Influence marketing as a communication strategy: A case study of the hotel sector

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Abstract | In an era in which the Internet and its use prevails, various entities do not neglect the potential that the first offers. Namely, the hospitality industry bets on social networks to present its services and captivate audiences. One of the communication strategies that hotels resort to is, therefore, influencer marketing, taking advantage of features such as the visibility and notoriety of digital influencers, to communicate their brand in a positive and appealing way. The general objective of this study is based on the understanding and analysis of the way in which hotel units' resort to influencer marketing, namely the visibility and notoriety of influencers, as a communication strategy that increases the notoriety of their brand, attracts customers, and find out if it promotes engagement. Methodologically, the interview survey of three individuals responsible for the communication of the hotel units was used to achieve the objectives of the study. From the results achieved, we were able to see that all the hotels resort to influencer marketing and achieve positive results.

Keywords | hospitality, influencer marketing, influencers, engagement

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1. Introduction

Today, with technological advances, particularly with the emergence of Web 2.0, communication and marketing have undergone significant changes. Ooi, Lee, Hew, Leong, Tan & Li (2023) affirm this, guaranteeing that the Internet has contributed to major changes in the field of marketing, with advertisements and other forms of publicity now present on social networks. The latter, in the form of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, among many others, allow individuals to become content creators, to become active and there is now a two-way communication. Barreiro, Dinis & Breda (2019) state that this aspect is crucial for companies, as the channels are direct and interactive, which promotes proximity to the public.

Now, marketing strategies are adapting to their surroundings in order to be successful, and so there is a transition to digital marketing. Busulwa, Pickering & Mao (2022) state that this digital transformation requires sectors such as hotels and tourism organizations to build digital business tools, namely consumer engagement through digital. Unlike traditional marketing, in which communication was unidirectional, through newspapers, magazines, television, among others, the information reached the public and they had no way of responding, they were just recipients. With digital marketing, the individual can interact with the content shared on social networks, for example. This consumer transition to digital media, according to Faruk, Rahman & Hasan (2021), allows marketers to reach and promote engagement with the public, as well as communicate to segments more effectively and efficiently.

This presence of individuals on digital platforms has led to the emergence of digital influencers. These are, according to De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders (2017), social media users who have established a network of followers by posting content online. Farivar and Wang (2022) point out that influencers often establish close and trusting relationships with those who follow them, providing the ideal conditions for promoting products and brands on their online pages. We are talking about influencer marketing. Some studies on the importance of this communication strategy and the role of social networks, where it is widely developed, have been carried out, in particular studies by authors such as Gretzel (2018), who claims that influencers have become almost as important as traditional word-of-mouth from family or friends. One of his studies revealed that, at the time of the study, 56% of Twitter users used and trusted recommendations from friends and 49% trusted recommendations from influencers. Ooi et al. (2023) reinforce this idea by stating that, according to data, 92% of consumers trust

content promoted by influencers more than other types of advertising. Hashim and Fadhil (2017) also conducted a study with a sample of 20 five-star hotels in Malaysia and showed how important social media is for those responsible for communicating with these hotels. The latter post marketing content on their networks in order to generate consumer interaction and proximity. Also, the results of a study by Tajvidi and Karami (2021), which studied 384 hotels located in the United Kingdom, showed a positive and significant relationship between the use of social media and hotel performance.

Ameen, Cheah, Ali, El-Manstrly & Kulyciute (2023), Roozen (2023) and Bastrygina, Lim, Jopp & Weissmann (2024) present several recent studies on this topic, however we have identified a gap in the studies carried out, bearing in mind that, according to Tajvidi & Karami (2021), Borchers and Enke (2021) and Ooi et al. (2023), influence marketing, developed in the context of hospitality, is little studied, as well as its impact on the consumer, in terms of interaction. It can therefore be said that there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research into this phenomenon within the hotel industry. On the other hand, according to Cooper (2009), influencer marketing has an increased importance in the tourism and hotel sector, due to the promotions and publications that influencers can promote, positively affecting brand awareness and because it is especially more effective for luxury products due to the need to create a perception of exclusivity and high quality (Hughes, Swaminathan & Brooks, 2019). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to understand and analyze influence marketing as a communication strategy developed within hotel units and to determine whether it promotes engagement with the public and contributes to brand awareness. Based on this objective, we formulated the following research question: *Does influencer marketing, as a communication strategy used by hotel units, contribute to promoting engagement and attracting customers?*

This study stems from the topicality of the subject and the fact that, as far as the hotel sector is concerned, there is little scientific literature on this subject. As it is a phenomenon at the beginning of its development, there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research, making it pertinent to fill in this gap.

2. Literature review

The Internet plays an extremely important role in bridging the gap between clients, consumers, partners and society in general (Kumar, 2021). Digital media has changed consumer behaviour and experiences and, according to Kumar (2021), has elevated them in the sense that these

individuals can become influencers, spreading the word (electronic word-of-mouth - eWOM) on their social networks, for example. Buhalis & Law (2008) state that, with the help of Web 2.0. and its platforms, hospitality and tourism companies are able to build and strengthen their brands and understand consumer behaviour. Dimitrios, Ioannis, Angelos & Nikolaos (2023) support this idea and state that technology has radically changed the marketing industry and that the power of communication now passes to consumers.

According to Busulwa et al. (2022), as well as Krishen, Dwivedi, Bindu & Kumar (2021), the importance of digital marketing as a way of building a brand image for businesses has been growing, especially in the areas of tourism and hospitality. Kumar (2021) reinforces this statement by saying that the advent of Web 2.0. has benefited marketing and promotion in the hotel and tourism industry. The same author stresses that the marketing of tourism services and products has come a long way since catalogues, vouchers, photographs and pamphlets.

According to Kim, Lee, Choi & Kim (2021) and Shukla & Mishra (2021), nowadays, thanks to digital marketing, potential consumers don't need to be physically present to understand and, to a certain extent, experience the amenities and the environment. Dimitrios et al. (2023) also state that it is easier for users to search for information, compare products and services, contact hotels directly and make reservations with relative ease using a mobile device. Websites and social networks provide audiovisual content through which individuals' opinions and decisions are influenced and shaped. Kumar (2021) adds that in the field of tourism and hospitality, the means of communication have to be extremely efficient, precisely in order to be able to convey their services, physical environments and products, prices and activities, but also their values and messages as a brand. These (digital) media, according to Dimitrios et al. (2023), offer hotel units opportunities, namely to reach consumers more easily and at a lower price, without intermediaries, and they can organize their own marketing strategies more easily, something that was more expensive with traditional marketing media, such as paid advertisements in tourism magazines, catalogues and brochures, among others.

Hotels are therefore adopting an increasingly less passive stance, seeking to engage with the public on the most diverse digital platforms, also responding to comments as a communication management strategy and Da Fonseca (2019) assures that connecting with consumers is extremely important, as it is a way of maintaining a continuous and effective relationship with them and ensuring the hotels' online presence. By responding to consumer comments and evaluations, whether compliments or complaints, hotels and their managers demonstrate that they take customers seriously and will potentially achieve better comments and reviews, greater

consumer satisfaction and, consequently, greater brand awareness, according to Sun & Kim (2013) and Chi & Gursoy (2009). Online reviews therefore play an important role in the hotel sector, given that, according to Dimitrios et al. (2023), it is a sector that focuses on consumer satisfaction. The latter consider reviews on digital platforms to be authentic and reliable, more so than those published by the entities themselves.

Digital marketing has therefore created a set of opportunities that are not indifferent to companies, including hotel companies, whose services depend heavily on consumer satisfaction and feedback. One particular digital marketing strategy that attracts audiences to social media platforms, according to Dimitrios et al. (2023), is the use of digital influencers.

The digital sphere has created opportunities for new approaches to communicating information to consumers (of companies and organizations) (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder & Yau, 2019). In this regard, due to the emergence of the Internet, more recently Web 2.0 and instant messaging, as well as the popularization of social networks, individuals can now create their own content relatively easily and share it. That said, one common approach, according to Valsesia, Proserpio & Nunes (2020), is for companies to use these "influential" individuals in the digital space. Thus, a new concept was born: digital influencers, social media influencers or digital influencers.

Digital influencers, according to authors such as Enke & Borchers (2019), are people with a vast number of followers on social networks, who have the potential to promote products and influence opinions, as they establish close relationships with those who follow them. Freberg, Graham & McGaughey (2011) define digital influencers as someone who promotes something to others, shaping audience attitudes through blogs, tweets and the use of other social networks. More and Lingam (2019) agree with this definition, stating that a digital influencer is an entity in the context of social media that helps potential consumers with their purchasing decisions by influencing their opinions through social media. This audience, their followers, also follow influencers in order to seek information and advice (Delbaere, Michael & Phillips, 2020). In this way, their content and opinions have the ability to shape the judgment of those who follow them. Kumbhojkar, Gaikwad, Thombare & Vasekar (2021) state that the most used platforms are Instagram, followed by Facebook and Youtube.

It should be noted that the public is attracted to the authenticity and expressive freedom of digital influencers, seeking to interact with them via likes and comments on social media posts, as well as sharing them. This points to the fact that communication is no longer one-sided and

Costa & Alturas (2018) stress the importance of two-way communication, as it is essential to talk to the public and not simply at them, as this is the only way to promote engagement. Venkateshi (2020) states that satisfactory relationships between influencers and their audiences strengthen the bond between the latter and enrich the quality of interactions in an organic way. They promote proximity, as well as feelings of empathy, credibility and trust.

Gretzel (2018) states that influencers have become almost as important as traditional word-of-mouth from family or friends. Ooi et al. (2023) reinforce this idea by stating that, according to data, 92% of consumers trust content promoted by influencers more than other types of advertising.

In a context where markets are increasingly competitive, the concept of engagement has become crucial, as building close and trusting relationships with consumers is extremely important for the relevance of brands.

Through influencer marketing and influencers, hotels are able to publicize the brand and what they have to offer. Glover (2009) points out that the advantages of this communication strategy are that it draws the audience's attention, gives credibility to content and achieves synergy between the product/brand and the influencer's personal brand, as well as boosting brand recognition. The same author highlights the importance of influencer marketing in the tourism and hospitality sector, stating that brand awareness can be significantly affected by the promotions and publications of influencers.

Gretzel (2018) states that identifying the right influencer for a particular marketing campaign is absolutely crucial to its success. This means that the influencer and their content must be consistent with the values and image that the hotel wants to convey, enhancing the latter and based on credibility. The type of audience reached is also relevant. If there is synergy between the hotel and the influencer, the content will be more natural and will not seem designed to manipulate or influence audiences, making it more effective. Partnerships between influencers and the hotel sector promote communication and give visibility to hotel units and their brand (Pereira, 2017).

3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to understand and analyze how hotel units use influencer marketing as a communication strategy that increases brand awareness and promotes public engagement.

However, in order to achieve this goal, it was necessary to meet and delimit specific objectives, namely:

i) Investigate whether hotels develop strategies to promote engagement and brand awareness;

ii) To find out whether hotels have reached more audiences on social media after implementing strategies related to influencer marketing;

iii) To find out if influencer marketing was a strategy that hotel units began to invest more in after the lockdowns;

iv) To understand the profile of the influencers they work with, what factors and characteristics they value most in them.

v) Understand how the influencer's profile has an impact on audience engagement.

Therefore, given the objectives presented, the following starting question was raised: *Does influencer marketing, as a communication strategy used by hotel units, contribute to promoting engagement and attracting customers?*

The research methodology used in this study was a case study. According to Creswell (1998), a case study can be defined as the exploration of a limited system or a case (or multiple cases) that involves in-depth research and data collection, as well as the analysis of multiple sources of information in a given context. On the other hand, the study is exploratory in nature, with the research method focusing on a qualitative analysis and a subjectivist approach. According to Dana and Dana (2005), this type of research was chosen because it includes different methods: personal observation of situations, individuals and interactions, as well as interviews to record testimonies. To this end, semi-structured interviews were carried out in three hotels. The interviewees - the heads of the communications departments - were contacted beforehand by e-mail and/or telephone, or both, and the research objectives were explained to them, after which a meeting was scheduled. The three hotels under analysis are located in the tourism regions of Lisbon, the Algarve and Madeira. They have in common a high tourist flow and their target audience is couples, families, groups, golf and business.

The criteria used to select the hotels were as follows:

i) They had to have at least 4 stars;

ii) Be part of prestigious hotel groups in Portugal;

iii) Have a presence on the Instagram social network;

iv) Investing in the presence of digital influencers in the posts on their social media pages.

To guarantee the confidentiality of the data, the interviewees were coded as H_L, H_A and H_M for the hotels in the Lisbon, Algarve and Madeira regions, respectively.

The interview script consisted of fifteen open-ended questions, based on the insights from the literature review, and was conducted between March and May 2023, lasting an average of one hour. Depending on the availability of the interviewees, the interviews were conducted in two ways: face-to-face and online.

The interviews were transcribed and their content analysed using NVivo 14 software. According to Hoover & Koerber (2011), this software is a flexible and highly customizable tool that can be adapted to meet the different needs of analysing qualitative information, allowing the researcher to use the deductive method. In addition to allowing for more detailed and accurate coding of transcripts, helping to identify patterns and themes in a more structured way and facilitating the identification of recurring and emerging themes, which can be crucial for a deeper and more meaningful analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019). Content analysis was chosen because it consists of critically understanding the meaning of communications, their manifest or latent content and explicit or hidden meanings (Chizzotti, 2006).

After exploring the material collected in the interviews, their analysis required coding using the procedure of recording units by themes, in accordance with the literature review carried out. They were then classified and categorized, giving rise to the research model that would be subject to content analysis, following Bardin's methodology (2011) (Figure 1).
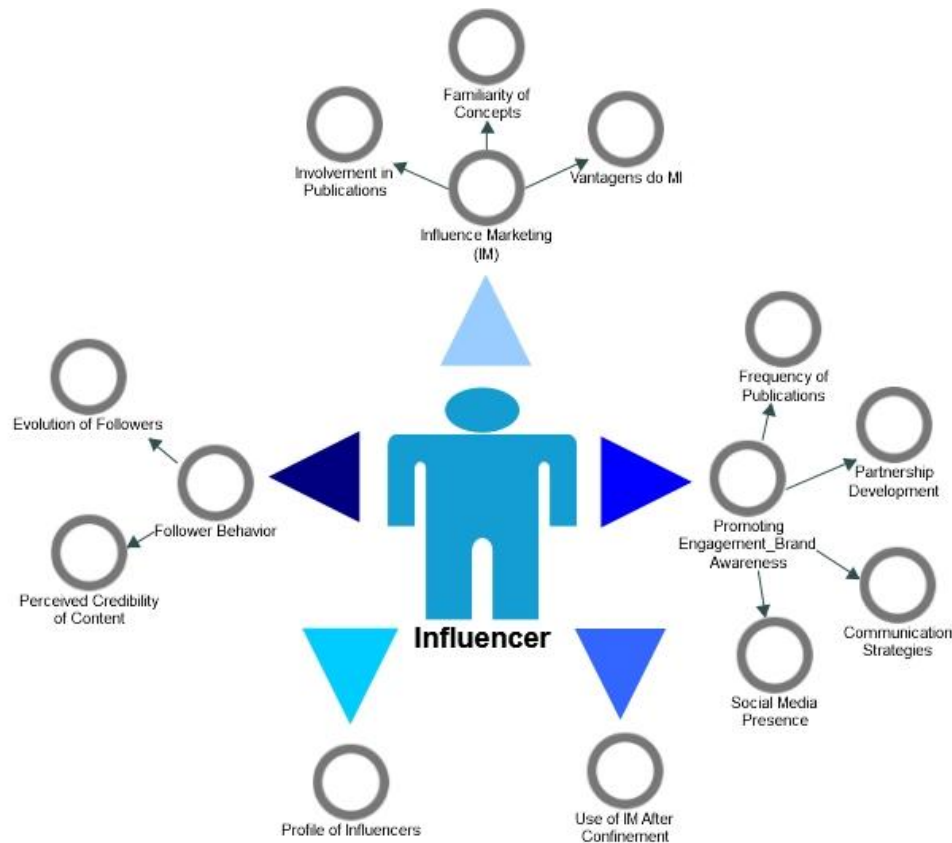
Figure 1- Research Model

Source: Own Elaboration

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1. Influence Marketing

The concepts of engagement and influencer marketing are part of the digital marketing practices of all the hotels. According to interviewee H_L, their hotel's "marketing team includes specialists in managing social networks and communities of followers". Authors such as Farivar & Wang (2022) state that influencers manage to create their communities by capturing their attention, responding to comments, publishing and sharing their content, which contributes to increased engagement with those who follow them.

Interviewee H_M says that "influencer marketing... is one of the hooks we use to promote our hotel". H_A adds that influencer marketing makes perfect sense when it comes to managing his hotel's communications, but stresses, however, that "it's not mass influencer marketing, but niche marketing". Any of the interviewees confirmed that they work with digital influencers, because according to H_A, they are able to promote engagement with their target audience, giving visibility and conveying what they want to show. This is in line with the study by Gretzel

(2018), who states that it is important for brands to seek to amplify their messages and that influencers are individuals who have the power to affect the decisions of others, thanks to their authority (real or perceived), knowledge, position or relationship. On the other hand, the use of digital influencers seems to have a positive impact on the promotion of luxury hotels (Dimitrios et al., 2023).

With regard to the involvement that followers have with the posts, interviewee H_A considers that the posts with the highest level of interaction are those that are more human and more related to the hotel team. Interviewee H_M optimistically states that "we are having very positive results, and we can see that the number of 'clicks' and the number of followers has increased" and adds that "our visits have increased and we have achieved this through the people who have generated Electronic Word-of-Mouth, which is very important for the development of our social networks". According to Pelsmacker, Tilburg & Holthof (2018), eWOM has a profound effect on consumer behaviour and a major role in the product experience and influencers are key elements when it comes to decision-making by their audiences (Crisafulli, Quamina & Singh, 2022).

With regard to the advantages of influencer marketing, our interviewees say that it provides additional and immediate visibility on a massive scale, boosting the number of visits to their social networks and benefiting from the company's ability to influence. They also add its versatile nature, the fact that it is interactive and fully measurable, and that it is not as expensive as traditional media. H_L reinforces these advantages, saying that digital marketing "helps to convey an image of credibility, proximity and sharing, because the people who follow the influencer do so because they trust and like their content, which is very beneficial for us as a hotel". Hou & Pan (2022) reinforce this idea, stating that digital marketing and the photographs published on online platforms provide virtual experiences for the potential consumer to evaluate and claim that several studies prove the effectiveness of photographs (in digital) in contributing to and promoting engagement.

However, interviewee H_M said that "both influencer marketing and digital marketing play a very important role in our communication strategy... one complements the other and one is not more important than the other... influencer marketing has come to complement traditional marketing". The choice will only depend on the content they want to disseminate, but they admit that influencer marketing is gaining more and more power. This evidence is in line with the authors Ooi et al. (2023) and Tajvidi & Karami (2021), who state that businesses and

companies are increasingly turning to influencer marketing to promote their brand and amplify the reach of their content.

According to H_A, "influencer marketing gives immediate visibility with a publication made by an influencer, and we know that the day it is made, I will gain more followers, and the reach of my Instagram profile will be greater". Farivar & Wang (2022) point out that influencers establish relationships with their followers, creating relationships of trust with their communities.

4.2. Promoting Engagement / Brand Awareness

When our interviewees were asked about their social media presence, Instagram and Facebook dominated their preferences. According to H_A, "the social network that we use the most today and that concerns us the most, in order to publish content and follow the trends of our customers, is Instagram... Instagram is the social network that people use the most, so it's normal that we use it for the brand to be present in people's memories" however, there are times of the year when it is strategic to publish on Facebook. Rejeb, Rejeb, Abdollahi & Treiblmaier (2022) corroborate this opinion when they point out that Instagram is a leading online platform for sharing information and content.

Interviewee H_L says that they are on different social networks, however, Facebook is the most used, because according to this hotel "it is attractive because of the ease and speed with which it allows messages to be transmitted and shows realistic images of the hotel and the experiences associated with them, such as enjoying the sun in the pool, the gastronomic options available, the variety of rooms and services... and also because it is possible to share good content from third parties, such as customers, employees, influencers, partners that involve the brand, ending up creating closeness with them and achieving greater diversity of content". Bearing in mind that this hotel has a target audience of couples and families, the fact that Facebook is the most used social network is related to this fact, since they are among the ages with the highest use of this platform. Gretzel (2018) states that identifying the right influencer for an influencer marketing campaign is absolutely crucial to its success.

H_M's top 1 preference is Instagram, followed by Facebook and TikTok. The preference for Instagram "is very much in line with our targets and our ideas, what we want to promote on social media. Instagram has been our biggest focus, because we've been able to reach our markets, our age groups and, of course, we've also been able to create greater

'acknolegement'/recognition of the hotels." Like Rejeb et al. (2022) and Mendini, Peter & Maione (2022), the social network Instagram is an important resource in the consumer decision-making process and its use is linked to better long-term relationships between the consumer and the brand, as well as positive engagement with the company.

Interviewees H_A and H_L post on a daily basis, through stories, reels and more static feed posts, both on Instagram and Facebook. It was noticeable in H_M's speech that they don't have the same enthusiasm for posting on their social networks as often.

According to H_L, "the strategy is to create an organic connection between followers and the brand, trying to provide our own content - images and videos of the hotels, promoting promotional campaigns, sharing experiences and news, services and facilities available, but also sharing good content from customers and users who are staying at the hotel and also from influencers with whom we have partnerships"? "We also take advantage of festivities, such as Mother's Day, to create allusive content... we publish photographs of our hotel's outdoor spaces, we make posts linked to gastronomy, in short, we want to show the best we have to offer."

The hotel located in Madeira, promotes content about the hotel, such as the view, the rooms, the decoration, in order to appeal to the sense of sight. They also try to invest in marketing strategies with positive phrases, with content accompanied by phrases such as "It's a beautiful sunny day!" and/or "The sea is fantastic!", in order to attract the attention of both guests and visitors. They say that if with this content "we can create engagement and buy-in from visitors, then we're doing it right".

Turning to the development of the partnerships made with influencers, H_A says that "there is no script, and we don't make paid partnerships. Partnerships are made in exchange for services... we just want to turn a weekend into a memorable experience". In other words, what they want is for influencers to produce content related to the experience and to convey it in the most real way possible. For Borchers & Enke (2021), once ties have been established between the influencer and their followers, this allows the former to be perceived as authentic, regardless of whether they cooperate with organizations in order to expand their influence and make a profit. The same authors add that the creative freedom of influencers is important if the content they create is to be perceived as authentic, allowing them to achieve strategic goals.

H_L follows a similar procedure, offering influencers nights and experiences at the hotel related to gastronomy, massages, wine tastings, themed activities, in return for sharing content on the influencer's networks, in order to show genuine and therefore credible content, after agreement

between both parties. In certain cases, a promotional code can also be given with exclusive conditions for the influencer's followers, with advantages for everyone. The application of influencer marketing takes many forms, including products that are sent to the influencer, participation in events and sharing them on social media, as well as giveaways, as Gretzel (2018) explains.

Interviewee H_M is clear in his opinion about partnerships with influencers, when he says: "We try to create these partnerships in order to generate engagement and if there isn't a good engagement rate, which is necessary to reach the public through this content, then there's no point in investing in this partnership." According to this unit, they don't ask the influencer to make certain content, it's up to them. However, they only accept partnerships when that influencer really meets their values and the aims of a campaign. In other words, influencers must have positive characteristics and persuasive arguments, "fitting in naturally" with the products or brand they are promoting, in order to convey an image of credibility, knowledge, honesty and trust (Ooi et al., 2023).

4.3. Follower Behaviour

All the interviewees were unanimous in saying that influencer marketing has brought more followers to their social networks. H_A says, however, that "it doesn't mean that they are loyal followers", i.e. loyal customers. H_L reinforces this positivity, saying that "some of these partnerships have brought a good volume of followers, particularly on Instagram". Interviewee H_M agrees with this development, saying that they are having very positive results and that they have seen an increase in the number of clicks and followers.

For H_A, communication strategies have to match the essence of the hotel group's brand, and this is what gives them good visibility, differentiating them from the competition and winning customer loyalty.

Interviewee H_M stresses the importance of influencers' content - "we believe that the power of communication they possess can reach their audiences and, as a result, attract more people or, at least, give their audiences more recognition, which is fantastic for us. What we usually want is authenticity in the influencer's posts." He also stresses the importance of promoting the authenticity, values and concepts of the hotel and that influencers are always able to adapt this to the content they publish, giving it the credibility they want and creating great engagement. Crisafulli et al. (2022) point out that attractiveness, experience/knowledge, as well as reliability

and trust, are characteristics that strengthen the ability to influence, as well as the effects on credibility in the eyes of the consumer.

4.4. Use of IM After Confinement

With the emergence of the Covid-19 virus, companies have had to select the most appropriate means of communication in order to market their products and services more effectively (Hardilawati, 2020). Interviewee H_A therefore switched from mass influence marketing to niche marketing, with very well-defined segments. As this hotel says, "we didn't feel the need to use influencer marketing to give visibility to the brand, we felt that our employees, our team, gave our brand much more visibility than influencer marketing". As a result, they began to provide a proximity service, to use human internal content and thus promote the connection with our followers.

However, for H_L, influencer marketing has always been part of the communication strategy, so there hasn't really been an increase as a result of the pandemic or post-pandemic. For interviewee H_M, digital marketing has become a very important tool during the pandemic. According to him, "if it wasn't for digital, I don't think we'd be able to get information". He also mentions that "influencer marketing came with more affluence after the lockdowns, because Madeira was considered one of the safest destinations to travel to and this generated immense interest on the part of several people, both tourists and content creators, in visiting us and we had much more affluence from that period onwards."

4.5. Profile of Influencers

The profile of influencers is influenced according to the communication strategy of the hotels interviewed. The following figure allows us to analyse this, based on the representation of the 50 most quoted words (with more than 5 letters) in the coding produced in the "Profile of Influencers":

Figure 2 - Representation of the 50 most quoted words (with more than 5 letters) in the coding produced in the "Profile of Influencers".

Source: Own Elaboration

The words that stand out most in the word cloud shown in figure 2 give us guidelines for analysing the profile of the influencers chosen by the hotels in the study. Interviewee H_A says that the choice of an influencer is not influenced by the number of followers they have or their visibility, but by quality, artistic and differentiating posts, with interesting content. Hou & Pan (2022) point out that visual content has become essential in marketing, in order to convey experiences in a pleasant way and induce consumer engagement.

For interviewee H_L, the influencer's profile has to match the brand's values and characteristics and has to meet the purposes of what they want to promote. According to him, "we also look at the quality of content such as copies, images and stories, the evolution of performance, engagement rates, reach, the type of followers and also the volume of comments on posts, are metrics that we have to look at." Hou & Pan (2022) point out that when it comes to destination-related marketing, photographic content can even be more effective than textual content. They point out that photographs have the potential to promote stronger emotional reactions in public and, as a consequence, achieve a higher level of engagement.

Interviewee H_M said that requests for influencers and content creators already have a presentation portfolio and considers this a sign that they are prepared to establish this type of partnership and already know what their brand wants. The regularity of publications and the amount of content that is published is also a condition for choosing an influencer. Your

influencers publish content related to a variety of topics, such as lifestyle, gastronomy, travel, among others, so certain groups of people identify with such content. According to Ooi et al. (2023), followers begin to see digital influencers as idealized versions of themselves, wanting to emulate their behaviour. This factor is therefore appealing to hotels that want to convey the quality of their services to certain segments of the public.

5. Conclusion

Considering the results obtained and the respective analysis, we can conclude that hotels use influencer marketing as a communication strategy, taking advantage of the characteristics of influencers, as well as their power of persuasion, to communicate with their audiences and, consequently, promote engagement. The proximity that these content creators are able to establish with their audiences is an important factor that does not go unnoticed by hotels. As such, influencer marketing, as a communication strategy, attracts the public's attention to the hotels' social media pages and promotes their engagement, who interact with the posts, as well as brand awareness. The fact that they are 4- and 5-star hotels may have influenced the choice to develop this type of marketing. As hotels in the luxury segment, they focus on the superior quality of their services, trying to convey the best they have to the public. Influencer marketing has the same purpose.

Instagram is at the top of the list of digital platforms because it's easy to use, inexpensive, accessible and where many of the hotels' target audiences are present.

The hotel units interviewed agree when it comes to establishing partnerships with digital influencers whose profile matches the values of the hotel brand and the aims of the campaign they want to run. They look for people who have a positive online presence and who are capable of conveying the desired messages and establishing a connection with the target audience.

Limitations of the study include the fact that the sample was quite limited, so the results may not be sufficiently representative, that the types of influencers and their different roles were not identified, as well as understanding the dynamics of control over communication and resistance to the use of influencers in communication.

In the future, this study could be developed by extending the sample size and also analysing the content of the social networks of the various hotels, with the aim of analysing the metrics of the publications, namely the number of views, interactions (comments, likes and shares) and other highly relevant KPIs in the analysis of influencer marketing such as Influencer Score, Social

media reach, volume of mentions, sentiment, on version or Share of Voice (SOV), in order to determine whether the publications where we see the use of influencer marketing promote more interaction and engagement.

Acknowledgements

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