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Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration

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# **Digital marketing policies and strategies**

## **SUMMARY**

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## INTRODUCTION

The current global market is in a constant state of change due to technological progress, which affects consumer behavior. Nowadays, an increasing number of people are choosing to purchase products online. The evolution of digital media and platforms has transformed digital marketing into the most powerful form of marketing (Aswani Thampi, Ambeesh Mon, 2024).

According to Statista, as of 2022, the internet has become the most significant advertising medium for agencies, accounting for 62% of the total budget for media advertising in the mentioned year. It is projected that by 2024, the global budget allocated for digital advertising will reach 667.58 billion U.S. dollars, continuing to grow to 734.59 billion U.S. dollars in 2025, 802 billion U.S. dollars in 2026, and by 2027, worldwide spending on digital advertising will amount to 870.85 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2024<sup>a</sup>).

Digital marketing is viewed as "an adaptive process, enabled by technology, through which companies collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders" (Jayawardena et al., 2023). People now spend more time on digital platforms and channels, and the recent development of the Metaverse reflects the increasing immersion of consumers in digital spaces where goods, services, and interpersonal communication take virtual forms (Hadi, Melumad, Park, 2024). Considering the changes occurring in consumer behavior, companies must adapt, and a suitable solution is influencer marketing, which offers businesses both the possibility of promoting products and the opportunity to have effective communication with customers (Khurshid, Ayoub, Kortam, 2024).

According to data captured by Faruk, Rahman, Hasan (2021), there were 16 million internet users in December 1995. In contrast, by June 2019, the number had increased to 4.536 billion, covering 58.8% of the world's total population, which amounts to 7.71 billion people. It is estimated that people spend an average of 6 hours and 42 minutes online daily, and by 2021, 73% of e-commerce sales were generated through mobile platforms (Faruk, Rahman, Hasan, 2021). Furthermore, the fourth industrial revolution began with the invention of Web 4.0, the Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain, artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and 4G/5G internet speeds (Kerren, 2014). These technological inventions have significantly impacted consumers' lifestyles and the way marketers communicate with their clients. In 2004, Facebook entered the market, followed by many other social media



platforms in the subsequent years. People adopted these social networks at an exponential rate, which has affected how they communicate and interact.

With the advent of social networks and the development of web technologies and mobile applications, communication has become much easier than in past decades (Khomenko, Saher, Polcyn, 2020). As modern customers spend their time on digital media, marketing professionals have also developed strategies and tactics to reach them through the media they frequently use. Consequently, academic research has focused on various aspects such as search engine optimization, social media marketing, affiliate marketing, content marketing, video marketing, and more (Jimenez, 2020).

The daily lives of millions of people have been transformed by digital marketing through social and mobile networks, which have expanded into popular social networking practices and often lead to the formation of customer relationships (Woodside, Mir, 2019).

The internet and numerous digital communication technologies, including social media and mobile applications, are part of the personal lives of billions of people everywhere. According to statistics, in 2019, 2.95 billion people worldwide were actively using social media platforms. Two years later, in January 2021, the number of active internet users increased to 4.66 billion, and the number of active social media users reached 4.2 billion (Statista, 2022). Currently, the total number of internet users reached 5.44 billion in May 2024, while social media users numbered 5.07 billion worldwide at the same time (Statista, 2024<sup>b</sup>).

Social networks have become an essential part of many people's lives worldwide. Digital marketing and social media platforms facilitate achieving business marketing goals at a relatively low cost (Ajina, 2019). This is evidenced by the large number of businesses, with approximately 50 million companies having chosen to create a Facebook page, and over 88% of them engaging in marketing activities on the X platform (formerly Twitter) (Lister, 2023).

According to Myers et al., influencer marketing is undergoing continuous evolution, as evidenced by the increasing number of academic studies on this niche. However, limitations arise concerning research on consumer behaviors using actual customer response data (Myers et al., 2022).

## **THE TOPIC OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS AND ITS FIELD**

Digital marketing is a complex field that offers opportunities not only for informing but also for engaging consumers in the creation and sales processes of products. The emergence of social networks has enhanced communication among internet users and brought significant benefits to the business environment. Consequently, numerous digital marketing strategies and techniques now provide companies with both promotional opportunities and effective communication methods with consumers, aimed at establishing and maintaining strong connections with them.

Given that the concept of influencer marketing has gained significant traction in recent years and is viewed as a highly effective solution for promoting products across various industries, as well as being a continually evolving sphere, the author sought to delve deeper into this subject. Consequently, this paper broadly addresses digital marketing, with particular emphasis on the concept of influencer marketing, the characteristics of content creators, and the behavior of social media consumers.

The content of the doctoral thesis falls within the fundamental domain of Social Sciences, specifically categorized under Economic Sciences, with a focus on Marketing. The work addresses digital marketing broadly, emphasizing the concept of influencer marketing, the characteristics of content creators, as well as the behavior of Romanian consumers on social media.

## DOCTORAL THESIS OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Considering the previously highlighted aspects, the current relevance of the concept, and the need for further studies on influencer marketing, this thesis aims to address specific aspects of the field, with a focus on the behavior of Romanian consumers in this context.

The purpose of the doctoral thesis is to identify the best influencer marketing strategies that combine solutions for the needs of industry professionals with methods that meet the needs and expectations of Romanian consumers.

To further develop the aforementioned ideas, five marketing studies were conducted. The study begins with an analysis of the specialized literature in the field of digital marketing, followed by two qualitative research efforts: a series of in-depth interviews with experts and a focus group interview with consumers of influencer marketing.

Following the analysis of the results obtained from the two qualitative studies, the objectives and hypotheses for the quantitative research were formulated. Consequently, the first quantitative marketing study was developed, involving an analysis of the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of Romanian consumers regarding influencer marketing campaigns conducted online in Romania. To implement this study, a survey method was employed, and data were collected using an online questionnaire. This research was followed by an experiment in which four groups were organized based on the Solomon Four-Group Design to analyze the impact of influencer marketing campaigns on young people.

Next, the research methodology for each of the four researches will be presented.

### **1. Qualitative in-depth interview marketing research, focusing on: "Opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of experts in Romania within the field of influencer marketing, regarding the execution of influencer marketing campaigns"**

In-depth interviews aim to identify the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of experts in Romania within the field of influencer marketing regarding how they conduct collaborations with various brands and their interactions with their followers.

The research method chosen is the "semi-structured in-depth interview" because it provides the researcher with the opportunity to conduct thorough studies to identify basic, unknown yet relevant aspects related to the topic. Although the discussion is based on an interview guide, respondents are encouraged to expand on the topics covered without being constrained by the moderator. This method allows for a free exchange of information, which other methods do not permit (Lefter, 2007).

The objectives established for this research are:

- To understand the current state of influencer activity.
- To identify how influencers manage the content they create.
- To determine how social media platforms can influence content creators' activities.
- To explore the connection between the content created and the platform on which the influencer operates.
- To identify the factors that influence the relationship between content creators and their followers.
- To ascertain how content creators have been affected by the requirement to disclose their partnerships.
- To establish the attitudes of content creators towards various platforms.
- To determine the changes influencers would like to see in the online environment.
- To understand the future perspectives of influencers.

The qualitative research was based on direct semi-structured communication techniques, specifically employing semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with specialists in the field of influencer marketing.

In this study, the research population consists of all content creators in Romania. The exact size of the target audience is not precisely known, but a database of 45 content creators in Romania was created, whose contact information was identified online. All of these individuals were contacted, and ultimately, a sample of 6 content creators who expressed their willingness and consent to participate in the study was established. The influencers added to the database were verified to ensure that they were real, active online, and had collaborations with various companies. The 45 content creators were contacted both personally and, in some cases, through their managers. Currently, influencers in Romania choose to be part of influencer agencies to gain more opportunities for collaboration with various brands.

The individual interviews were conducted from April 12, 2023, to May 5, 2023, with a duration ranging from 30 minutes to one hour. The interviewer followed the themes established in the interview guide.

In conclusion, at the end of the individual interviews conducted as part of the qualitative research, all the objectives set for the qualitative study of content creators in Romania were achieved.

After processing the collected data, the attitudes of influencers regarding their collaborations, how they communicate with brands, and their views on the necessity of disclosing paid partnerships were identified. Given the significant growth of influencer marketing, many companies are currently focusing on content creators. Consequently, influencers acknowledge having numerous paid collaborations and partnerships that they do not wish to hide. For some, it even represents a point of pride, potentially attracting a larger number of partnerships. Although there are differing opinions, with some creators preferring not to publicly post about paid collaborations, the current legal environment is moving towards mandating public disclosure of these aspects. Most often, the relationship between an influencer and a brand is very good, with effective communication and a mutual understanding of needs. Data analysis revealed that influencers place high importance on their relationship with the brand, specifically the resonance between themselves and the product they are promoting.

The methods of content creation and the choice of the most suitable type of content are influenced both by the collaborations that content creators undertake, due to clear requirements set by companies, and by the platform on which they operate. Influencers have stated that they are increasingly focusing on the TikTok platform, where they primarily create video content, as the platform inherently supports this format. Often, community opinions are important, and content creators strive to be as transparent and natural as possible, successfully maintaining long-term relationships with their audiences.

As in any field, influencer marketing has both advantages and disadvantages for professionals in this domain. Despite the negative aspects that may arise, content creators admit that they started this activity out of passion and do everything possible to maintain their communities. They view influencer marketing as being in its early stages in Romania and are confident that it is both a future-oriented and successful field.

According to the results obtained from the interviews, there are several aspects of the online environment related to content creators' activities that need to be changed. Some issues pertain to the people in communities and social media users, while others are independent of human factors, such as the algorithms of platforms that sometimes disadvantage content creators.

The passage of time, as well as technological advancements, has influenced the activities of content creators, and the changes in this regard have been discussed by influencers during the individual interviews. An interesting aspect is that, over time, the Facebook

platform has somewhat faded into the background, with influencers choosing to focus less on this network and redirecting their efforts towards the current platform, TikTok. From the in-depth interviews, it emerged that the Facebook page of influencers serves merely as an additional platform where they distribute content already created on Instagram or TikTok. Content creators who started their activities more recently (from 2019 or 2020) often do not even have a dedicated Facebook page for their work, but only a private, personal account.

## **2. Qualitative marketing research conducted through focus group interviews, focusing on: "Opinions, attitudes, and knowledge of Romanian adults regarding social media platforms and online content created by influencers"**

Subsequently, a second qualitative research was conducted, involving a focus group interview, which is a representative method for qualitative group techniques aimed at obtaining primary information based on discussions within a relatively homogeneous group of individuals (Constantin, Tecău, 2009). This research method was chosen because it allows for defining clear problems, generating ideas and hypotheses that can be tested through quantitative research. The benefits of focus group interviews include: the synergy that leads to the emergence of new ideas through the interaction of opinions expressed by participants, the advantage for the moderator to identify key terms used by participants, the speed at which ideas emerge through group discussion compared to individual ones, as well as the flexibility to address diverse aspects and topics and to conduct an in-depth investigation (Lefter, 2007).

During the focus group interview, the attitudes of consumers towards social media platforms will be examined, as well as their opinions regarding the online content created by influencers.

The research was centered around the following main objectives:

- Identifying the sources that subjects use for information.
- Determining the factors that influence the respondents' purchasing process.
- Understanding the purposes for which subjects use social networks.
- Identifying the factors that lead participants to follow an influencer on social media.
- Determining the types of content preferred by the subjects.
- Identifying the respondents' opinions about the relationship between the influencer/content and the platform on which they operate.

- Establishing the subjects' attitudes towards posts made by influencers in partnership with other brands, as well as the public mention of such partnerships.
- Understanding the subjects' views on the possibility that a product purchase could be influenced by content creators.
- Establishing the respondents' perspective on traditional marketing versus influencer marketing.

The population subject to the research consists of social media users, individuals over 18 years old, from Braşov County, who are familiar with the term "influencer" and follow content creators online.

The research was conducted on April 19, 2023, between 7:00 PM and 8:30 PM, in Braşov County, with the discussion being facilitated by a moderator. During the focus group interview, discussions were initiated, questions were addressed, and projective techniques were used, such as the sentence completion test and the story continuation test.

The discussion was recorded both video and audio. The recordings were then transcribed, and the most important information was consolidated into a content matrix.

The following sections will summarize the information obtained from the focus group interview, as well as the overall conclusions of the qualitative study. The conclusions will be presented in abstract terms, with the researcher maintaining an impartial stance.

It can be observed that with the popularization of social media, consumers have also shifted their focus towards these platforms, either for information, socializing, or entertainment. Based on the analysis of the focus group interview, it was highlighted that consumers have a strong preference for reading various reviews about a product before making a purchase. They prefer to follow content creators online who test different products and provide recommendations based on personal experiences. The findings from the focus group analysis align with previous studies (Djafarova, Rushworth, 2017; Geetha, Rajkumar, Arunachalam, 2018; Geng et al., 2020; Miah et al., 2022) which state that positive online customer reviews influence the decision-making process regarding purchases. Additionally, according to the respondents, the number of reviews for a product is an important element in the purchasing decision-making process. This factor is also mentioned in other studies (Viglia, Minazzi, Buhalis, 2016; Kim, Li, Brymer, 2016), which highlight the positive effect of reviews on company performance. Viglia, Minazzi, and Buhalis (2016) reinforce the focus group conclusion, explaining that the volume of reviews benefits a company, whether they are positive or negative, due to the increased visibility of the business, thereby raising

consumer awareness. Furthermore, De Pelsmacker, van Tilburg, and Holthof (2018) believe that due to the large number of reviews, a product remains in the attention of customers for a longer period, reducing perceived risk and distrust.

Of course, for influencers' opinions to be credible, the products presented must align with the creator's field of expertise. Transparency and authenticity are crucial for users when choosing to join an influencer's online community.

Over time, online users have shifted from reading blogs, which reported written experiences and personal opinions, to watching videos of various kinds. There is a noticeable shift in user preferences towards short-form video content that conveys as many details as possible. As a result, some content creators prefer to add written text or even voice-over to their videos to provide additional explanations. This type of content is highly appreciated by social media consumers.

The analysis of the focus group interview revealed respondents' opinions on the comparison between traditional marketing and influencer marketing. The latter is much more valued and is seen as the future, especially if the target audience of companies is young people. Some participants admitted that they do not even notice some traditional marketing campaigns, even when they are presented through large graphic representations, such as street banners. Influencer marketing is considered much more useful and accessible to young people.

It can be concluded from the analysis of the focus group discussion that half of the participants make impulse purchases after seeing certain posts from influencers, even if they did not need the product at the time. In contrast, the other four participants are not motivated to purchase a product they do not need at that moment just because it has been promoted or recommended by a social media content creator. All the objectives of the group research were achieved.

### **3. Quantitative marketing research on "Opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of consumers in Romania regarding influencer marketing campaigns in the digital services market of Romania"**

This quantitative marketing research aims to analyze the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of consumers in Romania regarding influencer marketing campaigns conducted online in Romania. Additionally, it seeks to determine the impact these marketing campaigns have on the purchasing process.



To conduct the described quantitative marketing research, a survey was used because it allows for the formulation of diverse questions that help to understand various aspects of the studied population (Constantin, 2009). The data collection tool is the questionnaire, which was administered online.

The analysis of specialized studies and the results of the two qualitative researches contributed to setting the objectives of the quantitative marketing research.

The objectives of the quantitative research are described in the table below:

**Table 1. Objectives of quantitative marketing research**

Basic aspects	Researcher's questions	Research objectives
Knowledge of terms specific to influencer marketing	1. How familiar are Romanians with the term influencer marketing?	1. Measuring the degree of knowledge of the term influencer marketing among Romanians.
	2. What are the most used social media platforms in Romania?	2. Identifying the most used social media platform.
	3. What is the preferred content by users of social media platforms?	3. Determining the type of content preferred by the subjects in social media.
	4. What is the attitude of Romanians regarding the activity of online influencers?	4. Discovering the opinions of subjects regarding the activity of content creators.
Opinions, attitudes and behaviors of Romanians regarding the link between influencer marketing campaigns and the purchase process of products	1. To what extent is the decision-making process of purchasing a product influenced by the online posts of an influencer?	1. Quantifying the extent to which the purchase process of a product is influenced by an influencer's posts.
	2. How often do subjects buy products suggested by influencers?	2. Identifying the frequency with which Romanians purchase products suggested by content creators in the online environment
	3. What is the frequency with which subjects get additional information before making a purchase suggested by influencers?	3. Measuring the frequency with which Romanians inform themselves before purchasing a product recommended by an influencer.
	4. What are the most important elements of an influencer marketing campaign that leads subjects to	4. Determining the most important factors in an influencer marketing

Basic aspects	Researcher's questions	Research objectives
	purchase various products?	campaign that lead subjects to buy the promoted product.
Opinions of Romanians in relation to various elements of influencer marketing campaigns	1. Which are the social media platforms where influencer marketing campaigns have a greater impact?	1. Identifying the social media platform where influencer marketing campaigns have the greatest impact on users.
	2. What are the elements that influence the credibility of an influencer marketing campaign?	2. Determining the elements that influence the credibility and authenticity of influencer marketing campaigns.
	3. To what extent do social media users trust the recommendations of content creators?	3. Measuring the degree of trust that subjects have in the recommendations of social media content creators.
	4. What is the attitude of the subjects regarding different statements about influencer marketing campaigns?	4. Determining subjects' attitudes regarding a series of statements about influencer marketing campaigns.
	5. How likely are subjects to skip or ignore sponsored content created in social media?	5. Identifying the probability of ignoring sponsored content by users of social platforms.
	6. What aspects would respondents improve on influencer marketing campaigns?	6. Discovering subject suggestions on how to improve influencer marketing campaigns.
	7. What are the elements of an influencer marketing campaign that led subjects to unfollow certain content creators on social platforms?	7. Finding out the elements within influencer marketing campaigns, which can cause Romanians to give up following a content creator in the online environment.
Characterization of respondents from a socio-demographic point of view	1. How can the respondents be classified according to certain sociodemographic characteristics?	1. Classification of Romanians according to sex, age, education, income, occupation, background.
	2. What links exist between the characteristics of the respondents and different variables of the research?	2. Establishing links between respondents' characteristics and certain research variables.

Source: Conceived by the author

Numerous phenomena related to the research topic in this study can be explained using the research hypotheses. These were defined by the researcher in the initial stage of the process, with statistical hypotheses to be tested and validated or rejected, and the general hypotheses to be confirmed or refuted based on the analysis of the collected data.

General hypotheses of the quantitative research:

1. The most widely used social media platform by Romanians is Instagram.
2. Most Romanians prefer video content in the lifestyle category.
3. Generally, Romanians believe that the activity of online influencers is aimed at providing useful information.
4. The majority of influencer marketing campaigns are conducted on Instagram.
5. The three most important factors in an influencer marketing campaign that influence subjects to purchase the promoted product are: detailed information, personal experience presentation, and discount codes.
6. The social media platform where influencer marketing campaigns have the greatest impact on subjects is Instagram.
7. Most respondents believe that the authenticity and credibility of influencer marketing campaigns are influenced by how creators incorporate products into their daily lives, and it is important that there is alignment between the product and the creator's field of activity.
8. The reason most Romanians stop following a particular influencer is that the influencer has conducted a marketing campaign for a product that is not aligned with their field of activity.

Statistical hypotheses of the quantitative research:

1. More than 70% of the population being studied is familiar with the term influencer marketing.
2. The average rating of how much the purchasing decision process is influenced by a content creator's posts is different from 4 points on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 represents "Not at all" and 5 represents "Very much").
3. The percentage of Romanians who have made at least one purchase based on an influencer's recommendation is greater than 60%.
4. The average rating of how often the population being studied seeks additional information before buying a product recommended by influencers is greater than 3 points on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 represents "Never" and 5 represents "Always").

5. There is a relationship between age and opinions regarding the credibility of influencer marketing campaigns.
6. There is a relationship between the influence of content creators on the purchasing process and the respondents' environment of origin.
7. There is a relationship between the type of preferred platform and the respondents' age.
8. There is a relationship between the respondents' gender and their ratings of the influence that a content creator can have on their purchasing decision.

In this research, a non-random sampling method was employed, with the selection of the sample and data collection being carried out via the internet. The questionnaire was distributed for completion using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which allowed for the identification of communities consisting of individuals representing the target audience of the research. Additionally, a snowball sampling technique was used, where adults who completed the questionnaire forwarded it to others. Among these individuals were several content creators who helped spread the questionnaire further online.

Data collection was conducted over a period of five weeks, starting from August 21, 2023. Google Forms was used to facilitate data collection and to download the database, which included all 618 responses. After the initial screening question, 568 subjects remained eligible to complete the questionnaire. Following the third question, an additional 48 respondents were redirected to the demographic questions section. The collected data were coded and processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

The marketing research aimed to identify the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of Romanian consumers regarding influencer marketing campaigns encountered in the Romanian digital services market, as well as their views on various elements of these campaigns. Additionally, the study sought to determine the level of familiarity with specific influencer marketing terms. The questionnaire was designed and administered via Google Forms, resulting in a sample of 618 adult respondents from Romania. The sampling method used was non-random.

The quantitative research results provided valuable insights that can be integrated into digital marketing strategies. Firstly, it is essential to understand the social media platforms where Romanian adult users have accounts. Based on the primary data analysis, Instagram is the most used platform (82.80%), being the preferred application for 75.48% of

respondents. 71.5% of the sample also have a Facebook account, which is the most appreciated platform for 5.77% of the study participants. TikTok is preferred by 10% of the respondents, while YouTube is preferred by 7.31%.

92% of the study participants are familiar with the term "influencer marketing" and perceive the activity of online content creators as both information-oriented (66.20%) and product sales-oriented (62.30%). Given this, the researcher aimed to assess the impact of online promotional activities of content creators, leading to a question about purchases made based on influencer recommendations. 92% of respondents reported having made at least one purchase based on a content creator's recommendation.

An important aspect that emerges from the primary data analysis is related to the types of campaigns that inspire the most trust in respondents. The top three types of campaigns that inspire trust are: social media campaigns where the influencer integrates the promoted product into their daily activities (68.8%), campaigns conducted by influencers whom respondents follow on social media platforms (54.60%), and those that indicate the existence of a paid partnership (31.20%). The credibility of marketing campaigns can also be influenced by other factors; for instance, 38.10% of respondents feel that the number of followers a content creator has affects the credibility of promotional activities. The remaining 61.90% do not consider this aspect as particularly important. Nonetheless, 45.8% of the respondents always seek additional information about a product promoted on social media by content creators. On the other hand, there are also negative effects of influencer marketing campaigns, which can sometimes lead to a decrease in the number of followers in the creator's community. 66% of respondents have stopped following a particular content creator online due to the campaigns they conducted. The most frequently mentioned reasons are: the campaign was too aggressive (44.8%), the promoted product was not aligned with the influencer's activity (44.8%), the promoted product itself (38.4%), or the brand with which the collaboration was made (23.30%).

Regarding the credibility of marketing campaigns, respondents' opinions do not vary according to their age; in other words, there is no correlation between the respondents' level of agreement with the previous statement and their age. The same conclusion applies to the level of agreement with the statement: "I would prefer to see more influencer marketing campaigns in my social media feeds" and the preferred social media platform of Romanians. However, the application of the ANOVA test revealed that there is a relationship between the frequency with which Romanians make purchases based on an influencer's recommendation and their income level.

It was also found that, within the surveyed population, there is a relationship between the preferred platform of respondents and their age. Instagram is predominant among respondents aged 18 to 49, while Facebook is more preferred by those aged 50 to 59. However, regarding the level of influence a content creator can have on respondents' purchasing decisions and the respondents' gender, it could not be guaranteed with a 95% probability that a relationship exists within the surveyed population.

#### **4. Marketing experiment on "The efficacy of influencers and brand ambassadors in influencer marketing campaigns"**

The Solomon Four-Group Test is a robust experimental design in marketing research that addresses many internal validity issues that might negatively impact the study. This type of experiment allows the researcher to control variables and determine whether pre-testing has influenced the results. The presence of both control and experimental groups provides the researcher with control over external factors that could alter the outcomes (Kumari, 2013).

The structure of the experiment is established according to the Solomon Four-Group Test. Consequently, the experiment consists of one experimental group and three control groups. The steps in this model are:

Step 1: Form the four groups of participants.

Step 2: Test the members of the experimental group and Control Group 1 without applying any stimulus.

Step 3: Expose the stimulus for a specified period only to the subjects in the experimental group and Control Group 2, while respondents in Control Groups 1 and 3 will have no contact with the stimulus.

Step 4: Analyze the results obtained from all four groups participating in the experiment.

Under normal conditions (assuming no interfering factors), the following conclusions can be drawn:

The Perceived Image Improvement: The perceived image of the experimental group should be better after applying the stimulus compared to that of Control Group 1, indicating that the stimulus had a positive effect.

Pre-Post Improvement Comparison: The same positive effect (as in point 1) can be achieved if the image in the experimental group improved after the stimulus was applied, compared to the perception of the same group before exposure to the stimulus.

No Impact of Pre-Testing: If the perception of the subject under analysis is the same for Control Groups 1 and 3 after treatment, it demonstrates that pre-testing did not impact the experiment.

Assessment of Pre-Testing Effects: To conclude that the initial evaluation did not cause unnecessary changes in the image, perceptions in the experimental group and Control Group 2 must be the same after applying the stimulus.

Learning Effect Evaluation: If the results are the same in both pre-testing and post-testing (after the treatment) for Control Group 1, it indicates that the learning effect between the first and second test was null. (Cătoi, 2002).

For conducting the experiment, the researcher formulated the following objectives:

1. Assessing the Originality of Campaigns: Identify the level of originality of influencer marketing campaigns conducted with multiple content creators.
2. Evaluating Originality with Brand Ambassadors: Determine the level of originality of influencer marketing campaigns executed in collaboration with brand ambassadors.
3. Measuring Brand Trust: Measure the level of brand trust conveyed by influencer marketing campaigns involving multiple content creators.
4. Assessing Brand Trust with Brand Ambassadors: Establish the level of brand trust conveyed by influencer marketing campaigns carried out with brand ambassadors.
5. Evaluating Credibility with Multiple Content Creators: Identify the level of credibility conveyed by influencer marketing campaigns managed with multiple content creators.
6. Assessing Credibility with Brand Ambassadors: Determine the level of credibility conveyed by influencer marketing campaigns involving brand ambassadors.

Based on the previous analysis of the means obtained using the IBM SPSS program, it was possible to compare the means of all four groups participating in the experiment to determine if the presentation of the eight marketing campaigns influences participants' perceptions of aspects such as originality, brand trust, and the credibility of the information conveyed.

The results of the experiment highlighted the sensitivity of respondents to digital marketing campaigns, both those conducted on social media with the involvement of multiple influencers and those including brand ambassadors. To identify whether the

differences in means were statistically significant, the t-Student test was applied using the IBM SPSS program. The results indicated a lack of significant difference; however, this aspect may be influenced by the small size of the sample.



## STRUCTURE OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The doctoral thesis with the title "Digital marketing policies and strategies" is structured in six chapters, including aspects such as: theoretical and methodological considerations regarding digital marketing, the current state of knowledge in this field, the study of Romanian consumer behavior, qualitative and quantitative marketing research having based on the niche of influencer marketing activities, but also a marketing program designed to increase the visibility of Transilvania University of Braşov in the online environment. The general conclusions, the author's contributions, as well as future research directions can be found in the last part of the thesis.

In the first chapter, titled "Theoretical and Methodological Aspects of Digital Marketing," the aim was to present the concepts specific to the field clearly, establishing the theoretical foundation for the doctoral thesis. Key terms were systematically defined, starting from general concepts and tracing the evolution of marketing over time, and then moving on to specific elements such as "influencer marketing."

The chapter describes the elements of the marketing mix, contextualized for the digital era, followed by a detailed examination of technologies specific to Industry 5.0 and 6.0, including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality. Online services and social media platforms, being essential in digital marketing, were also analyzed theoretically, with an emphasis on the behavior of customers within these two niches. Finally, the chapter addresses the effects of social influence on consumer behavior.

The current state of knowledge in the field of influencer marketing was analyzed in the second chapter. The chapter begins with a synthesis of research conducted to date on the influencer marketing market, capturing its evolution both globally and within Romania. Additionally, based on the analysis of scientific articles, human and virtual influencers were defined, and a comparison was made between these two categories, as well as their effectiveness in social media posts. At the end of this section, a series of social media-specific practices are presented, including sponsored posts, which play a crucial role in the activities of online content creators.

The following three chapters include a series of marketing research conducted by the author on the topic of the thesis. The first two studies are qualitative and are presented in the third chapter of the thesis. This chapter is divided into two sections: the first section covers qualitative research using in-depth interviews, aiming to identify the opinions,

attitudes, and beliefs of Romanian experts in the field of influencer marketing regarding their interactions with the business environment and their engagement with the communities they have formed online across various social media platforms. In the second part of Chapter Three, the author presents "Opinions, Attitudes, and Knowledge of Romanian Adults Regarding Social Media Platforms and Online Content Created by Influencers." The two qualitative studies provided significant insights into the behavior of digital services consumers, which served as the foundation for subsequent research.

Chapter Four presents the quantitative marketing research on the topic "Opinions, Attitudes, and Behaviors of Consumers in Romania Regarding Influencer Marketing Campaigns in the Romanian Digital Services Market," utilizing a survey approach. Data were collected using a questionnaire, resulting in a sample of 618 respondents over five weeks of data collection, starting from August 21, 2023.

Moving on, Chapter Five details an experiment titled "The Effectiveness of Influencers and Brand Ambassadors in Influencer Marketing Campaigns," which investigated whether the presentation of influencer marketing campaigns—both with multiple content creators and with a single brand ambassador—positively affects originality, credibility, and brand trust.

Chapter Six, titled "Policies and Marketing Strategies Applied to the Digital Domain," complements the existing literature by presenting policies and strategies for essential elements of the marketing mix, adapted to the digital age. These are applicable in the sphere of digital marketing, especially in campaigns conducted on social media platforms. Considering the study of these aspects and the overall analysis of the literature on influencer marketing, the author proposed a marketing program in the final part of this chapter. This last section includes various marketing programs conducted globally by universities in collaboration with content creators, as well as details of the marketing activities aimed at increasing the online visibility of the University of Transylvania of Braşov.

In conclusion, the general findings of the thesis, the author's personal contributions, and future research directions are presented, followed by the bibliography and appendices.

The doctoral thesis includes 62 tables, 57 figures, and 6 appendices. The general bibliography consists of 467 sources, including: specialized articles, analyses and reports, marketing research, books, conference papers, and electronic sources.

## CONCLUSIONS

Digital marketing represents a dynamic and ever-evolving market that offers a wide range of opportunities and technologies. Influencer marketing, a segment of the digital industry, was valued at 24 billion US dollars globally in 2024 (Statista, 2024<sup>6</sup>), marking an increase of 2.9 billion US dollars compared to 2023. This branch of marketing is becoming increasingly popular among numerous firms due to the benefits it can generate. In sectors such as fashion, beauty, tourism, food, soft drinks, and others, many companies choose to partner with influential individuals to create promotional content on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Very few businesses have not engaged in any campaigns with content creators (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Analyzing the literature in the field of digital marketing reveals the current relevance of the concept of "influencer marketing," particularly its potential for evolution due to the widespread use of social networks and increasingly advanced technologies that generate creative and diverse content. Studies confirm that influencer marketing is an innovative approach suitable for both product promotion and the creation and maintenance of relationships between consumers and companies. Among the advantages of digital promotion experienced by companies are: interaction with users, rapid feedback that allows for effective campaign analysis, highly precise audience segmentation, broad geographical coverage, the opportunity to personalize messages, lower costs, and the ability to more easily observe competing enterprises. Notably, due to technology's continuous evolution and its increasing array of opportunities, companies can develop new marketing strategies. From the consumers' perspective, these techniques provide convenience, offering access to information from anywhere at any time of day.

A crucial factor in developing digital marketing strategies is consumer behavior, which can be significantly influenced through social networks. Content creators are specialists in this field who, through their online activities, manage to alter behaviors or prompt users to take various actions. Thus, the decision to purchase a product can be influenced digitally by content creators. Based on the results of the qualitative research analysis presented in section 3.1, it can be stated that it is essential for the promotional actions carried out by influencers to be integrated into their daily routines and to be part of their personal lives. Moreover, it is crucial for the products recommended to align with the niche in which the influencers are "specialized" in order to attract users and, more importantly, to maintain a long-term connection with them.

Moreover, for the economic environment, it is essential to understand the perspective of specialists, especially when aiming to create strategies that are compatible with the expectations and needs of content creators, so that they can convey the desired message as naturally as possible. Based on the focus group interviews conducted by the author, it was found that authenticity and transparency are two of the essential characteristics of influencers valued by social media users. These traits are pivotal in why subjects choose to join a content creator's community.

On the other hand, influencer marketing has amplified consumers' impulsive buying behavior. Consumers often purchase products recommended or showcased by influencers they admire online, even when there is no immediate need for the product at the time of purchase. Therefore, involving content creators in promotional activities can be beneficial, as 92% of the sample members have made at least one purchase after seeing a product recommended online by influencers.

Another crucial aspect in developing a successful influencer marketing strategy is identifying the most suitable social media platform for the marketing campaign. Firstly, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of the target audience and their preferred social network. Once this is established, the influencer whose online community matches the target audience of the campaign should be identified. The results of the survey conducted among Romanian consumers revealed that most subjects prefer Instagram as their social media platform. Additionally, it was concluded that there is a relationship between the type of social media platform preferred by respondents and their age within the sample. Therefore, depending on the age of the target audience, the digital marketing strategy should focus on presenting promotional activities on the social media platforms where the target audience spends the most time.

It is also essential to consider actions on social media that may annoy users and should be avoided. During the thesis, in the quantitative research titled "Opinions, Attitudes, and Behaviors of Romanian Consumers Regarding Influencer Marketing Campaigns in the Romanian Digital Services Market," it was found that more than half of the respondents had stopped following an influencer online due to certain events. The most frequently mentioned reasons are: a lack of alignment between the promoted product and the influencer's activity, the aggressiveness of the promotional campaigns conducted by the influencer, or the characteristics of the product or brand involved in the promotional collaboration. Other aspects that led to "leaving" an influencer's community included: the influencer focusing solely on promotional campaigns, not sharing personal life aspects with followers, thereby

losing connection with them, and collaborating with multiple competing companies and promoting similar products, which led viewers to perceive a sense of inauthenticity.

Influencer marketing actions on social media are commonly encountered online, but sometimes they are presented in a very subtle manner. To enhance the positive impact of this type of marketing, it is advisable to highlight marketing campaigns that are based on sponsorship. This aspect was the most appreciated by the respondents in the quantitative research presented in subchapter 4.1.

The success of an influencer marketing strategy can be measured by the conversions achieved subsequently. These conversions can be represented by the number of purchases generated by the posts on social media platforms created by influencers who are part of the strategy. The most important aspects that can positively influence a person's purchasing decision include: first, providing detailed information about the promoted product by the content creator, sharing personal experiences, offering discounts in the form of coupon codes, making recommendations in a highly authentic manner, the attachment to the influencer involved in the campaign, highlighting sponsored content, and the celebrity status of the content creator. These characteristics were previously listed in a descending order based on the level of importance assigned by the participants in the survey conducted by the author, starting with the most important attribute in an influencer marketing campaign to persuade the subject to purchase the promoted product, and ending with the least important element for them.

The results of the experiment highlighted the concept of brand ambassador, a term also mentioned by members of the sample during individual interviews. Upon completing the experiment, it was shown that the participating subjects were responsive to the stimuli to which they were exposed. The differences between the means calculated for the four groups, before and after the application of the stimulus, demonstrated that there was a change in the participants' perception regarding the level of originality, trust in the brand, and credibility of influencer marketing campaigns conducted in collaboration with both multiple content creators and brand ambassadors. However, not all of these differences were statistically significant.

In conclusion, this doctoral thesis presents an analysis of the specialized literature, highlighting the specific concepts of digital marketing and examining the current state of the influencer marketing market. Through four research endeavors—two qualitative and two quantitative—the attitudes of Romanian consumers towards influencer marketing campaigns were captured, along with the perspectives of industry specialists. By capturing

the opinions of both parties, the most suitable influencer marketing strategy can be outlined, selecting the most appropriate actions and content typologies for both the viewers and the content creators. All findings presented in this study contribute to the existing literature in the field of digital marketing.

## PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In this doctoral thesis, the study of influencer marketing is approached from both the perspective of Romanian consumers and the content creators who are experts in the field and are actively involved in the creation and promotion of various types of content. The primary objective of the research is to identify the most critical elements of a marketing campaign involving collaborations with content creators, with the aim of establishing the foundation for an optimal and successful influencer marketing strategy. By understanding consumer needs and examining the expectations of content creators, a well-balanced and effective strategy can be developed.

The first stage of this doctoral thesis involved a systematic review of the specialized literature to capture both theoretical and methodological aspects of digital marketing. This was achieved through the consultation of various scientific sources, including specialty articles, marketing research, analyses and reports, books, conference papers, and electronic sources.

The current state of knowledge in the field of influencer marketing was approached and presented in a distinctive manner, capturing the evolution of this concept on a global scale. This chapter also addressed the state of the virtual influencer market and the characteristics of content creators, enabling the analysis and definition of specific strategies within influencer marketing.

In Chapter 3, the author conducted two qualitative marketing studies in an original manner. The first study targeted specialists in the field of influencer marketing to identify the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of experts from Romania. This was achieved through individual interviews with six content creators in Romania. The second qualitative study involved a focus group interview to gather primary information on Romanian consumers' attitudes towards social media platforms, as well as their opinions on online content created by influencers. The author's contribution is highlighted through the moderation and analysis of these two qualitative studies. The findings from these investigations provided the foundation for the objectives and hypotheses of the quantitative research presented in Chapter 4.

The quantitative marketing research titled "Opinions, Attitudes, and Behaviors of Romanian Consumers Regarding Influencer Marketing Campaigns in the Romanian Digital

Services Market," designed by the author, aimed to understand consumer perceptions of influencer marketing campaigns and to determine their impact on the purchasing process.

The author also fully designed the second quantitative research, an original marketing experiment based on a four-group design, specifically the Solomon Four-Group Design. This experiment aimed to examine participants' reactions to applied stimuli, analyzing aspects such as the originality of influencer marketing campaigns, brand trust, and campaign credibility. These characteristics were investigated both for marketing campaigns conducted in collaboration with multiple influencers and for those involving brand ambassadors.

Another exclusive contribution of the author is the development of the marketing program described in subsection 6.3. This program integrates current influencer marketing techniques with modern technologies capable of generating virtual influencers. The primary goal of these marketing activities is to enhance the visibility of the Transilvania University of Braşov and to establish connections between the academic environment and students. Although the program is proposed for a specific period, namely one academic year, the creation of a virtual avatar could become the university's representative, allowing for long-term planning and management of its online presence.

The author's entire research activity contributed significantly to the development of the doctoral thesis. The dissemination of all studies and results was accomplished through the author's participation in scientific conferences and the publication of scientific articles in specialized journals (ISI/BDI).



## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

During the three years of studying the field of digital marketing, numerous concerns have emerged that can form the basis of future research directions. The complexity of this field, as well as the dynamics with which it evolves, have determined the appearance of slight differences between the objectives initially proposed by the author and the final result. However, this aspect is seen as an opportunity for future research. Based on the results of the studies contained in this thesis, the following future research directions are proposed:

- Conducting a representative quantitative research study on the topic "Opinions, Attitudes, and Behaviors of Consumers in Romania Regarding Influencer Marketing Campaigns in the Romanian Digital Services Market." This research idea emerged from the qualitative research conducted in this work. However, due to the sampling method used, the results cannot be extrapolated. Therefore, it is proposed to develop a survey-based study at the national level in Romania, employing a random sampling method.
- Based on the results of the individual interviews conducted with content creators, it is proposed to carry out a series of individual interviews with specialists, specifically targeting 10 marketing agency managers in Romania. The objective is to ascertain their attitudes towards collaborations with content creators. Having already obtained perspectives from influencers, it is important to also gather insights connecting these collaborations with the business environment.
- Another research direction emerged from the literature review, which identified a new typology of content creators: virtual influencers. The author proposes conducting a qualitative study among marketing agencies to determine whether there is potential for this concept in Romania.
- Building on the findings from the previous qualitative research, a quantitative study is suggested to assess consumer opinions regarding the impact of virtual influencers. This study aims to determine if there is potential for this domain within the Romanian market.
- Given the identified differences in perception regarding originality, credibility, and trust in brand between campaigns involving multiple influencers and those involving brand ambassadors, the author proposes designing a quantitative



research study at the national level in Romania. The goal is to compare the impact of marketing campaigns with multiple influencers versus those with brand ambassadors on the perceived credibility.

- Some of the aforementioned research directions could be pursued as a continuation of the current study, as the author has already conducted related research that could serve as a foundation for these investigations.

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- **Szakal, A.C.**, Brătucu, G., Ciobanu, E., Chiţu, I.B., Mocanu, A.A., Ialomiţianu, G. (2024) `Exploring Influencing Marketing—Consumer Insights and Creators’ Perspectives`, *Sustainability*. Vol.16, No.5. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16051845>.
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