their categorization, digital influencers can be divided according to several dimensions, such as the theme and type of content they publish, the level of influence, other relevant metrics and, most commonly, the number of followers on their social media accounts (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023).

Thus, it is possible to highlight four main categories of digital influencers in addition to the category of traditional celebrities. These are:

- Celebrities (who can also be considered influencers) gained fame and notoriety before their presence on social networks; that is, they achieved this status through their qualified professional success, such as in music, sports, dramatic arts, etc. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Leung et al., 2022). They use their digital presence to support their professional careers and promote partnerships with reputable brands. They have over 1 million followers, and their engagement rates are generally low.
- Mega influencers, like celebrities, have many followers on their social networks. However, in contrast to celebrities, these influencers gained their "fame" already in the digital world, namely on social networks. Usually, they can have more than 1 million followers, but they are only recognized in their communities of followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).
- Macro influencers, despite being less well known, are highly successful. They usually have a community of followers between 100,000 and 1 million. Macro influencers dominate their areas of interest (e.g. travel or cooking) and can influence their followers, inspiring them to be like them. These influencers are often preferred over mega influencers and celebrities due to their higher engagement rates and appeal. In addition, this category of influencers is often considered by companies to be the best to work with, as it has a good network of followers and exposure, which brands can take advantage of for a lower price than they would pay for a mega digital influencer or celebrity (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).
- Micro-influencers, which can have a community of followers between 10,000 and 100,000, are a category with less exposure and fewer opportunities than macro influencers. This community of followers may even be closer to the influencer's origin. Most of the earnings of these individuals are from affiliate marketing and partnerships with companies from different sectors. The content most often created by these micro-influencers is usually video (such as the "stories", most famous on Instagram), the preferred method for creating and establishing an accessibility and authenticity connection with their followers. With this, micro-influencers can significantly influence the opinion and actions of their followers, as they consider their opinions more reliable than those of better-known influencers with a larger community. Consequently, marketers are progressively looking at this category of digital influencers with more attention because these influencers, by being more genuine

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in their produced content and by being attentive to the needs of their followers, can reach the target audience more effectively (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

- Finally, nano influencers have a smaller community of followers, which can go up to 10,000. As these influencers are still at the beginning of their career, their followers are primarily friends, family and people who live close to these individuals. Nano influencers focus slowly on growing their community and partnerships and are often particularly proactive and reach out to brands to create partnerships rather than the other way around. Since their community is small, influencers develop a more personal relationship with their followers, making them see the content as more authentic and unique, ensuring very high engagement rates compared to other categories of digital influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

According to Borges-Tiago et al. (2023), a digital influencer with fewer followers may be beneficial regarding credibility, engagement, and connection with the consumer. A digital influencer with a larger audience may directly influence brand equity.

2.3.2. PROCESS

The process from the briefing for the influencers to the final publication of the content is critical. During this process, communication between the company and the digital influencer is essential for creating creative content suitable for the campaign (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Unlike publications that digital influencers usually make daily, publications sponsored by a brand differ in the information presented about the products and the respective brands. It is usual for these sponsored publications to contain an unmistakable advertising message in which the brand name of the product to be promoted is mentioned. Brands can suggest the message they want the influencers to pass on or even suggest the caption of the publications since this is a powerful space to describe the products' characteristics or the campaigns' conditions.

However, the ideal would be for both the digital influencer and the brand to be aligned on the message conveyed in the campaign so that the influencer develops the content with his creativity, adjusting it with the brand later, if necessary (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022). Likewise, it is essential to consider that brands must draw up a concrete plan of action before launching the campaign with influencers so that both the entity and the influencers are prepared to respond to questions and comments, provide additional information about the campaign and adequately deal with possible negative comments (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2022).

With the knowledge they acquire over the years, influencers and their teams often develop exceptional skills in producing and editing multimedia content in photography and video. Furthermore, digital influencers already know their audience perfectly so that they can create content for brands according to their followers' preferences. This is undoubtedly a great advantage, as not only does the content appear more authentic in the eyes of consumers, but there is also a greater likelihood that the content will be appreciated and more easily influence followers in their decision-making (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Requesting content approval before the influencer publishes it is a common practice. It ensures the brand that the content is appropriate and that the influencer does not provide wrong, sensitive or illegal information (Leung et al., 2022).

In order to select the ideal candidate for the campaign, brands must conduct an exhaustive analysis of the differences and characteristics of the various digital influencers and choose the profile that best suits their target audience and brand attributes. Choosing the right digital influencer can be very advantageous for the brand in the long term, boosting specific metrics such as brand awareness, brand equity and engagement with consumers (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023).

2.4. MONITORING AND MEASUREMENT OF RESULTS

Monitoring and analysis of results are usually done through Social Media Analytics (SMA). SMA are tools for collecting and analyzing data produced by social networks. With these tools, it is possible to obtain information and opinions from users of social networks in order to be interpreted and considered by brands in the future to adjust their communication objectives and online strategies (Ayodeji & Kumar, 2019).

There are several types of these tools, the most common being those that are intrinsic to social networks (such as Facebook and Instagram Insights, Twitter Analytics, Pinterest Analytics and YouTube Analytics) and those that are considered multiplatform tools (such as Google Analytics, Sprout Social, among others) that collect and process data from various digital media (Ayodeji & Kumar, 2019).

Using SMA is crucial to measure the impact of communication campaigns with digital influencers (Moreira et al., 2021). However, analytical monitoring of these campaigns can often be challenging due to the diversity of digital platforms on which digital influencers are present (Moreira et al., 2021). However, this tracking and monitoring of sales related to campaigns with digital influencers can be done through Google Analytics or other SMA tools, simultaneously with the number of visits to the website, tracked through UTMs and personalized discount coupons for each profile of digital influencer (Moreira et al., 2021).

By carrying out a detailed analysis of the data collected from campaigns with digital influencers, it is possible to determine the number of new customers obtained by each profile, the value of each order placed, the cost of each new customer and its value, particularly the gross profit and revenues (Quilty, 2022). In this way, through a duly performed analysis, it is possible to examine and compare the investment made and the actual return that the brand, in partnership with digital influencers, obtained. By interpreting the results of the data analysis of these influencer marketing campaigns, companies can make more sensible decisions in future campaigns to adjust their investments and strategies more informedly (Moreira et al., 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

This article builds on existing literature, the perspectives of various authors, and previous studies on influencers and the components of influencer marketing. Additionally, a quantitative methodology was used, through the elaboration of a questionnaire, in order to deepen and consolidate the developed literature review. This questionnaire aimed to listen to the opinion of several individuals regarding influencer marketing, namely in the fuel and gas sector, specially "PRIO" brand. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions adopted from previous studies and modified to suit the study context. In terms of scale, we chose to use a 7-level Likert scale, ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree".

3.1. SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

For this study, data was collected through a questionnaire developed on the FormsUA platform and distributed online on February 28th (until March 10th). The questionnaire was published online and shared on the social networks Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Whatsapp to obtain more responses. The non-probabilistic sample initially consisted of 196 responses, of which 53 were not classified as valid because they were incomplete. All incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis, thus leaving 143 valid responses. 72.73% of the participants were female, the rest were male, and 26.57% of the respondents were between 25 and 34 years old. Concerning academic qualifications, most (53.85%) of the respondents answered that they had a degree.

4. RESULTS

In the initial phase of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they followed any digital influencers on social networks, of which 55.24% responded affirmatively and 44.76% negatively. Participants who answered "no" to the first question would go on to the demographic questions to complete the questionnaire, as the remaining questions only made sense for those who followed a digital influencer on social networks. The remaining analysis of results continues with the participation of the 79 respondents who followed digital influencers.

It was interesting to find out that the social networks most used by the participants are Instagram (51.05%), followed by Whatsapp (32.87%) and YouTube (27.97%). The study found that the most appreciated type of content on social networks is images, with a percentage of 45.45%; videos followed closely behind, with short videos (41.96%) scoring a higher percentage than longer videos (30.07%), as can be confirmed in figure 1.
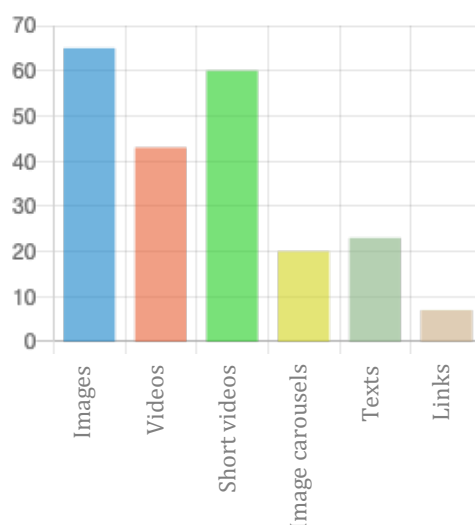
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**Figure 1 – Answers to the question, "What kind of content attracts
your attention on social networks?"**

Most respondents follow, on average, between 1 and 20 digital influencers on social networks. The most voted categories in the areas of influencers were travel (24.48%), kitchen and fashion (both with 20.98%). Interestingly, the most submitted reason for following these digital influencers was "entertainment", demonstrating that users genuinely like to see the content these profiles present.
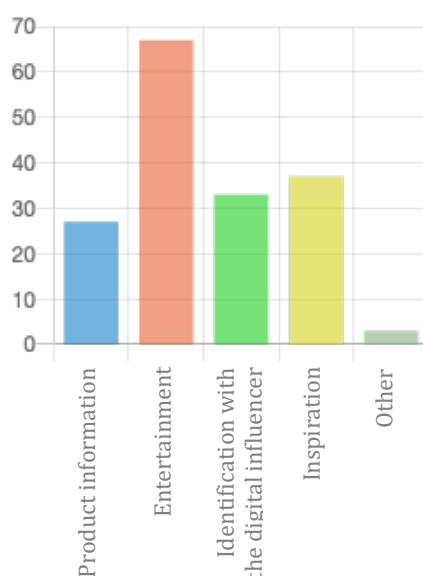

**Figure 2 - Answers to the question "Why do you follow these
digital influencers?"**

In the following questions, participants were asked to choose a digital influencer they liked and to base their answers on the selected profile and shared content. 20.28% of respondents partially agree that influencers are specialists in their work area, while the same percentage agrees that they use shared content as a source of information. The highest percentage of respondents (23.78%) also agree that the content usually published by the influencer is informative. Regarding the relationship of partnerships between brands and influencers, 19.58% of the respondents agreed with the statement, "In the future, it is likely that I will consider using one of the same brands that the digital influencer posted on their Instagram.". As for the fuel and gas market, 34.27% of participants said they did not follow any brand in this sector on social networks; however, 13.29% confirmed that they followed "PRIO" brand.
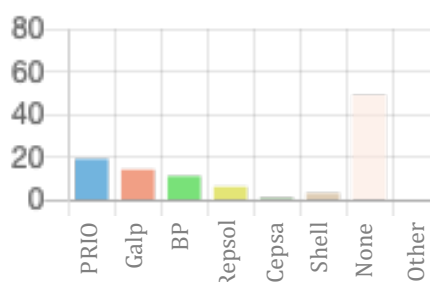
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**Figure 3 – Answers to the question, "What fuel and gas brands do
you follow and/or like to see on social media?"**

Next, a list of Portuguese digital influencers working with the various brands in this sector, which had been presented to respondents earlier, was presented. From this list, the best-known influencers were Pedro Fernandes (35.66%), Sofia Arruda (28.67%) and Miguel Oliveira (27.97%). None of these influencers worked with "PRIO", and due to their number of followers, they are all considered macro influencers. Regarding the credibility of the "PRIO" brand, all the questions asked for this purpose, unfortunately, obtained the highest percentage of answers in the category "I neither agree nor disagree", which may show indifference to the exposed brand.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Social networks have transformed how we communicate, relate to and influence each other. With companies' excellent use of social networks, new opportunities for communication strategies arise, such as influencer marketing. This phenomenon has emerged on a large scale in recent years and has quickly attracted consumer and brand interest in potential partnerships. These partnerships have strengthened companies' digital marketing strategies and helped them stand out from the rest of the market, generating engagement and traffic for their businesses (Ki et al., 2020). The results of the small survey conducted by questionnaire, although they are only exploratory, show that, due to their exposure to a larger audience, macro influencers still stand out more than micro-influencers in terms of their visibility. However, they are still the right choice for some brands. As discussed in the literature review, brands cannot rely solely on the number of an influencer's followers but must thoroughly analyze several essential indicators. Depending on an influencer marketing campaign's purpose and ultimate goal, companies should choose different digital influencers that best fit the campaign and brand image (Ren et al., 2023).

According to the study prepared and presented by Gross and von Wangenheim (2022), not only does the number of followers affect engagement, but also the type of promotional content/publications presented to the public. In these advertising campaigns carried out in collaboration with digital influencers, these individuals are challenged to creatively incorporate a product or service of a brand in a convincing and not too-invasive way. Influencers, according to what is established with the brand and their audience's behaviour, dedicate their efforts to creating content that reflects the brand's advertising messages, creating informative content with added value for social networks (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022). It was also found that a good action plan, a previously well-defined digital communication strategy and the choice of the right influencer are essential to reach the specific target audience of a campaign and the possibility of creating a long-term relationship with them (Moreira et al., 2021). Finally, it is essential to highlight that the literature on influencer marketing is constantly evolving, and new studies and new methodologies appear regularly better to understand the dynamics of this marketing communication strategy.

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