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ARTICLE

#TURNINGPOINT
THE NEW ERA
OF INFLUENCER
MARKETING

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INTRODUCTION

Amid the shock COVID-19 has caused to both brands and the marketing industry (to say nothing of individual citizens), many have understood, in the words of Jordi Black at Zine, that “those who had established partnerships with influencers had different levers and safety nets than those who had not.” During a pandemic that has forced official production channels to close, many brands have had serious problems creating quality content that can connect with their audiences. With an estimated value of \$10 billion over the coming months, we have yet to see how this unquestionable sector recession that the coronavirus caused will affect these figures. However, now is also a good time to reflect on past and future trends in the influencer marketing industry.

In the last two years, while the turnover figures influencers have reported continued to grow, we also witnessed the development of anti-influencer sentiment, something strongly fueled by the explosion of fake news and false followers. There is no shortage of cases, including that of Yovan Mendoza (formerly known as Rawvana), a raw vegan influencer who was shown eating fish in a post by another influencer. Following the controversy, she changed her identity on social media. Specific incidents (and their global repercussions) due to inappropriate statements or content from influencers have also led brands to apologize and publicly distance themselves from their former allies. There have even been some cases of people parodying this situation, such as Jenya Kenner, who leaves her followers intrigued as to whether or not she is real and ridicules the superficial nature of the sector.

The main problem in the evolution of influencer marketing and cause of its fall from grace is that, all too often, everyone (brands, agencies and influencers alike) has tried to influence using the information and communication technologies (ICTs) of reach techniques. This detracted from an industry that, like any other, was (as Influencer Marketing Hub has said) “the Wild West.” The influencer ecosystem has also been affected by immediatist brands, which have committed to working with influencers followed by millions of people and

offering them no small sums of money without any kind of consistency between them and their own companies’ territories or values. This has led to many expecting special treatment, or even costly products for free, without delivering anything in exchange. It has been an area with little regulation, where people basically acted however they liked.

In reality, this anti-influencer sentiment is an opportunity for the influencer marketing industry to professionalize itself. The model shift has been supported by interest from certain institutions, such as the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), in regulating this brand-influencer relationship model, as well as concerted efforts by companies such as Kellogg’s or Unilever to fight back against fake accounts. Although there are now regulations in force that are making a push toward transparency, compliance is slow. The reasons for this include reservations from brands that believe revealing the nature of their relationships with influencers could reduce their effectiveness, despite studies rejecting this theory, including Alice Audrezet and Karine Charry’s, reported by Harvard Business Review in 2018. Furthermore, as highlighted by the “What’s Next for Influencer Marketing?” report by Zine, “no influencer can guarantee they have a clean audience. 1 out of 3 influencers say they have been gifted followers or engagement at some point in the past. This means that even with the best of intentions on their part, marketing managers will need to find some way of taking a proportion of fake followers into account in their estimations.”

Below, we will discuss some of the keys to transforming an industry seeking its place in marketing while fighting against its own contradictions.

OVERLAPPING VALUES AND AUTHENTICITY *or, How to Choose Suitable Partners*

An increasing number of brands understand that it is not just about having a network of influencers with millions of followers, but rather, above all, creating better overlap between their values and those of these partners. Brands are not the only ones realizing this. There are countless examples of influencers who impose their own values, only working with companies who share their outlooks. Sophia Li, focused on mindful travelling, is one such influencer. She only partners with sustainable brands that fit into the concept of 'mindful content.' This trend coincides with an explosion of influencers with purpose, focused on causes ranging from mental health to animal rights to sustainability.

Many influencers have become benchmarks for people committed to consuming only environmentally responsible brands. This has happened with animal testing in the beauty sector and accounts such as @sustainably_vegan, or the Low Impact movement with @crueltyfreewithme, or veganism and animal rights with @thatvegancouple. Today's influencers with purpose often move on the fringes or even within activist movements, such as the one on weapons regulation in the United States (Emma Gonzalez, a survivor of the Parkland shooting), the search for better sex education (Killer and a Sweet Thang) or support for women dealing with eating disorders in the fashion and beauty industry (The Chain). All these are examples of how trends crystallize in the digital world, potentially leading movements against brands. But, above all, they can be major allies for brand activism strategies.

In 2019, Instagram announced its intention to remove likes in order to foster content quality over other criteria, in line with a widespread search for greater authenticity and less reproduction of prefabricated content. This search for self-expression and authenticity, which we mentioned in our [2018 trend analysis](#), can be found in the case of Rianne Meijer, an influencer who compares filter-processed images and unfiltered ones. One of the most often-repeated

sector criticisms in recent times relates to its uniformity, something Paper Magazine reported when compiling the 100 Instagram accounts with the most followers – the vast majority of which were young white women. In its report, it even merged images to create a photofit picture of a modern successful influencer,

Buetti, the data analyst behind @beautiful.newyorkcity, an automated account for which he trained an AI to obtain photos from other profiles and upload them to his own, adding hashtags. Digital avatars have also grown in number. Some have already become international celebrities, including Lil Miquela, Dadeko Noonoori and Shudu, the world's first digital supermodel.

Connecting brand values to an influencer's and doing so through more flexible briefs that encourage perceptions of authenticity will help you create genuine enthusiasts among influencers. Creators who are allowed to produce content that not only fits their channels and the brand's, but also excites them, convey more drive and credibility to their followers and align more naturally with brand strategies.

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CONVERSATION STRUCTURE *or,* *How to Develop Relationships, not Campaigns*

Despite the current reign of Instagram or the emergence of Tik Tok, influencers are increasingly aware that their futures cannot depend on specific platforms, or even specific categories. This has led to more and more multi-faceted influencers. These people accumulate followers with different interests and take different approaches to each platform. This comes alongside the fact that, as opposed to the standard situation, where brands contract celebrity influencers, growing priority is being given to field of expertise and each influencer's real ability to influence the communities key to the company marketing strategy. In this regard, it has become more common to work with micro-influencers as the engagement KPI has increased in relevance, because their work is usually far superior to that of their more established and professionalized colleagues.

Another factor to bear in mind in the future is the predominance of conversations taking place on closed or semi-closed apps, making it more difficult to measure strategies in traditional ways. Putting the explosion of messaging apps aside, the world of social conversation is being changed through the emergence of closed and controlled ecosystems around certain influencers, such

as Escapex, which creates decentralized social platforms that operate similarly to Instagram, but with total control given to the influencer. Celebrities such as Jeremy Renner and Alessandra Ambrosio are already using these platforms, which enable them to not depend on the emergence or disappearance of certain social platforms in the future, allowing them to directly monetize their fans without needing brand sponsorships.

Furthermore, rather than focus on campaign-based influencer marketing methods, the most advanced brands have been building strategies that combine content creation with influencer marketing for some time, doing so through stable, long-term work with certain individuals instead of focusing on simple product launches or specific actions. A strategy that only focuses on influencers or only focuses on websites or social media content will miss the opportunity to really make the most of the tools and formats available today. **The key to obtaining effective results is building conversation structures based on brand stories without having all profiles play the same role, but rather letting each play a specific role within the conversation.** In terms of content, it is a well-known fact that video is now king. However, other growing formats should not be forgotten, including audio (with podcasts leading the charge). Some of them are working increasingly well and may be more economical to produce.



brands capable of identifying it and helping it grow hand-in-hand with their objectives.

ADVOCACY WITH CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES or, *How to Build Influence beyond the Realm of Professional Influencers*

In 2018, Macy's launched Style Crew, a community built on the expertise of its own employees and focused on enabling them to share fashion and beauty advice with customers online. An Influencer Marketing Hub report states that "customer and employee advocacy exists, but relatively few firms have noticed its unrealized potential. This tends to change as businesses recognize that, although these people may not have the largest numbers of followers, their enthusiasm and knowledge of the company's products/services easily compensate for their less expansive reach."

“Identifying new communities is becoming a basic need for brands, which must connect them with the stories they develop for certain territories, such as lifestyle or urban culture”

Identifying new communities is becoming a basic need for brands, which must connect them with the stories they develop for certain territories, such as lifestyle or urban culture. The creativity found in some of these trending digital communities is often related to the democratization of artistic production through social media. Among them, those that experiment with forgery culture to produce creative pieces, those who work to give quality to mundane objects, those who create augmented reality digital filters and memes or even those who write narratives through social media all stand out. A large part of today's most subversive creative talent uses social media (Instagram above all) as a battlefield, representing an opportunity for

In line with overlapping values and the aforementioned search for authenticity, but also with effectiveness in communication, it seems logical that brands would start to realize the underused potential of the credible brand ambassadors they have among their own employees and customers. The idea of “superfans” has been slowly developing in the world of brands through platforms such as Zyper, which uses AI instead of standard influencers to put brands in touch with the top 1 percent of their clientele. Zyper enables interactions with these fans about product recommendations and allows them to become brand ambassadors by offering them free products.

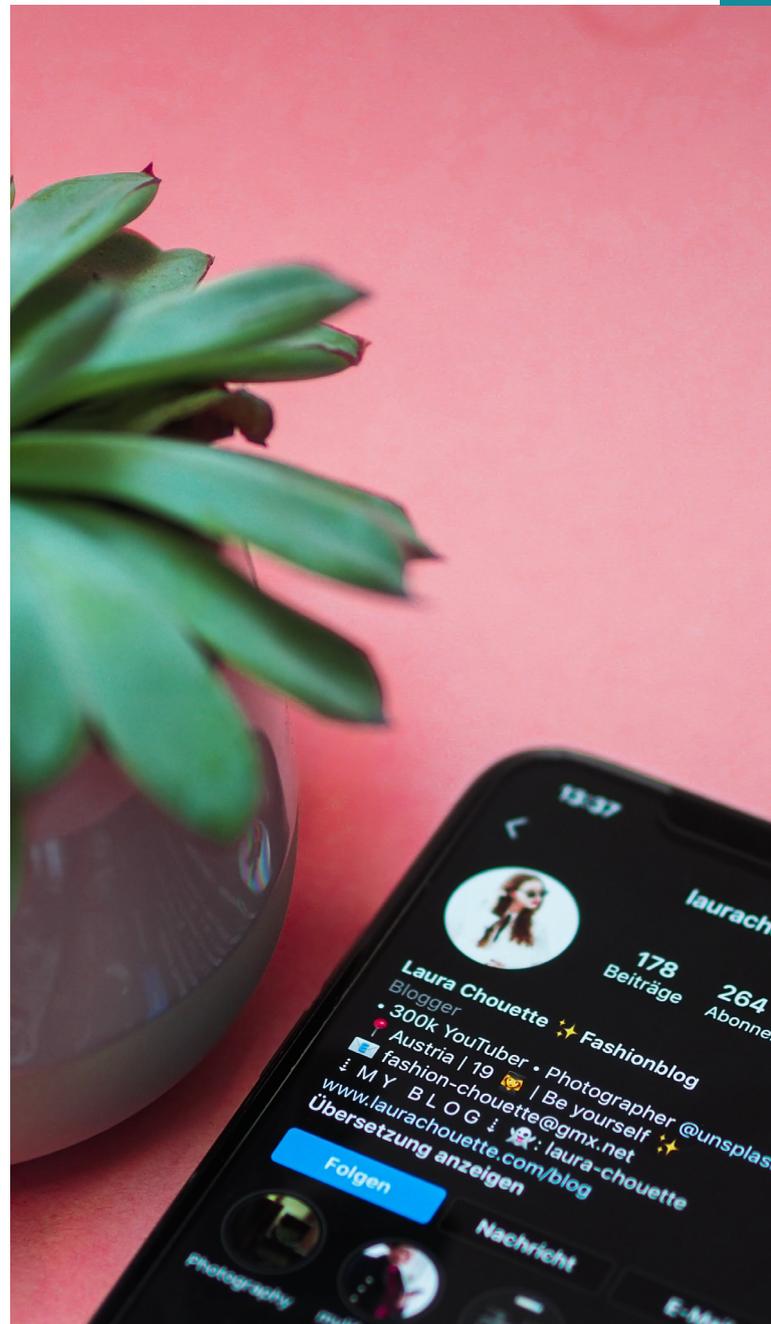
Adidas launched its Creators Club along the same lines. This membership program offers the most enthusiastic consumers a chance to gain early access to products, events and special offers. As stated by Fast Company, this relationship model has steadily evolved to allow community members to sell Adidas products themselves, jumping them from influencers to social sales.

Regarding employee advocacy, companies often continue to fall into the trap of disconnection between departments. There is also an increasing number of ambassador programs being developed for companies’ current corporate realities. Their capacity to inspire confidence in third parties through marketing or product strategies is often forgotten. A more integrated vision of the potential offered by these internal superfans always allow for improved message impact and consistency, while also increasing pride in belonging to these organizations.

NEW WAYS TO MEASURE *or,* How to Tackle the Profitability Dilemma

The basic question still being asked today by many marketing leaders when embarking on influencer strategies is how to measure ROI. According to a report published last year by Zine, half of all participating managers stated that, although their knowledge of how influencer marketing works had increased, it still falls short of other digital marketing areas in terms

of transparency. They specifically highlight two aspects that directly impact ROI: Prices and audiences. A total of 42 percent of those surveyed recognized the importance of asking for evidence of follower and engagement figures, while only 18 percent recognized the need for reports on the demographic components of influencer figures. Uncertainty surrounding the possibility of paying for an audience or engagement that is not real remains one of marketing managers’ greatest fears. The industry can only combat this with a greater degree of transparency as the professionalization process continues.



Lack of pricing standards and poor accessibility to reliable, scalable metrics also contribute to feelings of insecurity among many marketing managers. Therefore, while the focus from brands is increasingly placed on engagement metrics and direct sales, 75 percent of influencers in the Zine report said they would feel more comfortable if brands were more concerned about content quality when they enter into a partnership. Above and beyond the factors of reach or engagement, the call from influencers for content quality as a metric makes sense if we understand it in terms of relevance, examining what a certain influencer or content piece could bring to the table within the context of conversation structure.

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CAPITALIZABLE IDEAS FOR BRANDS

- Establish medium- and long-term **partnership strategies** based not only on economic remuneration, but also on overlapping values, to create genuine enthusiasts.
- Take risks to **discover new partners** within the field of influence and help build communities that align with the brand, rather than simply following the path of profiles trodden by the competition.
- Consider the **role superfans** have on consumers and among employees, accounting for this within influence strategies and developing platforms and programs to take advantage of it.
- Establish **conversation strategies** in which not all influencers play the same amplifier or engagement role and in which various channels and/or marketing techniques can contribute differently to the brand's promoted story.
- Encourage authentic **content development** through co-creation strategies with the influencers themselves.
- **Evolve the metrics**, considering relevance to brand story based on the quality of content promoted by influencers.

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