

**Influencer Marketing Strategy in Global CSR campaigns  
during the Covid-19 era**

**by**

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### THESIS APPROVAL

**“Influencer Marketing Strategy in Global CSR campaigns during the Covid-19 era”**, a thesis prepared by **Eleni Anthopoulou** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the **Master of Arts degree in Strategic Communication & Public Relations** was presented **April 8, 2022**, and was approved and accepted by the thesis advisor, second reader and the Graduate School.

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## **Abstract**

The present thesis aims to investigate the new communication strategies of influencer marketing in brand campaigns with corporate social responsibility (CSR) orientation during the Covid-19 era of 2020 – 2021. Throughout the chapters the reader is taken from classic theories of opinion leadership and influence to the modern concepts of influencer marketing, focusing on the growing impact of influencer content and how it was manifested during the pandemic, a time when brands had to shift their content strategies and adapt to the audiences' new needs and expectations. Towards this aim, a content analysis was conducted on fourteen (14) best awarded promotional CSR campaigns employing influencers as their core marketing strategy, drawing both quantitative and qualitative data on various dimensions.

*Keywords: influencer marketing, CSR, Covid-19, influencers, new communication strategies*

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## **Introduction**

The present thesis will examine how the popular and widely used communication strategy of Influencer Marketing (hereinafter called “IM”) has changed during the pandemic era and adapted to the new conditions, since Covid-19 has reshaped IM and digital culture throughout the years 2020 - 2021. Consumers are looking for brands to be authentic, personalized experiences, human and sensitive messages, brands that respect their values, as well as influencers with social media followers who seem natural, authentic, and not artificial as an emerging new trend (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). At the same time, there is expanding impact and high demand of influencer content, since marketers are shifting their content strategies, turning to influencers and content creators to diversify their communication strategies and reach highly networked audiences. We also observe unavoidably change of focus by the influencers who adjust their content in accordance with what audiences want to see, hear and seek suited to the lockdown conditions (Hickey, 2021). The new channel of Tik-Tok grew enormously in popularity (Ward, 2021), because audiences craved for authentic and less restrained content, so influencers took advantage of this social media platform to share content, showcase and build image of the represented brands (Hickey, 2021).

The proposed thesis aims moreover to investigate the effects of influencers’ endorsements in CSR communication as a developing practice, a topic that is interesting and worthy of research both for its academic and its professional value. It is also argued that it is important to investigate influencer marketing strategy, as well as the specific characteristics of influencers in CSR communication that drive consumers’ brand awareness, brand preference and engagement during the Covid-19 era, given that this is a novel, contemporary and historically unique context that needs to be documented (years 2020 – 2021). Furthermore, this study aims to add to the literature on how influencer marketing in general affects consumer attitude and behavior, a topic of research that is of growing interest in the last years (Chopra et al, 2021; Lou & Yuan 2019; Vrontis et al 2021). I strongly believe that such contribution is required in the contemporary landscape of digital PR and IM. All these issues will be investigated through a well-structured methodology of data collection, analysis and interpretation among fourteen (14) awarded marketing campaigns, supported by the theoretical knowledge, as per the below defined thesis structure.

## Thesis Structure

The theoretical part I of the thesis starts with a discussion about the concept of opinion leaders and the two-step flow of information theory (chapter 1). These theories have been very useful in explaining the diffusion of innovations, ideas, or commercial products, and it is also one of the theories that are very relevant to understanding modern influencer marketing. It is an important research tradition exploring the interplay of interpersonal and mass communication. The theoretical part continues with the discussion about multi-step communication theory, in comparison to the two-step flow model, and the concept of opinion leaders in the digital era, referring to the social media “ordinary” influencers with growing impact and popularity, contrary to the traditional celebrity influencers (chapter 2). Then the reader has the chance to read about the concepts of word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), their definitions, motives, advantages, how they are used by the companies and how consumer behavior is affected by them (chapter 3). The next section (chapter 4) illustrates the key terms and concepts of influencer marketing in relation to definitions, platforms, and strategies, which are crucial in the economy of the thesis, since they constitute its backbone. Chapter 5 focuses on the source effects in influencer marketing, based on the social media influencer value (SMIV) model, the main influential effective characteristic, as well as the definition and dimensions of source credibility. Chapter 6 deals with the current phenomenon of influencers on social media platforms and specifically, the growing power of bloggers and Instagrammers. Part I ends with the new trends of influencer marketing in Covid-19 times (chapter 7) and corporate social responsibility issues (chapter 8), together with the phenomenon of influencers in CSR.

The empirical part II provides readers with my research design and methodology of (quantitative and qualitative) content analysis. Chapter 1 of this part includes the research aims and questions, Chapter 2 deals with the sampling and Chapter 3 with the content analysis method in more details. Finally, Chapter 4 illustrates the main findings and discussion about each category in the coding Table (Appendix 1). The Conclusion reflects on the main observations and findings of the study, as well as on future research on influencer marketing.

## I. Theoretical Part

### 1. The concept of Opinion Leaders

The concept of opinion leaders is hereby examined in its original and classical conceptualization by Katz and Lazarsfeld, as well as in more recent literature which examines how opinion leadership is manifested in the modern media ecosystem.

The concept of opinion leadership and the two-step flow model of communication were first introduced in the mass media theory by sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld *et al.* in 1944 (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and elaborated by Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1955 (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and subsequent publications. The two-step flow of communication hypothesis was first introduced by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in *The People's Choice*, a 1944 study focused on the process of decision-making during a Presidential election campaign. These researchers expected to find empirical support for the direct influence of media messages on voting intentions. They were surprised to discover however that media such as newspapers, radio, and campaign advertising did not have a profound influence on individual voting habits. Instead, the less formal interpersonal interactions, personal contacts and word-of-mouth were more significant determinants of voting behavior. Based on these findings, Katz and Lazarsfeld suggested the two-step flow theory of mass communication.

According to this hypothesis, information from the media passes through two phases. The information is first received by individuals (opinion leaders) who pay careful attention to the media and its messaging. They are a small, but crucial subset of people who then pass on this information to less avid or knowledgeable media consumers. In addition to the real media material, opinion leaders pass on their own interpretations.

According to this theory, mass media messages are not always transmitted to the public generally and directly, but are channeled through a particularly active audience segment, known as opinion leaders. Those key individuals would receive, interpret, and disseminate media messages among the larger public. While not necessarily holding formal positions of status and prestige, they can act as intermediary opinion leaders, because they are considered to be more knowledgeable, therefore more persuasive and able to exert influence on others' opinions or behaviors (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Therefore, most people form their opinions, thoughts and ideas not

directly from the mass media, but indirectly under the influence of opinion leaders. The latter are people of all societal levels who have more contact with the media (higher media exposure), they are active media users attending more fully to the media than others, so they are more knowledgeable and trustworthy in certain areas of media content undertaking to interpret the meaning of media messages towards lower-end media users (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998).

Very importantly, opinion leaders have the opportunity to add their own interpretation on the actual media content that they receive, frame it with their own schemas and put them into context (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). An example of influential opinion leader is a prominent journalist who transfers to the public through mass media channels the speech of a politician adding his own interpretation and opinion.

Personal influence plays a major role. The term "*personal influence*" was used to describe the process that occurs between a direct message from the media and the audience's response to that message. Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviors and are quite similar to those they influence. In their 1955 book *Personal influence: the part played by people in the flow of mass communications*, considered to be one of the most influential books in mass communication research of the postwar era, and still relevant today, Katz and Lazarsfeld reported the results of a pioneering study conducted in Decatur, Illinois, validating the Paul Lazarsfeld's discovery that messages from the media may be mediated by informal "*opinion leaders*" who interpret and diffuse the information they hold to the personal networks in which they belong. "*Messages pass from the media, through opinion leaders, to opinion followers*" (Baran & Davis, 2015, p. 112).

Katz (1957) identifies three primary elements that distinguish influentials from the rest of the social group to which they belong:

- (1) Who one is – the individual characteristics and values of a person;
- (2) What one knows – the level of competence or expertise of a person; and
- (3) Whom one knows – the person's accessibility and the connections they can mobilize.

Broadly speaking, this reflects a person's position in their social network.

Opinion leaders have many connections and may influence others due to their personality, knowledge, and expertise on a specialized topic. They filter and interpret

the received information equipped with knowledge, expertise and influence and then pass it to the others of immediate environment (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Opinion leaders are therefore credited with a large amount of interpersonal influence and many studies have in the following years tried to identify the demographic and social characteristics of opinion leaders. Myers and Robertson (1972) conducted a research on the exercise of opinion leadership among housewives in Los Angeles and found that opinion leadership was highly associated to perceived knowledge about a specific topic, ability to discuss the topic, and interest in this topic. Myers & Robertson also put forward the interesting insight that although opinion leader have the power to influence others, they also receive influence when it comes to specific subjects, so in effect this is more like a two-way influence (Myers & Robertson, 1972).

Summers (1970) in his turn analyzed the profile of opinion leaders regarding women's clothing fashion and concluded on the demographic and socio-behavioral differences between opinion leaders and non-leaders: opinion leaders can be of any age, level of education, type of occupation, category of income, while opinion leaders are also better positioned in networks of social communication and interaction, they are more active and mobile. Regarding their attitudes and values, opinion leaders are found to score high in self-confidence, emotional stability, competitiveness, extroversion and progressiveness, they are gregarious, have many social contacts and also care a lot about clothing and fashion (Summers, 1970).

In general, opinion leadership is in operation when an individual tends to generate, spread, and diffuse information about a specific issue, or product, provides word-of-mouth and influences the behavior of other consumers through interpersonal communication (Kim, Jang & Adler, 2015). In this way, we can observe that opinion leaders play an important role in the information flow process, and generally they provide valuable assistance to others in their social environment by providing advice on specific topics and interpretation of messages. They also contribute significantly in people's decision making process, like in purchase and voting decision.

## **2. Multiple Flows of Communication & New Influentials in the Digital Sphere**

The classical model of opinion leadership related to the mass media era aimed to explain how mass media messages and stories broadcast by news outlets manage to reach, influence and affect individuals. However, the contemporary media environment

and the predominance of digital media presents new challenges and opportunities for research examining the flow of information and influence across individuals and media outlets. Today, we have shifted from mass communication to what O’Sullivan (2005) has named “*mass personal*” and Castells (2007) “*mass self-communication*.” The Internet has increased access to information and blurred the line between mass and personal communication. Social media provide a detailed record of interpersonal ties and exchanges among users. Reputation and influence mechanisms in the digital environment are different and new types of influential have emerged.

In traditional mass media effects theories, the influence process is unidirectional, from one generator of messages to multiple recipients, whereas in the mass self-communication context, there is a “*multi-step flow communication*” where messages are distributed through myriad of intermediary channels and drastically expand interpersonal communication (Park, 2013).

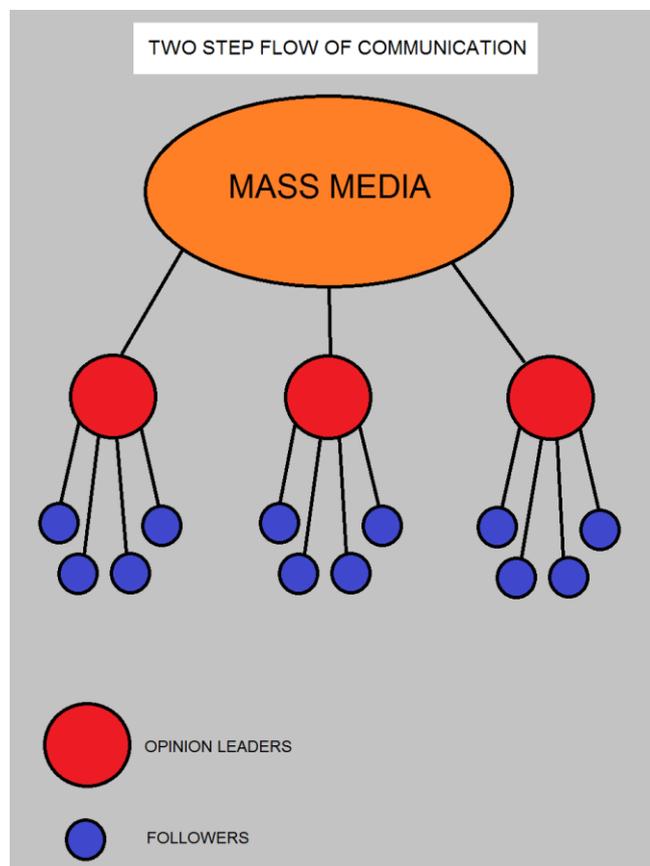


Figure 1 – Diagram of two-step flow model

## Multi-step flow

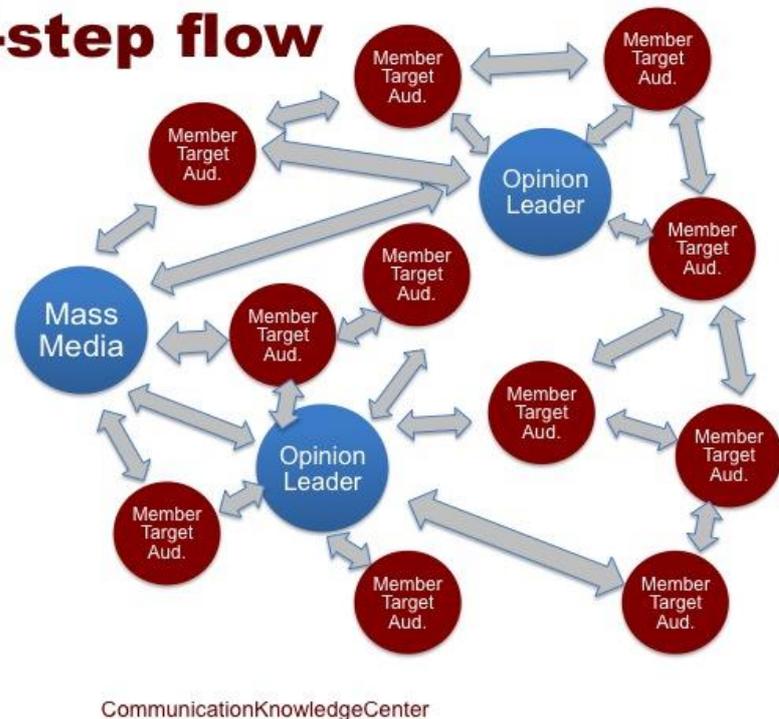


Figure 2 – Diagram of multi-step flow model

Audience members may see stories posted by news outlets they follow on social media platforms, or links to news items shared by their friends. The platform, on the other hand, may broadcast the behaviors of users who are not circulating specific content on purpose. A user's stream on Facebook, for example, may include posts with stories that their social connections have liked or commented on.

In two-step flow theory, opinion leaders use interpersonal communication channels to influence individuals who are inactive or marginally active in a particular issue (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). The development of digital platforms and the Internet have, however, enabled multiple channels of communication in a networked structure. In this way, through digital media, the sphere of influence has expanded.

According to the multi-step flow of information theory (Burt, 1999; Harik, 1971; Robinson, 1976; Weiman, 1982) information flows in many different directions and through several influencers. Digital media validate the findings of multi-step flow research. Web users have stopped relying so much on traditional mass media

entertainment and news as source for their information. Instead, they can collect and access information from many different sources, such as websites, blogs, and content from social media. While the idea of a top-down flow of information is today incompatible with the digital environment, there still exists that crucial audience segment that serves as a network's key source of information. Today, it is these primary influencers and not the mass media who provide and interpret the information and therefore influence their larger networks.

These new influencers do not channel information through interpersonal contacts, but through digital platforms, the web and social media. Moreover, their information can reach wider networks of connections in real time and using a variety of media. Because current online opinion leaders have access to digital and online media, they have the means to influence others who are members of their extended networks or online communities (Xu et al, 2014).

Nowadays we encounter a new type of independent third-party endorser. These are digital and social media influencers who are online personalities, everyday "ordinary" people with a massive number of followers and a great influence on their audiences' behaviors, beliefs and ideas. They are active on multiple social media platforms, especially on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube or TikTok, as well as on their personal blogs, by creating and posting valuable content regularly. They rely on their online reputation, user engagement on their accounts and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Zhou et al, 2019). Although many TV personalities or mass media journalists have moved online and have even monetized their digital influence, the phenomenon of online celebrities is contrary to established celebrities and public figures, who are well-known mainly through the offline and traditional media (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Theoretically, influencers can be anyone looking for fame and recognition online, since they try to create a form of celebrity capital, an authentic personal brand on the internet, but on the other hand they must have an expertise or value to be more engaging due to their perceived knowledge and credibility. Consumers prefer to identify and seek opinions of other consumers/influencers online to make a decision, feeling in this way more connected to the brand. For this reason, "ordinary" influencers are considered to be more effective to drive traffic on social media at less cost than traditional celebrities (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020). The main difficulty and challenge remain to choose the right type of relevant influencer transmitting the correct crafted

brand message to have an impact on the specific target group (Chopra, Avhad & Jaju, 2020).

Social media have recently been studied as a realm where opinion leadership is effectuated in the modern age. Park (2013) examined the role of opinion leadership on the social platform of Twitter, the largest microblog service, and found that opinion leaders on Twitter are highly motivated to seek information, mobilize, express publicly, comment and distribute information through the network. In this way, they contribute significantly to the political process, involvement and engagement in political discussion and participation of its users. As per the same study, social status on Twitter was not found to matter, since tweet messages are created mostly by ordinary individuals than by politicians or professors (Park, 2013). Similarly, Song, Cho, & Kim examined the personality characteristics of online opinion leaders who play critical role in the travel and tourism industry, and found them to be primarily “*openness, competence in interpersonal communication and exhibitionism*” in the sense of seeking attention and being extravert (Song, Cho, & Kim, 2017).

In the modern world of hyperconnectivity and widespread social networking, the exchange of information among networked users has accelerated. We encounter the phenomenon of citizens and consumers sharing their opinions, experiences, thoughts and beliefs with posts about various industries, through online platforms, interacting with many others and influencing their attitudes. They become in this way the modern digital opinion leaders (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). We refer here to the so-called phenomenon of “*prosumers*”: the term and concept were created by Alvin Toffler, an intellectual in the US in his book “*The Third Wave*” (1980), in the context of technological changes, the World Wide Web and the emergence of capitalism. Toffler argued that we are cultural consumers and producers at the same time, ie. “*prosumers*”. In the same way, interconnected users of digital media are prosumers by consuming and producing content through the procedure of user generated content (UGC) (Ahluwalia & Miller, 2014).

The study of Cole et al. (2011) revealed strong relationship between online users and opinion leadership, as well as increased word-of-mouth, which is examined in the next chapter, and brand preference. Brands value the engagement of users in their development, like in the case of online product reviews, to attract opinion leaders to the brand’s website and enhance their products through valuable user generated content (UGC). Customers of a brand who generate content and are highly involved with the

brand's product are valuable and likely to be opinion leaders, since they have increased customer interaction and collaboration (Cole, Long, Chiagouris, & Gopalakrishna, 2011).

### **3. Word-of-Mouth & Consumer Behavior**

*Word-of-mouth* (WOM) is another concept that is widely used today in relation to networked influence and is widely regarded as one of the most influential factors affecting consumer behavior (Sandes & Urdan, 2013). Word-of-mouth is defined by Harrison-Wallker (2001) as “*informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service*” (Serra Cantallops, & Salvi, 2014, p. 41). Most studies refer to WOM as a main factor that affects consumers in choosing products and services. Similarly, *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM) is defined by Litvin et al. (2008) as “*all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers*” (Serra Cantallops, & Salvi, 2014, p. 41). As regards the difference between WOM and eWOM, Sun et al. (2006) said that eWOM is more influential thanks to speed, convenience, one-to-many reach, and absence of face-to-face human pressure (Serra Cantallops, & Salvi, 2014).

Huete - Alcocer in her article (2017) conducted a literature review about WOM and eWOM, which are the most influential sources of information with high credibility for decision making during, before or after consuming a product or service, and explains their impact on consumer behavior and businesses, as well as their differences. WOM on one hand is the traditional and oldest medium for sharing opinion, interpersonally and face-to-face, whereas eWOM on the other hand has derived from online communication, written comments and reviews online, increases consumer confidence, offers speed, fast and easy access, therefore high credibility and reliability (Huete - Alcocer, 2017). These two types are very similar, but also a lot different, due to the use of Internet.

The eWOM is spread by consumers when they are highly motivated, while the hidden drivers of eWOM have been studied by academics. For example, Kim, Jang & Adler (2015) found that some of the motives for eWOM behavior are the need for social interaction, economic incentives, concern and help of others and self-enhancement, ie. to appear knowledgeable. The latter motive is related to self-relevant values, since

consumers tend to provide eWOM to products that are personally and socially significant, self-relevant and in this way, they are constructing a self-image and self-identity passing an impression to the others. Therefore, self-presentation, impression goals and the need for positive recognition from others (reflected appraisal of self) are the most important factors that encourage consumers to engage word-of-mouth in the digital world (Kim, Jang & Adler, 2015). According to the same study, another less important motive is “*conspicuous consumption value*”, meaning that an individual shows wealth publicly through consumption of luxury products, since psychologically has the need to present a prestigious position within a specific social network.

The afore mentioned electronic way of communication is highly appreciated by companies and marketers who tend to transmit their messages online by consumers in order to reduce advertising costs (Kim, Jang & Adler, 2015), since eWOM is considered to be stronger, more authentic, credible, and cheaper contrary to traditional advertising techniques (Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013). In the same way, brands have discovered the power of social media influencers, ie. people with large number of followers, to promote brand’s services and/or products, as more effective strategic tool due to high credible word-of-mouth and authenticity of these influencers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). EWOM is an essential and developing topic in the marketing context, since new media, social media and growing user-generated content (UGC) may be utilized by brands in all possible functions, no matter how much internet is used in a country (Ismagilova et al., 2017). Thanks to the internet, people trust information from others and pass it on through electronic communication, a new phenomenon which influences companies’ marketing strategies. Marketers and brands cannot then rely only on traditional advertising, but need to create online communities to obtain competitive advantage (Ismagilova et al., 2017).

Opinion leaders are also critically important for the flow of information and influence processes in the non-profit sector, in cause marketing and socially oriented campaigns. Climate change campaigns are a case in point and a good example of the importance of electronic word-of-mouth to raise public awareness and engagement. Opinion leaders are often employed in the context of climate change campaigns as a valuable strategic asset that can generate higher public attention on climate change issues, change and impact on public perceptions, increase political participation and citizen voice, and even change behaviors by increasing demand for “green” and environmentally-friendly products (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Influential people may be

different kinds of opinion leaders, such as those who have issue-specific knowledge and intense involvement or those who have strong personality and distinct personality traits, like leadership, confidence, persuasiveness, or market mavens, who have expertise and deep knowledge in market information (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009).

Other types of campaigns relying on eWOM are found in the health sector, hospitality and tourism industry. For example, organ donation campaigns in Michigan used eWOM strategies resulting to increased number of electronic organ donation registrations (Smith et al., 2016), while in the hospitality and tourism sector, it is found that social media encourage participation of customers and guests to share their experiences through eWOM and UGC, a practice which impacts positively consumer preferences (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2018).

#### **4. Influencer Marketing: Definitions, Platforms, & Strategies**

Following chapter 1 on the original theory of opinion leaders and its dimensions in the digital era of today, we now move on to the next chapter of Influencer Marketing (hereinafter called “IM”), a new digital marketing practice in the brand communication mix and digital paid form of WOM marketing, which is using the power social media stars as online opinion leaders (Bakker, 2018).

With social media growing in influence and advertising agencies allocating more of their media budgets to social media (Brynley - Jones, 2019), the advertising industry is in search of effective strategies to get the most return on investment when it comes to social media. One of these strategies in recent years has been Influencer Marketing, which is a form of paid media and part of the Promotional Mix, which is part of the strategic plan, or one of the tactics in an integrated campaign that may combine different media and tactics. The focus of influencer strategies is placed on specific individuals rather than a target market as a whole. It identifies the individuals that have influence over potential buyers, and orients marketing activities around these influencers (Dwivedi et al., 2021). *“Influencer Marketing is the art and science of engaging people who are influential online to share brand messaging with their audiences in the form of sponsored content”* (Sammis et al., 2016). According to Bakker (2018), IM is defined as *“a process in digital marketing where opinion leaders (influencers) are identified and then integrated into a brand’s brand communication on social media platforms”* (Bakker, 2018, p. 80). The main purpose of IM is the critical role of an influencer in the purchase decision making process for a brand (Bakker,

2018). We refer here to third party endorsement; people who are celebrities or well-known through movies, music, sports, lifestyle, fashion, modeling etc., while IM has also given a new concept to the term “celebrity” and created a new kind of celebrity endorsement. Thanks to the power of social media, like blogs and Instagram, we now refer to social media influencers, who can increase awareness and improve brand perception (Sammis et al., 2016).

IM presents a rapid expansion in recent years. Marketers and brands use selected individuals who are content creators with high numbers of followers, in their marketing strategic communication to endorse their services and/or products and elevate their image through the influencers’ everyday lives, opinions and experiences posted online (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). This form of marketing is considered to be more organic and authentic than traditional ads, while influencers are believed to be accessible, authentic and intimate as they are sharing publicly their lives online and create the illusion of close relationship and direct contact with their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Bakker (2018) provides a conceptualization of IM that distinguishes between three perspectives from which IM may be examined and approached: the brand’s, the influencer’s and the consumer’s perspective. While they are interrelated, each one points to a different level of analysis.

From the brand’s perspective, IM is adopted in order to accomplish communication goals: engage customers, enhance brand reputation and image, create positive brand attitude. Partnership with influencers may have a significant positive impact on the above goals, which indicates that brands ought to be very careful in selecting the right type of influencer (“brand-fit”), according to his/her characteristics (Bakker, 2018). In order to partner then with the most appropriate influencers, there are several steps for brands to follow like the following: 1) identify influencers that are a good match with the brand and have a sufficient number of followers and social media engagement 2) reach out for influencers personally and friendly as human beings, not only professionally, 3) sign a contract of partnerships defining all terms of cooperation, 4) pay influencers for time and effort as compensation for their work (Sammis et al., 2016). A useful model to assess the appropriateness of an influencers with regards to the brand’s target audiences and objectives is Percy & Rossiter (1980) model about source effectiveness, known as VisCAP Model. The VisCAP Model (Percy & Rossiter, 1997, pp. 260-268) provides a mechanism for evaluating the Visibility of an endorser

(how recognizable or well-known) along with Credibility (expertise and objectivity), Attractiveness (likability), and Power, among target audiences. Presenter characteristics should align with the communication effects that need to be boosted. The manager should seek a presenter who offers a profile of characteristics that have positive hooks to the targeted communication objectives and is not negative on others (Rossiter & Smidts, 2001).

Also, according to Levin's book (2020), there are specific steps to follow and questions to answer for a completed framework in order to build a brand's IM campaign. Herein below follows a Table including the Four-Step Influencer Marketing Framework:

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Step<br>1 | <p>What's your marketing objective?</p> <p>Who's your target audience?</p> <p>How do you define success?</p> <p>Which of the four proven influencer marketing campaign types will suit your needs?</p>   |
| Step<br>2 | <p>Examine the traits of the 23 different campaign strategies on YouTube and Instagram, and write down a list of 2–5 that suits your marketing objective, target audience, and definition of success</p>   |
| Step<br>3 | <p><b>Your creative idea:</b> What is the unique insight? What is the opportunity? What is the idea?</p> <p><b>Creator selection process:</b> Where will they be based? What are their personality traits like? What values do they share with your brand? What categories are they in? How many pieces of content will each influencer create and post? Will you be working with a smaller number of influencers (each with a larger audience) or the other way around?</p> |
| Step<br>4 | <p>What's your total budget for this project? Identify your unit cost, target, and business impact using the four campaign types from Step 1.</p> <p>Use values and parameters from Step 3: Creator selection process, to identify your overall campaign scope.</p>  |

Figure 3 – Four-Step framework sheet

### Types of influencers:

Influencers are divided in the below categories based on follower count (Santora, 2021):

- Nano influencers (1K–10K followers)
- Micro influencers (10K–100K followers), with higher engagement rate
- Macro influencers (100K–1M followers)
- Mega or celebrity influencers (1M+ followers)

Influencers are also divided in the below categories based on specific content or niche (Santora, 2021):

- Gamers (livestreaming of games)
- Sports and fitness
- Bloggers and vloggers (the most popular ones)
- Photographers
- Travel
- Beauty
- Fashion
- Parenting

It is evidenced that micro-influencers offer better engagement and broader reach than mega-influencers on Instagram and YouTube, but mega influencers are more popular on TikTok. On the other hand, 75% marketing professionals say that verified web traffic of an influencer (ie. engagement and clicks) is the most important criteria for selecting one, than the number of followers (Santora, 2021).

From the influencer's perspective, they cooperate with brands by making posts about specific products/services on their social media channels and benefit by their followership, as a number, ie. how many followers, and quality, ie. how active (engagement), so the market value and effectiveness of an influencer is estimated according to quantitative and qualitative criteria (Bakker, 2018). There are also several tactics and strategies for influencers in order not to risk their credibility and trustworthiness, depending on the selected platform. As for Blog Influencers, the first step is finding the blogger who is right for the brand, depending on the sector of industry and campaign objectives, especially based on the quality of content, authenticity,

creativity, and originality. The content is of different types, such as food, lifestyle, beauty/fashion, home, and health/fitness. The bloggers should provide clear calls to action, key messages, and high-quality photos, as well as disclosure of paid partnership, proper hashtags and shares with Facebook community (Sammis et al., 2016). Then Instagram is characterized by beautiful photography with original content, snapshots of everyday life or inspirational lifestyle. After targeting the best Instagram influencer for a specific brand, the basic strategy to engage target audience includes using the best photos and videos or hybrid photo-video content, writing captivating captions, choosing the right campaign hashtags, posting contests, giveaway, prizes, promoting and hosting photo challenges, by always disclosing that it's sponsored/paid content (Sammis et al., 2016).

Finally, from the customer's perspective, the decision making depends on the product category (ex. fashion/beauty, lifestyle, travel, cars etc.) where an influencer encourages the relevant purchase and the customer is affected by the credibility and trust in the specific influencer, as well as genuine, authentic, creative, relevant and spontaneous posts (Bakker, 2018).

The following Table shows different types of campaigns on Instagram and YouTube (Levin, 2020):

| Instagram                                | YouTube                 |
|--|-------------------------|
| Single Feed Post Campaign                | Product Tutorial/Demo   |
| Story-Only Campaign                      | Product Review          |
| Pairing Feed Posts and Stories           | Hauls                   |
| Multi-post Campaign (Ambassador Program) | Unboxing                |
| Amplifying Brand Experiences             | Lookbook                |
| Burst Campaigns                          | Memes and Comedy        |
| Real-Time Recruitment                    | Game Play               |
| Going Live for Maximum Authenticity      | Brand/Product Shout-Out |
| Supporting Hero Brand Campaigns          | Favorites               |
| Driving Consideration Through Polls      |                         |
| Hyper Local Campaigns                    |                         |

Figure 4 – Instagram & YouTube campaign types.

Finally, it's interesting and useful at this point to refer to some theoretical frameworks that may explain the behavior of individuals/customers under the effect of influencers. The theory of planned behavior by Ajzen (1991) and social learning theory by Bandura and Walters (1963) are related to different aspects and key factors of influencer marketing. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, based on empirical evidence, shows that the expected behavior and different kinds of intentions of a person at specific time and place may be predicted quite well. The person's intentions to engage in a behavior may be determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). This theory suggests that human behavior is motivated and changed by three types of beliefs, behavioral, ie. possible consequences of actions, normative, ie. expectations of others, and control, ie. absence or presence of factors affecting behavior (Chopra, Avhad & Jaju, 2020). The theory is connected and useful to IM to explore the customer's behavior intentions towards the role of influencers. The

theory of social learning was initially designed by Bandura, a Canadian American psychologist in 1963. It's a behavioral theory and general framework which proposes that a person's new behavior derives from learning, observing and imitating others (Bandura & Walters, 1963). The main elements of this theory are the cognitive process of learning (not only behavioral) in the social context, the environment and observation. The theory emphasizes the cognitive process that mediates social behavior, explains the learning experience in the real world, as well as the role of imitation and the effect of role models (Grusec, 1994). This theory is based on the role of socialization of peers, family, experts, celebrities, opinion leaders and others who influence consumer behavior and attitude. Therefore, this theory, among others, explains the reason people follow influencers and are influenced by them, as well as the imitation process of people towards influencers.

## **5. Source Effects in Influencer Marketing**

According to McGuire's Communication and Persuasion Matrix (1985), communication's effectiveness depends on five input communication factors/variables: source, message, channel, receiver/audience, and destination. In this classic framework for constructing persuasive messages there are also specific output persuasion steps that describe the process of being persuaded, like exposure to communication, attending, liking, comprehending, agreeing, acting etc. (Persuasive, 2012). Source effects (the person who communicates) and message effects (how the message is structured) are most essential also in the frame of Influencer Marketing.

In the digital media paradigm, source and message effects remain of major importance. Lou and Yuan (2019) proposed an integrated model, the social media influencer value (SMIV) model, to explain the influence of IM on consumers through social media. The model focuses on the effects of social media IM on consumer's levels of trust in influencer-branded content and source credibility. It is then found that the effectiveness of IM, followers' trust, brand awareness and purchase intentions are closely related to the influencer's posts informative value and their credibility. Also, the influencers' characteristics of trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and perceived similarity to their followers play a positive role in generating trust for the relative branded posts, since influencers are appealing and credible online personas (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Furthermore, in the frame of studies that focus on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is further examined in chapter 8, it is found that the inherent traits of trustworthiness, expertise, uniqueness, and originality of a social media Influencer who endorses a CSR campaign are positively associated with the effectiveness of such campaign and consumers' engagement to the campaign (Cheng, Chen, & Hung-Baesecke, 2021).

### **5.1 Source Credibility: Definition & Dimensions**

Source credibility is related to specific communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message. The effectiveness of endorsements often depends on the source credibility measurement; the expectation is that the more credible a source - like a message creator or communicator- is perceived to be, the greater the impact on audiences, and the more likely that they get persuaded by the communicator (Tingen et al., 2014).

Ohanian (1990) suggested a model about source credibility that measures the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers and found out that the factors of expertise, trustworthiness and physical attractiveness are the three main characteristics that drive individuals' perceptions of source credibility. Sources with high credibility have a greater impact and are more persuasive on consumer attitude and behavioral intention (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019).

Especially ordinary celebrities, who are born in the context of social media like Instagram and Facebook, add credibility to the products that they endorse, contrary to established traditional celebrities, who are already well-known personalities to the public thanks to their profession in film, music or TV shows and add credibility due to their image (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020). Social media/ordinary celebrities seem to be stronger on social media since they endorse products that they are really using. Customers have significant interest in the lives and personal experiences of influencers shared openly online and create two-way relationships with them (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020). This new type of social media celebrities who are ordinary people, such as micro-celebrities, fashion, sports, food, travel, lifestyle bloggers, are perceived to be more authentic, real, stronger in terms of connectedness, more approachable, intimate, and motivating as role models for their customers. Such insights are expected since customers may identify personally more with them, than with celebrities who are distant, lack real human feel, have an unapproachable lifestyle, will not interact with

them online and they are usually associated with expensive sponsorship contracts with brands (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2018).

According to the study of Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu (2018) about Instagram celebrities, the so called “*Instafamous*” are perceived to be more credible, trustworthy, and effective than traditional celebrities and consequently, there is more positive disposition and attitude towards the endorsed brand. The key to success for a social media celebrity is its credibility which is built through their personal brand by their own efforts, their social media presence, openness, interactivity and engagement on a regular basis, warm relationship, and popularity with online communities, which is all finally translated to trustworthiness (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2018).

Social media influencers are believed to be more credible and authentic than other endorsers, but as Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze (2019) point out, the challenge is to choose the best-suited influencer among the thousand ones in the market, and the one who is likely to be the most effective, based on measures that go beyond the number of followers. Breves et al (2019) found that one of the most essential criteria for assessing the effectiveness of an influencer program is the “*fit and match between the interests of the endorser and the goals of the endorsed brand*”, which adds value to the influencer’s perceived credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness, as well as to the brand itself. High levels of endorser credibility guide to positive brand attitude and behavioral intentions. Consequently, the social - adaptation theory mentioned herein below explains that the endorsers need to be congruent with the advertised brand. It is only when an influencer has high level of parasocial relationship and interactions with his followers that the matching of the brand is not so significant (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019). According then to the same above studies, there are two theories which explain the above findings: the social-adaptation theory provides that endorsers are more effective in diffusing new information in case their personality matches with the image of the promoted brand, and the attributional theory says that consumers tend to believe that the endorser really likes, prefers and is motivated internally, rather than promoted by contract or money, when he promotes a fitting brand (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019).

The three influential characteristics and dimensions of celebrity endorser credibility are the following:

Trustworthiness

It is more likely that consumers will be convinced by highly trustworthy sources. The characteristic of trustworthiness is related to trust and reliability, as well as another three sub factors: integrity, ie. being whole, undivided and having past positive recommendations; honesty, ie. authenticity and reliability; and benevolence, ie. investing on good relationship and making efforts (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020).

#### Expertise

The characteristic of expertise is related to the endorser's degree of knowledge and validity of information source. The knowledge of influences is based on his experience shared through storytelling, rather than his profession. Influencers are perceived by their followers are experts, while their job doesn't really matter (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020).

#### Attractiveness

The influencer's characteristic of attractiveness may be related to physical beauty or personality attractiveness. It is found that physical attractiveness and appeal are criteria used by marketers and advertisers in choosing a traditional/established celebrity as endorser, rather than social media influencers (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020).

### **6. Social Media & Influencer Marketing**

The concept of Influencer Marketing (IM) is strongly linked to social media, since influencers need social media platforms to create and post engaging content in favor of the brands they represent (Haenlein et al., 2020). First Instagram and then Facebook are considered to be the most important platforms for IM (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019), but also blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Video/YouTube are considered the most established and marketing-friendly for IM strategy (Sammis et al., 2016). However, there are differences between social media platforms, such as audience characteristics and age (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Facebook's users are in average in their 40s. Although Facebook is the oldest and most established platform with the most active users and shares, it is declining compared to the other platforms, as it shows the least user satisfaction. The cost per influencer post is the lowest and it's generally considered as the least effective for IM with limited appeal (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Instagram's users are in average in their 30s. Its main role is entertainment and killing free time, so it's easier to become influential (Haenlein et al., 2020). The IM Benchmark Report 2021 shows that Instagram remains the most preferred platform for

IM campaigns, although its popularity fell in 2021. Most of survey respondents consider Instagram important for their IM campaigns, but it's significant that increasing number of agencies and brands are now using TikTok instead.

It is phenomenal how the platform of TikTok has become one of the most preferred social media. Users here are in average in their 20s. Working with Influencers on TikTok may offer powerful advertising unlike another platform, competing Instagram. Brands may execute TikTok campaigns by cooperating with TikTok creators to successfully promote a brand, products or services. Following TikTok marketing strategy and by finding the right TikTok creators, influencer campaigns become vibrant (Mediakix.com, 2021).

Consequently, we may observe that Instagram and TikTok are the most effective, favorable, and appropriate tools for IM strategy, due to their entertainment purpose, their rich content of images and videos, as well as the younger population of users who are more susceptible to influencers and skeptical towards traditional paid advertising.

### **6.1 Bloggers as Online Opinion Leaders**

The blog is like a personal journal online where the blogger publishes as if writing for self, like in social media, but reaching a much wider audience (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012). Bloggers with more readers, expertise and wide reach are influential members of their community who have the power today to act as digital opinion leaders and share their experiences about a specific brand regularly. Uzunoglu & Kip (2014) studied the role of bloggers in brand communication by the method of in-depth interviews and found that, similarly to the opinion leaders in the frame of the two-step flow theory, bloggers act as digital influencers and transmit messages in the digital environment rapidly and effectively. For this reason, bloggers are now necessary strategic tools for the brand communication (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

As per the above study, the main characteristics of bloggers influencers that differentiate them from the traditional opinion leaders, are innovativeness, more expertise, and credibility. According to the diffusion of innovation theory, opinion leaders are early adopters of innovation (Kaminski, 2011). Bloggers are technology and information savvy, they share their personal opinions and feelings independently and freely on the internet, and they are active on popular social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and YouTube, creating content and keeping their followers interested and

entertained through eWOM. They have wide reach on social media and blogs among their online communities, which offer high levels of interaction and user generated content (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Therefore, brands acknowledge the influential role of bloggers in evoking interest, affecting customer's purchase behavior and engagement online, the usefulness of their blog recommendations and their trusting effect, and are therefore seeking to collaborate and form long-term partnerships with them (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013).

According to the research of Uzunoglu & Kip (2014), bloggers are divided in expert and/or celebrity ones. Expert bloggers are more specialized in specific subjects, while celebrities bring more fame and publicity. The most essential criteria for the brands to select the appropriate blogger in their marketing communication strategy, depending on the brand identity, target group and message strategy, are the following: the match between the blogger's followers and the brand's target audience, the blogger's tone of voice in writing style, the number of followers, the blog's content as for quality and variety, blogger's reliability, and trust, as well as his/her popularity

The influential power of bloggers is found in their intense activity in the social networks they are active in, their confidence, trustworthiness, and perceived credibility (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Blogs remain permanently as archived published material on the web, contrary to the Facebook or Instagram posts, which are more fleeting and disappear under streams and feeds of content. Bloggers have the potential to generate a buzz effect in the blogosphere about a brand, increase its online coverage and its reach capabilities. It's obvious that there are mutual benefits for both parties, since bloggers also enjoy the honor to have been selected by a brand (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Closely connected to eWOM, we observe the novel phenomenon of "*megaphone effect*" which refers to the fact that specific ordinary selected consumers, without professional experience or family connections, by posting online reach a large audience of strangers (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012). The online messages of customers are going viral, since they are the ultimate influencers: the shared experiences of our peers online are incredibly valuable and influential in shaping the final decisions that we make (Solis, 2022). This is a new consumer behavior, especially in the field of fashion/beauty, food, and home design blogging. Ordinary consumers, such as fashion bloggers, use the power of web to engage thousands of consumers through blog posts and user generated content, and build their "cultural" and "social capital" (Cavusoglu & Atik, 2021).

The cultural capital theory is originated to the idea of Bourdieu, which has been adopted in the context of the digital era. Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist who contributed to sociology of aesthetics and achieved big influence in the media. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron defined the term “*cultural capital*” in the essay “*Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*” in 1977. Bourdieu then developed the concept of cultural capital in the essay “*The Forms of Capital*” (Bourdieu, 1985) and in the book “*The State Nobility: Élite Schools in the Field of Power*” (Bourdieu & Clough, 1996) to explain that the education, knowledge and intellectual skills of a person provide social motivation to achieve a higher social status. Cultural capital comprises the social assets of a person, including education, style of speech, dressing etc. that promote social mobility, including cultural knowledge which brings social status and power. Therefore, the theory is based on the fact that people from more cultured families with more cultural capital tend to gain advantage economically and socially. In the present context, consumers who are market mavens, have high knowledge, education, expertise, culture and family peers about fashion, or other products/services, are more possible to succeed as bloggers. The blogger accumulates cultural capital in fashion through repeated display of taste which is favored by the audience. The blogger represents a persona away from real self, constructing an authentic self and taking the risk of being judged in order to succeed. The blogger’s taste and her aesthetic judgment, within the power of web, thus are the main criteria of economic and social success to act as opinion taste leader and cultural capitalist with a megaphone (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012).

## **6.2 Instagram Influencers**

“*A picture is worth a thousand words*”, as the adage goes, referring to the persuasive power of images and visual communication. Like in the field of advertisement, relevant studies, methods, and models have shown that the images are widely used by producers in order to persuade the viewers to buy specific products (Vahid & Esmae’li, 2012). Thanks to their persuasive impact, visuals are common in advertising and campaigns to persuade the target audience and engage emotionally. Images have the power to change people’s attitudes, behaviors, and thoughts (Joffe, 2008). Visual images may even influence the way that people process information, according to their predispositions and values and trigger considerations in their minds (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002).

All the above studies explain the power of Instagram as an image-intensive social application. Instagram is the ideal platform for eWOM, shareability and influence, since it's based on visual aesthetics and filtered images, personal narratives, posts and captions of various products and brands where consumers can freely and voluntarily disseminate brand information and preference. Instagram is the perfect platform for promoting beauty products, luxury brands, sports, travel, and lifestyle (Miles, 2019). It is a social media app with unique characteristics which combines aesthetics with social interaction, collects followers, favors interactions with brands and consumers and reaches wide audiences. For these reasons Instagram has given birth to the rise of Instagram celebrity personalities and fashion bloggers who spread easily and effectively news about various luxury products and fashion tips (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2018).

Brands address trusted online personas to liaise with their customers, but the main challenge is to choose the appropriate and most effective Instagram influencer, while the number of followers is one of the frequent criteria. Relevant research shows that the high numbers of followers make the Instagram influencer more likeable, more popular and increase his/her opinion leadership toward the brand (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). However, the high level of followers does not always mean true influence. In case of a divergent product design which addresses people's need of uniqueness, when promoted by an Instagram influencer with high number of followers, this may lower the perception of being unique, as well as attitude toward the brand (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

The below chart shows the value that brands give to Instagram Influencers: according to a survey in 2021 carried out among influencers from Canada, UK, and US, it was found that an Instagram influencer with under 10,000 followers is expected be paid of around 195 USD per post and an influencer with more than 90,000 followers may be paid of around 1,221 USD per post.

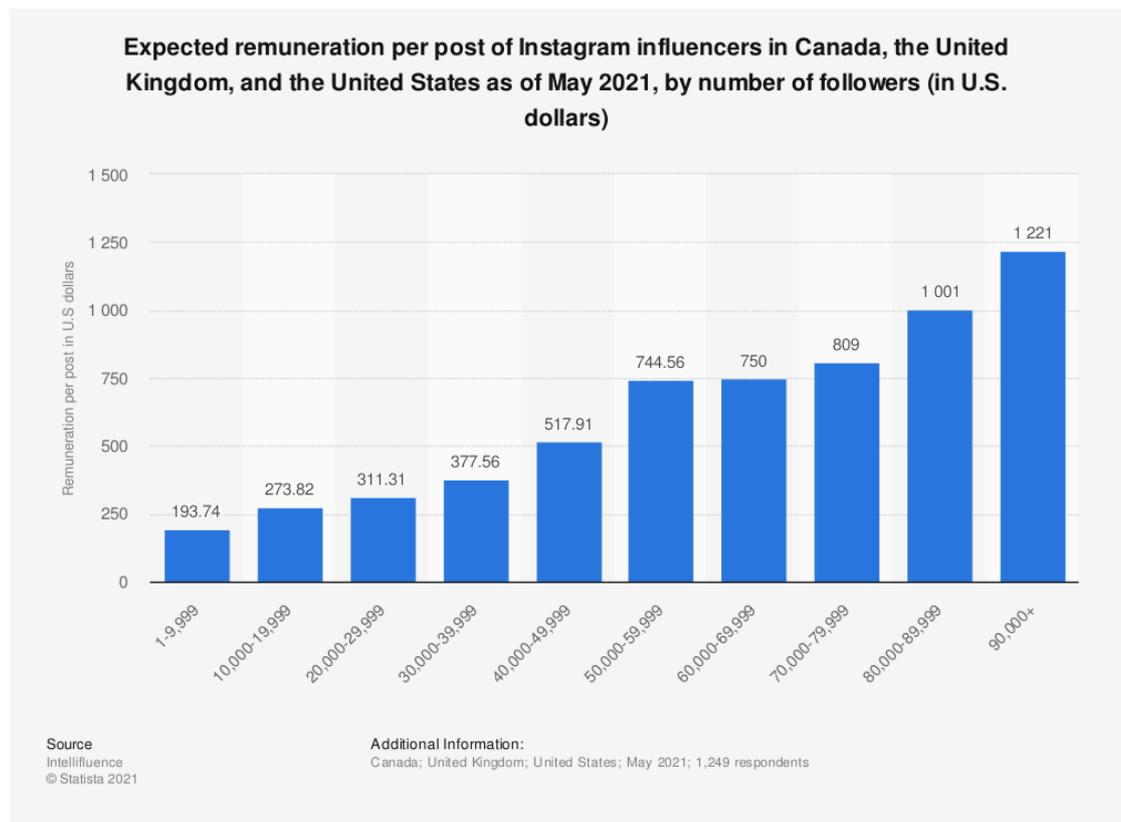


Figure 5 – Expected remuneration per post of Instagram Influencers in Canada, UK and USA (Statista, 2021)

## 7. Influencer Marketing in COVID-19 Times

The pandemic of Covid-19 obviously forced most campaigns, advertising projects and marketing plans to stops, strategic communicators and marketers were forced to quickly adapt to the new stressful and totally unprecedented circumstances, to prove their agility and adapt their communications to the new conditions (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Strategic and effective communication became even more important during the Covid-19 pandemic era of 2020 -2021, since people were exposed to difficult conditions of stress, psychological pressure, fatigue and fear at their homes, communities, and work environment. Large amount of Coronavirus information was transmitted through all types of media which required appropriate strategic methods, trusted and credible information sources to motivate, inspire people, comfort them, give them a sense of psychological comfort, raise their awareness and persuade them into conforming with the rules and norms of social distancing and hygiene. The pandemic effected the physical and psychological health of whole planet, therefore the component of message became very important, while messages had to be sensitive and relevant

more than ever and effective communication to be based on the right content, language, and symbols (Reddy & Gupta, 2020).

Under these conditions of uncertainty and stress during Covid-19, brands have shifted their strategic digital communication and adapted to the changing consumer culture. On one hand there is lack of investment in advertising, but still need for digital promotion, giving rise to the “*trust economy*” (Dang, 2020). Trust plays thus larger role in communication strategies where brands build trust through attentiveness, transparency about safety measures, CSR initiatives and giving back, loyalty to customers, social listening, humanizing content, responsibility-first and empathy approaches (Dang, 2020). This new emerging trend of trust-based communication strategy, combined with the influencer culture developed above, makes brands seem trustworthy, reliable and sensitive.

There are also some significant conclusions, statistics, and observations about Influencer Marketing in 2021. Santoras’ article (2021) reports the impressive fact that the expected value of IM was \$13.8 billion. Regarding the most essential and valuable channels for IM, 67% of brands use Instagram, while a growing percentage of brands use TikTok. YouTube is earning millions from influencers’ videos (70% of teenage YouTube subscribers relate to YouTube creators more than celebrities), 210 million of people use Snapchat daily and LinkedIn features 90 million senior-level influencers. Priyanka Dayal, Content Marketing Manager at Centaur Media PLC., believes that “*when working with influencers, brands have to let go and allow influencers take control of the narrative to preserve the authenticity of what is being communicated*”.

The Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report 2021 published by the Danish private media company Influencer Marketing Hub gives valuable insights into the industry, based on findings from a survey of more than 5,000 marketing and PR agencies and brands in different sectors (IM Benchmark Report, 2021). The statistics are quite similar to those of the previous year, while a major trend is the significant increase in the use of TikTok and unsurprisingly, a major slowdown in IM spend between March and July 2020, during the first phase of the pandemic. Despite the uncertainties caused by the pandemic in 2020, IM remained a very popular and effective form of marketing and an essential part of the mainstream marketing mix (Geysler, 2021). According to the same IM Report 2021, it is found that 240 new influencer marketing-focused platforms and agencies entered the American market during 2021.

Figure 6 herein below illustrates the steady growth in the number of platforms and agencies focused on IM during the last 5 years since 2015.

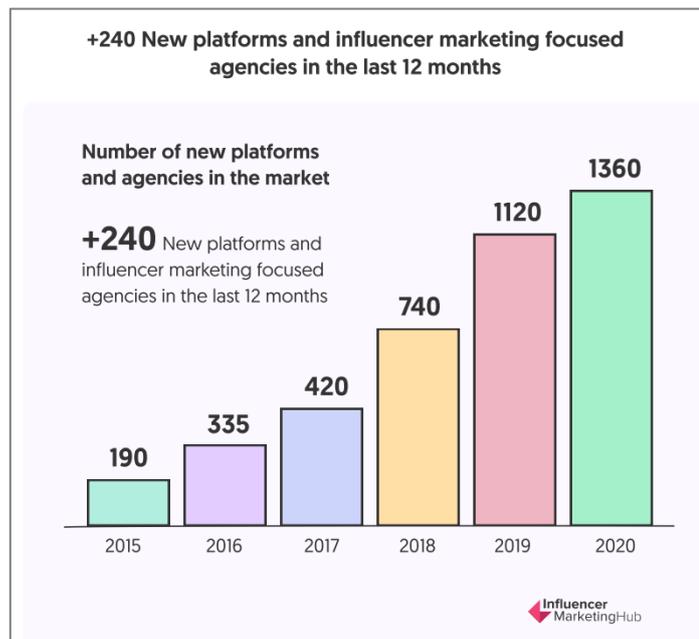


Figure 6 – Number of new platforms and Influencer Marketing agencies from 2015 - 2020

The great majority of respondents in the survey of IM Report 2021 believe that IM campaigns enhance the quality of customers, comparing to other marketing types.

Figure 7 herein below shows the most used and popular social media platforms for IM in 2021, with Instagram being the first choice and Twitter the least preferred one.

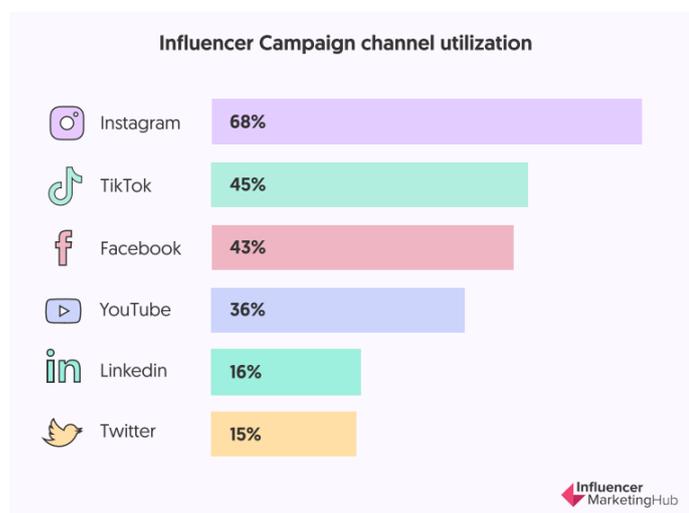


Figure 7 – Most popular social media platforms of Influencer Marketing.

According to the surveyed professionals in the frame of the IM Report 2021, the most important challenge and difficulty in the market is finding available and appropriate Influencers to participate in marketing campaigns.

According to Ryan Detert, CEO of Influential, an AI high-tech platform that contributes to the evolution of IM (Influential, 2021), micro-influencers are the most employed ones during the pandemic, targeting niche audiences with highly relevant and authentic content, in sectors like cooking, fitness, beauty etc. (IM Benchmark Report, 2021). Influential uses artificial intelligence to identify brand-appropriate influences based on demographics, psychographics, and contextual factors. The year 2020 was marked by the increased organization of digital events and livestreaming, while physical events are by now remote to come back. The year 2021 continued along the same trends, with possibilities for virtual content and virtual interactions getting stronger and leading the ecosystem to a new era of digital transformation, since the pandemic brought a digital acceleration by months or even years (KPMG, 2022). Influencer marketing thrived during the pandemic and as far as Influencers are concerned, they played a strategic role in various campaigns by brands of different types (Ward, 2021). As main key takeaways from 2020, it was crucial for brands to cooperate with social media Influencers who curated content, raw short videos, self-produced and homegrown productions; relatability and authenticity of influencers are the most essential factors in engaging customers (Drenik, 2021).

## **8. Corporate Social Responsibility**

Corporate Social Responsibility (herein referred as “CSR”) is strongly related to Public Relations, was developed by PR specialists, incorporates PR activities and is a vital part of the theory and practice of PR. CSR and PR have similar objectives: both are aiming at the improvement of relationships between an organization and its stakeholders, as a matter of good business practice (Clark, 2000). One can encounter similar terms in the CSR literature, such as “*corporate social responsiveness/performance*” or “*corporate accountability/sustainability*”. CSR refers in general to the performance of a corporation which respects laws and regulations, operates in an ethical and transparent way, providing benefits to the society, mainly through philanthropic and environmental endeavors, focuses on the well-being, social welfare, human rights issues, sustainability, and climate change (Franco, 2015).

Multiple CSR definitions were developed by academics in the past based on the social, economic, political and environmental context of that period since 1950s. Every definition of CSR cover various dimensions including economic development, ethical practices, environmental protection, stakeholders' involvement, transparency, accountability, responsible behavior, moral obligation, corporate responsiveness and corporate social responsibility (Rahman, 2011). For example, Heald (1957), a CSR expert, defined CSR as "*recognition on the part of management of an obligation to the society it serves not only for maximum economic performance, but for humane and constructive social policies as well*", stressing obligation to the society. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, World Business Council for Sustainable Development introduced its CSR definition as "*the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as of the local community and society at large*" (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2008), stressing the dimensions of ethical behavior, economic development and improving the quality of life.

CSR remains a top strategy among businesses who care to build their public image, and enhance their reputation, credibility, and financial returns (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli Zeynep, & Schwarz, 2006). By engaging in CSR activities, companies gain favorable stakeholder attitudes and behaviors, build their corporate image, strengthen their relationships with stockholders and enhance stakeholders' advocacy behaviors (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). CSR aims to contribute tangibly to the community's well-being through various business practices and the spending of corporate resources. This practice is based on the professional belief that such activity will attract favorable stakeholders' reactions and create strong relationships with them It's also proven that consumers gain multiple benefits from CSR, such as functional, which are tangible, monetary and specific, psychosocial, meaning psychological and sociological well-being, as well as value satisfaction, meaning that CSR confirms and identifies personal values (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli Zeynep, & Schwarz, 2006).

According to the stakeholder theory (Freeman, & Dmytriiev, 2017), the sustainability and sustainable operation of a company depends on its stakeholders, such as its employees, clients and investors, who are essential to its existence and operation because they provide resources upon which the successful operation of a company depends. Through this practice, there is mutual gain, and it is described as a win-win situation since both stakeholders and companies benefit from it. Stakeholders

correspond to the CSR activities depending on the benefits gained and degree of improving their lives. The types of relationship created between the stakeholders and the company may be identification, commitment, trust and satisfaction (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2008). Social good CSR campaigns may have a positive influence on public opinion and can enhance a company's image, reputation, credibility. It can create the perception of a trustworthy organization in people's minds and can positively affect consumer behavior (Pfau, Haigh, Sims & Wigley, 2008). CSR is part of corporate responsibilities to all stakeholders and there is need for both concepts, CSR and stakeholder theory, in business ethics (Freeman, & Dmytriiev, 2017).

Social good or cause marketing campaigns also appear to resonate with audiences and there is evidence that they tend to choose brands serving a good cause and being socially and environmentally responsible. For example, consumers are turning more from fast fashion towards slow and sustainable fashion, widely used in fashion industry today. There is trend for international socially responsible fashion brands, such as H&M, Patagonia, Stella McCartney etc., to use eco-friendly products, ethical manners, and sustainable manufacturing methods considering the environment and attracting in this way conscious consumers who adopt sustainable fashion and make socially responsible choices (Khandual, & Pradhan, 2019). Brands, nonprofits, and marketers promote partnerships with Influencers with a cause by using powerful messages. There have been many examples of cause marketing related influencer campaigns, like "Red Nose Day" by Walgreens, "Buy a Lady a Drink" by Stella Artois, "Hope on Wheels" by Hyundai, and "Go Red for Women" by the American Heart Association, some of which are also examined in the present thesis (Mediakix, 2021; Carusele, 2021).

The four main constructs or components of CSR (Chen, 2011) are the following:

- a) Accountability is related to the ability of a company to justify its actions, give answers and responds, be open, provide an account or report about what is being responsible, acknowledges mistakes, show responsibility, transparency, and competitiveness.
- b) Transparency is the degree of providing information openly to the public, conducting business according to the laws, mainly financial and governance.
- c) Competitiveness is linked to a company's relationship with its stakeholders, its commitment, trust, reputation which lead to sustainability.

d) Responsibility is the degree a company follows legal guidelines and takes care of its employees, as well as society in general, shows commitment especially on social, environmental, and financial issues.

According to a relevant model, it's empirically shown that accountability and transparency promote competitiveness and make companies more responsible, credible and well reputed. Consumers are willing to trust companies and leaders with CSR activities in their strategic agenda and routine (Chen & Wongsurawat, 2011).

### **8.1 Influencers in CSR**

Social media influencers have suddenly become protagonists in social-mediated CSR communication, contrary to celebrities who are found to be less effective and more expensive. The main salient characteristics of social media influencers endorsing a corporation who attracted consumers to imitation in the context of CSR communication are found to be trustworthiness, expertise, uniqueness, and originality (Cheng, Chen, & Hung-Baesecke, 2021). Therefore, companies tend to increase long-term strategic collaborations and paid partnerships with trusted influencers under “always-on” program and activity, rather than advertising, in their CSR communication in order to successfully promote their initiatives (Bellan, 2020; Ward, 2021).

In this context of the pandemic era, where the majority of Europeans show high levels of empathy, prefer more cooperation and EU involvement (De Vries & Hoffmann, 2020) and the new media have accelerated tendencies and campaigns of social good, we observe the evolution of influencers who use their platforms for social good and creation of philanthropic posts, as well as the rise of influencer marketing, as state of the art, mainly due to meaningful and authentic influencer-generated content (Bellan, 2020).

## **II. Empirical Part - Research Design and Methodology**

### **1. Research Aims & Questions**

The scope of this thesis is to explore the strategies implemented in Influencers Marketing (IM) campaigns in terms of their target audiences, messages, media and tactics during the pandemic. The sample includes fourteen (14) of CSR global campaigns that were implemented in the years 2020 – 2021 of Covid-19. The aim is also to investigate the influencers' specific characteristics and identify key factors of IM which drive brands, marketers and influencers on investing effectively on such practice, as well as consumers on increasing their brand awareness and preferences.

The following are the Research Questions to be examined:

1. What are the topics and contexts in the sampled CSR campaigns?
2. Which are the types of industries using the specific influencer marketing strategy and what is the type of CSR used?
3. What is the message strategy of each campaign?
4. What are the specific content strategies, tactics and communication channels adopted in these CSR campaigns?
5. What type of influencers are employed and what are the specific characteristics of the collaborating influencers?
6. What are the IM platforms used?
7. What are the source effects of influencer marketing in CSR communication?
8. How has IM strategy changed due to the pandemic?

### **2. Sampling**

The corpus of the empirical study consisted of fourteen (14) awarded influencer marketing campaigns, drawn from the pool of campaigns that were awarded by the 2021 Influencer Marketing Awards (IMAs/ Book of the Night, 2021), the Shorty Awards 2021 and the PR Week Awards 2021. The analyzed campaigns come from Europe, UK, USA and India having employed IM and CSR strategies during the Covid-19 period 2020-2021. The reason that I chose to work with the specific campaigns is that they are best awarded campaigns, therefore they distinguished as most effective, successful and famous ones in the international market by well-reputed and prominent awarding organizations.

The Influencer Marketing Awards (2021) were established in 2018 with the mission to reward campaigns, teams and influencer partnerships which have pushed boundaries and showed creativity and innovation during the last 12 months. The IMAs are global in nature, the jury consists of international experts and peers. They had great success until now and created buzz immediately in the industry. The Shorty Awards (2021) were founded in 2008 as the first organization to honor the best creators, brands and agencies, on social media and digital platforms. They are again international awards judged by experts and leaders in digital and social media with deep industry knowledge, reputation and achievements. The PR Week Awards (2022) are the most prestigious award ceremony for UK PR industry over the past 30 years, awarding the best of PR industry. Linked with the relevant online magazine, they showcase and celebrate the PR achievements over the past one year.

Therefore, this content analysis study utilized a purposeful sample of fourteen (14) best awarded campaigns with a CRS orientation and an IM strategy during the pandemic listed below (the numbering below refers to the one in the relevant coding Table in Appendix 1):

2. The official travel guide to Denmark, by the Danish government.
3. Hair won't be silenced, by Pantene UK.
4. Corona facts campaign, by the Finish government.
5. Hellmann's Animal Crossing, by Unilever.
6. Spread joy. Not germs, by Method cleaning products.
7. Small Business Heroes, by Vodafone.
8. Axis Thought Factory, by Axis Bank.
9. Suede Music for All Time, by Puma.
10. Planet Earth's Favorite Vodka, by Absolut.
11. New Jingle for a New Era, by Good Humor ice-cream.
12. Buy a Lady a Drink, by Stella Artois.
13. Red Nose Day USA, by Walgreens.
14. Leftovers Challenge, by Mythical Kitchen.
15. Perfect as I am, by Mark Jacobs.

Among the above campaigns, five (5) of them come from the food and beverages industry, three (3) from beauty and fashion, one (1) from tourism, one (1) from telecommunications, one (1) from banking, two (2) from health and one (1) from

home and decoration. As regards the country of origin, seven (7) of the campaigns come from Europe, two (2) from USA, one (1) from India and four (4) of them are global.

### **3. Content Analysis Method**

I selected and investigated thoroughly fourteen (14) national and global campaigns from Europe, UK and USA in different industries with CSR orientation, like social good, humanitarian, sustainability, environmental, development, which have implemented IM strategy and utilized integrated marketing communication (advertising, marketing and PR strategies) during the Covid-19 period of years 2020 - 2021, in order to assess the influence of these CSR campaigns by performing content analysis. The unit of analysis was each individual analyzed campaign and each coded category in the Table (Appendix 1) operated as separate variable.

Content analysis method systematically describes, categorizes and makes inferences about communication messages (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019). Data can be almost anything, from texts and observations or other communication types. Content categories are actually areas or themes explicitly separated into which units of content (data) are coded for analysis. Content categories derive from the question what content categories produce the data needed to achieve the objectives of the specific research. The unit of analysis is the specific content that you analyze in the data, which can be identified and counted (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2019). There are various uses and advantages of content analysis, such as describing communication content and catalogue the characteristics of communication content to identify what exists, testing hypotheses of message characteristics, comparing media content to real world, assessing the image of minority groups in society, as well as exploring various media effects (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

The media content analyzed in this study is related to the above 14 global campaigns. The components of the campaigns were coded iteratively, were classified, categorized, and grouped in order to derive data and formulate for the following variables:

A detailed coding Table was developed to record the different type of information about the IM strategy of the specific fourteen (14) CSR campaigns. The Table consisted of the following coding categories:

1. Context and topic of campaign (the theme of the campaign)
2. Industry (the sector of industry that the organization comes from)

3. Type of CSR (the CSR orientation of the campaign)
4. Country (where the campaign applies)
5. Target audiences (the audiences that the campaign addresses)
6. Message content (the appeal, tone of voice and message strategy)
7. Goals and objectives (of campaign which are important for measuring its effectiveness)
8. Content strategies/tactics/communication channels (the media channels for promoting the campaign)
9. Influencers – who and how many
10. Type of influencers (according to the number of followers and content)
11. Influencers' characteristics (contributing to their effectiveness)
12. Type of collaboration (with various other organizations)
13. Source effects (the effectiveness of influencers)
14. Platforms (the most popular ones used by the campaign)

The purpose of the present content analysis study was to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, since the combination of both is needed for a more holistic interpretation.

The information, data and materials from the brand campaigns were retrieved from the relevant official websites, microsites, most popular IM social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) and various publications in the internet. All data were catalogued as lists in a Coding Table in different categories by type of information, in order to easily collect data and analyze it thereafter in a systematic way. However, it was sometimes difficult to retrieve useful material, posts and videos, about the analyzed campaigns through the social media platforms, since separate pages were not always created for the specific campaigns and appropriate hashtags were hard to find. I had therefore to make research in the social media page of the relevant brand and search through hundreds of posts and images or videos to discover helpful data.

The content analysis method offers objective, systematic and quantitative description of communication messages, however, it must be acknowledged that the research was limited only to a segment of global or national campaigns due to time restrictions, and therefore the results may not be representative for all CRS campaigns during the pandemic. It is also worth mentioning that the coding was tested and checked with one more coder from Deere College, which proves the intercoder reliability.

## 4. Findings & Discussion

All data was collected by content analysis research method and was analyzed in order to draw conclusions in relation to the above-mentioned Research Questions and aims, to investigate, amongst others, the main strategies of CSR campaigns, and the main characteristics of effective influencers.

The numbering below refers to each coding category of the coding Table.

### 4.1 Topic & Context of Campaign

All analyzed campaigns in the present thesis were implemented during the Covid-19 period of 2020 - 2021, so they were all much affected by the special conditions, circumstances, necessities, and sentiments that the pandemic created. Under this context, a variety of campaign topics were observed, such as:

- supporting local tourism,
- fighting against racism and discriminations,
- educating and informing the public,
- donating meals,
- gifting products and providing free advice to people in need,
- supporting start-ups and new music talents,
- protecting the planet and environment, bringing joy, and
- fundraising.

More specifically, with tourism industry hurt by Covid-19 lockdowns, Denmark's campaign no. 2 theme is to showcase the country's beauty and attract tourism again. This campaign was awarded as best brand engagement campaign by Influencer Marketing Awards (IMAs) 2021.

Pantene's campaign no. 3 fights discrimination and micro aggressions towards people with Afro hair. This campaign was awarded as best cause-led campaign by IMAs 2021.

Campaign no. 4 of the Finnish government, once more in response to the pandemic, diffuses Coronavirus information for education of the public. This campaign was awarded as best pro bono by IMAs 2021.

Hellmann's campaign no. 5 donated Christmas meals to people in need. This campaign was awarded as most creative influencer marketing, as well as best food and drink campaign by IMAs 2021.

Campaign no. 6 of Method cleaning products spread joy to elderly and vulnerable people through gifting. This campaign was awarded as best use of Instagram by the Shorty Awards 2021.

Vodafone's campaign no. 7 supported small business sector with free helpful advice on digitizing their shops during lockdowns. This campaign was awarded as best multi-platform campaign by IMAs 2021.

Campaign no. 8 of Axis Bank provided boost to startups through funding, guidance, infrastructure, and exposure.

Campaign no. 9 of Puma Suede shoes attracted new young music talents through music collaboration. This campaign was awarded as Best influencer marketing campaign by PR Week UK Awards 2021.

Absolut's (Vodka) campaign no. 10 was a planet-centered and people-centered campaign which employed lots of activists to create awareness.

Campaign no. 11 of Good Humor ice-cream created a new jingle for ice-cream trucks which actually replaced the old traditional racist jingle. This campaign was awarded as multi-platform campaign by the Shorty Awards 2021.

Stella Artois' campaign no. 12 supported clean water through fashion.

Walgreens' campaign no. 13 raised money for children in need with NGO Red Nose Day USA.

In campaign no. 14 Josh Scherer, Food Tuber who hosts the Mythical Kitchen channel, teamed up with multiple food channel hosts to introduce the "Leftovers Challenge" and saving food leftovers.

Finally, Mark Jacobs' campaign no. 15 launched the new fragrance "Perfect" by supporting self-acceptance, self-appreciation and individuality. This campaign was one of the best brands on TikTok in 2021 (Mediakix, 2022).

There is, therefore, obviously a variety of campaign topics, which were all inspired, influenced and dictated by the Covid-19 new demanding and challenging circumstances, while there is a turn of campaign topics towards sustainability, environment, anti-racism, human needs and values. These are new emerging documented trends, as also confirmed in theory (Dang, 2020), since brands shifted to new message strategies, more human oriented than product oriented, in order to

correspond to people's new needs caused by the pandemic. Brands are seeking in this way to effectively communicate and show empathy to their audiences who are experiencing unrepresented stress, pressure and bad feelings.

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 1 "*What is the topic and context of the specific CSR brand campaigns*", as well as partly to Research Question no. 8 as regards the new marketing strategies changed during Covid-19 time.

#### **4.2 Industry**

The analyzed campaigns come from various industries. Out of the totally fourteen (14) campaigns, one (1) of them refers to the tourism industry (campaign no. 2), one (1) of them comes from the beauty industry (campaign no. 3), two (2) of them come from the health and pharmacy industry (campaigns nos. 4, 13), five (5) of them come from the food and beverages industry (campaigns nos. 5, 10, 11, 12, 14), one (1) of them comes from the home deco industry (campaign no. 6), one (1) of them comes from the telecommunications industry (campaign no. 7), one (1) of them comes from banking (campaign no. 8) and two (2) of them come from the fashion industry (campaigns nos. 9, 15).

#### **4.3 Type of CSR**

The present campaigns all have a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) orientation and cause marketing purpose. According to Refuel Agency (2022), "*cause marketing involves the collaboration between a for-profit business and a nonprofit organization for a common benefit. Cause advertising can also refer to social responsibility or charitable campaigns taken on by for-profit brands. The benefits of cause marketing strategy include brand loyalty from your customers and raised awareness for a cause*".

Specifically, out of the totally fourteen (14) cause marketing campaigns, two (2) campaigns are linked to education (campaigns nos. 2, 4), three (3) campaigns fought against racism and discriminations (campaigns nos. 3, 11, 15), three (3) campaigns are linked to social good and humanitarian purpose (campaigns nos. 5, 6, 13), three (3) campaigns supported development of weak sectors, ie. small businesses, startups and new talents (campaigns nos. 7, 8, 9) and three (3) campaigns were connected to environment and sustainability (campaigns nos. 10, 12, 14). There is, therefore, a balance of all kinds of CSR.

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 2 “*Which are the types of industries using the specific influencer marketing strategy and what is the type of CSR*”.

#### **4.4 Countries**

The fourteen (14) campaigns investigated herein come from Europe (Denmark, Germany, and Finland), United Kingdom (UK), the United States (USA) and India. More specifically, three (3) campaigns are from Europe (campaigns nos. 2, 4, 7), five (5) campaigns are from UK (campaigns nos. 3, 5, 6, 7, 9), two (2) campaigns are from USA (campaigns nos. 11, 13), five (5) campaigns are global (campaigns nos. 10, 12, 13, 14, 15) and one (1) campaign comes from India (campaign no. 8). The majority, therefore, of examined campaigns in the present study are global and British ones.

#### **4.5 Target Audiences**

Each of the fourteen (14) campaigns had different target audiences, primary or secondary, depending on the campaign goals and objectives (described in the relevant chapter below), which are the following:

Target audiences of campaign no. 2 were the local population of Danes, as well as tourists globally, for campaign no. 3 all the white people, for campaign no. 4 the local population of Finland and especially young people in Finland, for campaign no. 5 the public in UK and especially young people in UK, for campaign no. 6 again the public in UK, for campaign no. 7 small businesses in UK and Germany, for campaign no. 8 technology savvy, innovative and talented startups in India, for campaign no. 9 young people, especially men aged 16-24, who were new emerging music talents in UK, for campaign no. 10 the public globally, for campaign no. 11 the public in USA and especially white people in USA, for campaign no. 12 the public globally, for campaign no. 13 children in need internationally, for campaign no. 14 Mythical Kitchen channel fans and food lovers in general, and for campaign no. 15 women globally.

According to the above, I observed that the analyzed campaigns targeted mostly big groups of people globally or local national populations and the public in general, rather than small niche audiences. Ten (10) out of the fourteen (14) campaigns (nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15) addressed to whole national populations (in UK, USA, Denmark, and Finland) or publics around the world to reach their targets and succeed their objectives. This fact makes sense taking under consideration the universality of the pandemic which threatened and touched everyone. The brands used to adopt

communication strategies to reach specific and well-defined groups of audiences according to bases of segmentation (demographics, psychographics and behavioral characteristics), but now during Covid-19 I noticed that companies try to reach bigger populations and whole nations, due to the global similar pandemic conditions that have affected almost everybody on the planet.

#### **4.6 Message Content**

We refer here to motivational messages that may encourage participation as applied in the specific campaign language. Taglines and calls to action are important part of communicating an organization's purpose in a memorable way found in websites and ads (Frew, Macias, Chan, & Harding, 2009).

As seen in the coding Table (Appendix 1), the most common appeals among all fourteen (14) items of campaigns included messages of love, diversity, openness, racial justice, eco-friendly and sustainability. It is impressive that all fourteen (14) campaigns included in one way or another, more or less, love appeal messages, with seven (7) campaigns (nos. 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15) spreading messages connected to diversity, against racism and various discriminations, and five (5) campaigns (nos. 2, 5, 10, 12, 14) promoting green, eco-friendly, environmental and sustainability messages. Based on the *theory of reasoned action* (an individual's behavior is affected by both the individual's attitude concerning the behavior and the subjective norm concerning it) and *social influence theory* (interpersonal influence in social media provokes users' engagement in eWOM, so that users' online behavior of providing and seeking opinion is affected by the acts of peer users), it is found that social media content effectiveness incorporates emotional appeals, informativeness and creativity which drives positive online behavior and favorable purchase intentions (Lee & Hong, 2016). Such emotional appeals as the above found in the analyzed campaigns, created through social media platforms in the conditions of a devastating pandemic era, may then encourage positive customer behavior and action.

Overall, the most common appeal included love messages, in all campaigns the messages were designed to engage the target audiences and were phrased in an authentic, genuine and sensitive way (eg. "*Land of everyday wonder*", "*Everyday is a Red Nose Day*", "*Absolut Collectively*", "*Suede music for all time*"). The tone of voice was strongly emotional, human and authentic (eg. "*Have fun, go green*", "*Perfect is a celebration of everybody as they are*", "*Spread joy, not germs*"). Most messages

utilized straight forward linguistic approach and calls to action (campaigns nos. 2, 3, 9), the content was rich with creative and memorable concepts (campaigns nos. 5, 6, 11, 13, 14), as well as strong people-centered tone of voice (campaigns nos. 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15).

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 3 “*What is the message content in each campaign*”.

Herein below follow some indicative posts showing emotional messages:

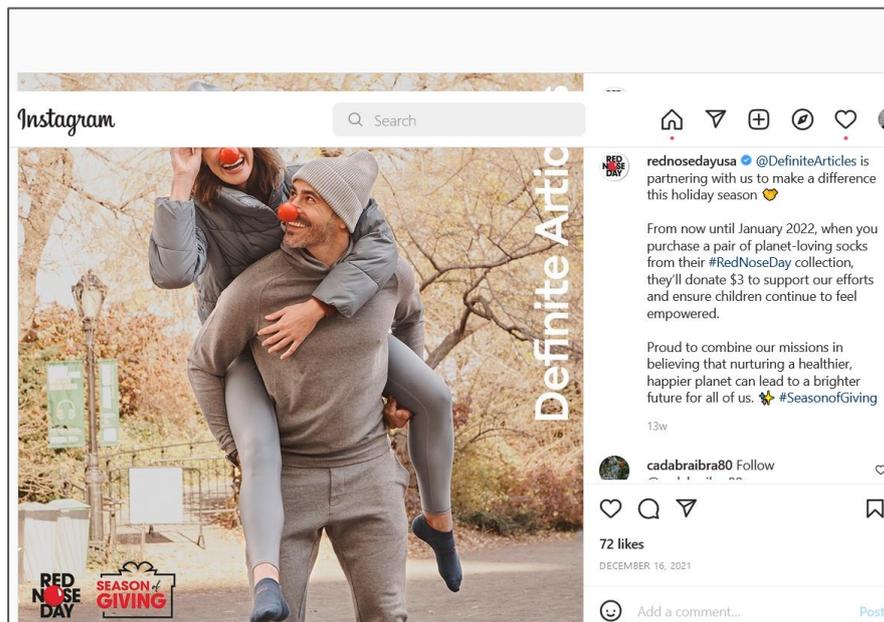


Figure 8 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXjIGVELzhu/>

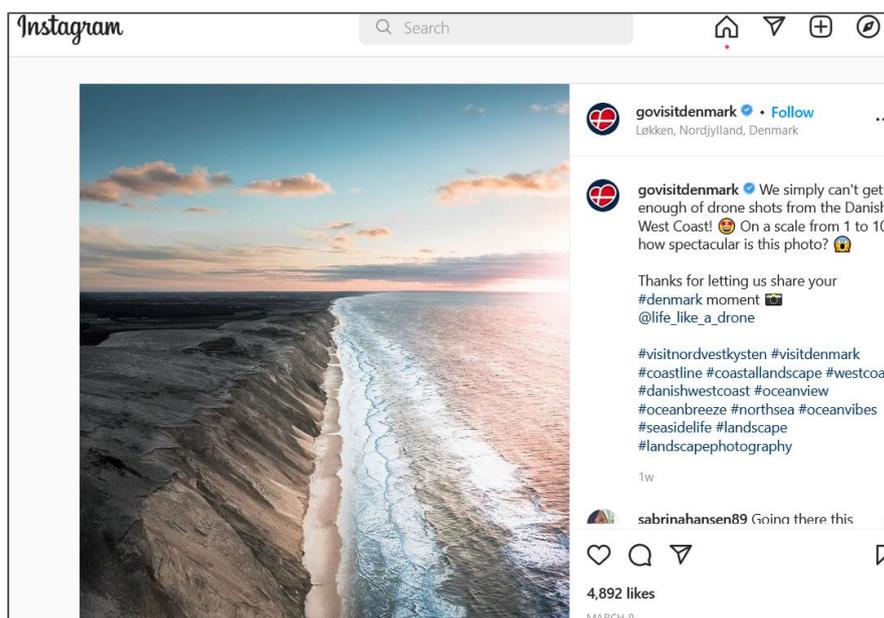


Figure 9 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4zJz-q2fn/>

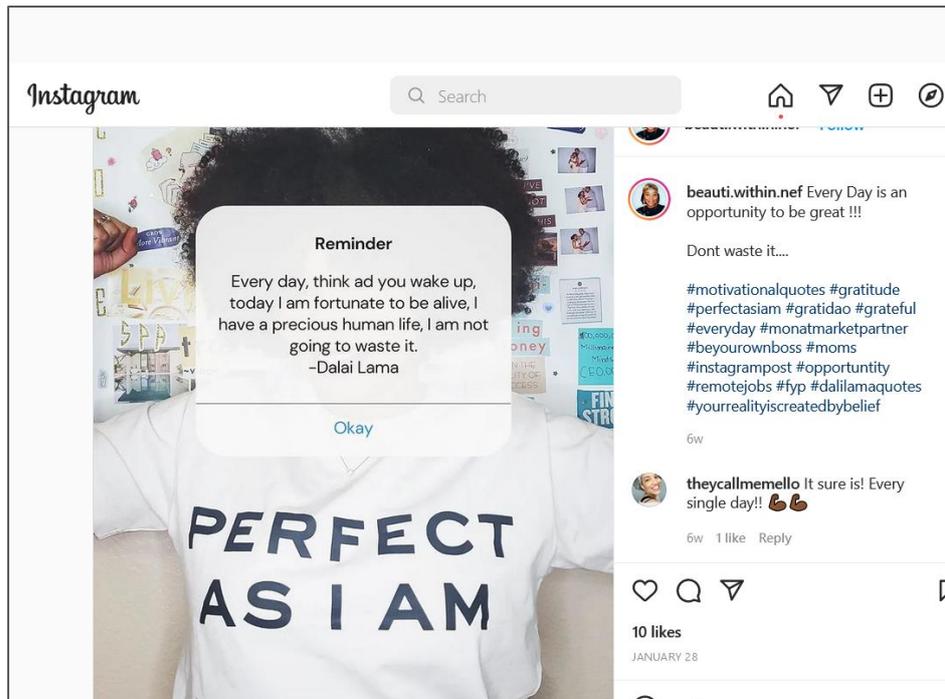


Figure 10 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZSXe95PZ5E/>

#### 4.7 Goals & Objectives

The goals of an organization are abstract and long-term, related to the overall strategy, while the objectives are actionable, short-term, measurable, and related to tactics. The objectives are categorized into awareness, acceptance, and action objectives, depending on their effect (Smith, 2017). In our case, there are accordingly various campaign goals and objectives.

The specific goals and objectives of each examined campaign of course differentiate, and they are presented in detail in the coding Table (Appendix...). I then observed that out of the fourteen (14) campaigns, all of them had awareness goals, ie. to create or raise awareness about the brand or the campaign, inform and educate the targets (ex. campaigns nos. 4, 7, 13) or build reputation about the brand, nine (9) of the campaigns had acceptance goals, ie. to change audiences' attitude (nos. 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15) and ten (10) of the campaigns had action goals, such as to make donations or raise funds for social good or purchase brand's products (nos. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15).

In conclusion, all of the examined campaigns aimed to create awareness and the majority of them had both acceptance and action goals. In general, the main goal was to create awareness about the specific brand and its campaign, create engagement to the target audiences, and change attitudes, as well as to motivate people, give

encouragement to them, comfort and spread a message of resilience against the pandemic.

#### ***4.8 Media Mix, Content Strategies, Tactics & Communication Channels***

There was a variety of campaign communication strategies, tactics and channels developed within each of the fourteen (14) campaigns to recruit target audiences.

A well-structured and easy to navigate official website or microsite or interactive platform was created by five (5) campaigns (nos. 2, 3, 5, 7, 13), like the multi-platform campaign no. 7 of Vodafone which supported small business sector through a smart platform with digital shopping promenade and Suede Music creative music platform for new talents created by Puma for campaign no. 9.

Numerous emotive social media posts, hashtags, info, and stories involving attractive, vivid, emotional photos, combined with creative, interactive and interesting content, like Nintendo's Animal Crossing popular game with easy and innovative in-game donation activation mechanism of campaign no. 5, were the most frequent (campaigns nos. 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15). Earned media coverage, press releases and other forms of mass media publications on digital and print media were also prevalent (campaigns nos. 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13).

Furthermore, campaign storytelling videos and films, as well as new tracks and tunes were employed in six (6) campaigns (nos. 2, 3, 9, 11, 13, 14) as prevailing and very successful tactics, such as the campaign film "*Hair won't be silenced*" by Pantene in campaign no. 3 (see link below), the new track of Puma streaming on Spotify in campaign no. 9 (see link below), and the new ice cream truck jingle created by the iconic Black rapper RZA in campaign no. 11 (see link below).

Another very popular communication tactic across eight (8) of the analyzed campaigns included educational material distributed through webinars, podcasts, lectures, workshops and talks (campaigns nos. 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 15). Finally, launch experiential events, celebrations, parties, concerts and engagement activations were developed in five (5) campaigns (nos. 8, 9, 10, 13, 15) to reach target audiences and become viral. Other forms of promotion were utilized less frequently, such as sale of branded products (campaigns nos. 3, 6) and gifting or giveaways (campaigns nos. 6, 11).

In conclusion, I observed that digital PR and online materials were by far the most commonly used communications strategy, with the totality of campaigns creating and sharing multiple creative and inspiring social media materials.

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 4 “*What are the specific content strategies, tactics and communication channels adopted in these CSR campaigns*”.

The below Table includes the various communication strategy and tactics adopted in each campaign:

| <b>Campaign no.</b> | <b>Media Mix/ Content Strategies/ Communication Tactics &amp; Channels</b>   |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>2.</b>           | Well-structured and easy to navigate official website<br>Attractive vivid emotional photos<br>SM posts<br>creative content<br>storytelling videos by influencers   |
| <b>3.</b>           | Microsite of Pantene<br>Earned media, big coverage<br>Emotive social posts<br>Successful campaign film<br>Power of Hair Fund<br>Gold series of products<br>Educational material  |
| <b>4.</b>           | Guide on SM best practices<br>Ready-made posts on Covid-19<br>Thousands of SM posts/info/stories<br>Education, info & instructions<br>Webinars<br>Weekly update with ready-made content  |
| <b>5.</b>           | Nintendo's Animal Crossing popular game, easy & innovative in-game donation activation/mechanism led by influencers, interactive<br>Branded gaming environment<br>Press Releases, digital & print media  |
| <b>6.</b>           | 599 pieces of Instagram positive joyful content<br>Gifting/giveaways (about 1,000 products) to elderly & vulnerable people through Influencers by their personal notes, messages, flowers on gifted products<br>Briefing guidelines to Influencers |
| <b>7.</b>           | Multi-platform campaign<br>Platform with digital shopping promenade<br>Smart use of platforms<br>Online & offline channels<br>Influencers podcast, digital webinar, lecture, mentoring session   |
| <b>8.</b>           | Axis Thought Factory innovation lab providing banking solutions through new technologies<br>Launch event<br>Workshops  |
| <b>9.</b>           | Suede Music creative music platform for new talents  |

|            |  |
|------------|--|
|            | <p>Suede Music Studio based in West London for recording new artists &amp; new music movements</p> <p>Radio station, podcasts</p> <p>Launch event with artist Ghetts &amp; 2 emerging talents</p> <p>New track streaming on Spotify</p> <p>Coverage in music, fashion, news media</p> <p>Puma &amp; retailers various channels</p> <p>Influencers playlist</p>   |
| <b>10.</b> | <p>Event highlights: 4-day immersion in commitment to sustainability at Swedish production facility &amp; photoshoot recreating the historic march at Stonewall with renowned artist and advocate, David LaChapelle</p> <p>Experiential events for unique brand experiences</p> <p>612 Instagram posts</p>   |
| <b>11.</b> | <p>Employ an iconic Black musician, RZA rapper, to create new ice cream truck jingle that represents all communities.</p> <p>Behind-the-scenes look at his creative process, and a music video showcasing the new jingle as it spread joy to the streets.</p> <p>Make track available for free to any ice cream truck driver indefinitely.</p> <p>Great media coverage (Reddit, Apple News)</p>  |
| <b>12.</b> | <p>Cause marketing</p> <p>Sponsored Instagram posts about Oscar dress of Olivia Culpo</p> <p>Press coverage using Oscars event</p>   |
| <b>13.</b> | <p>Cause/experiential marketing</p> <p>Cash donations to Red Nose Day Fund</p> <p>Offer the iconic red noses to customers of Walgreens for purchase in-store &amp; online during annual 6-week campaign, with all proceeds going to foundation</p> <p>Customers encouraged to wear them and take photos on Red Nose Day fundraising events/activities/celebrations/engagement activations (donation for every nose sold)</p> <p>Launch videos, posts, stories, social shares, boomerangs, livestreaming</p> <p>Print &amp; digital media</p> |
| <b>14.</b> | <p>Ask hosts' audiences to create unique/creative meals from leftovers &amp; share them on SM with hashtag #LeftoversChallenge.</p> <p>The YouTube hosts provided donation links in their videos, encouraging subscribers to donate to organization</p>  |
| <b>15.</b> | <p>TikTok duets</p> <p>Launch viral party event, celebration through myriad of online experiences</p> <p>KIM PETRAS' mini-concert</p> <p>Exclusive talks with campaign members</p>   |

Herein below follow links of some videos created for the campaigns:

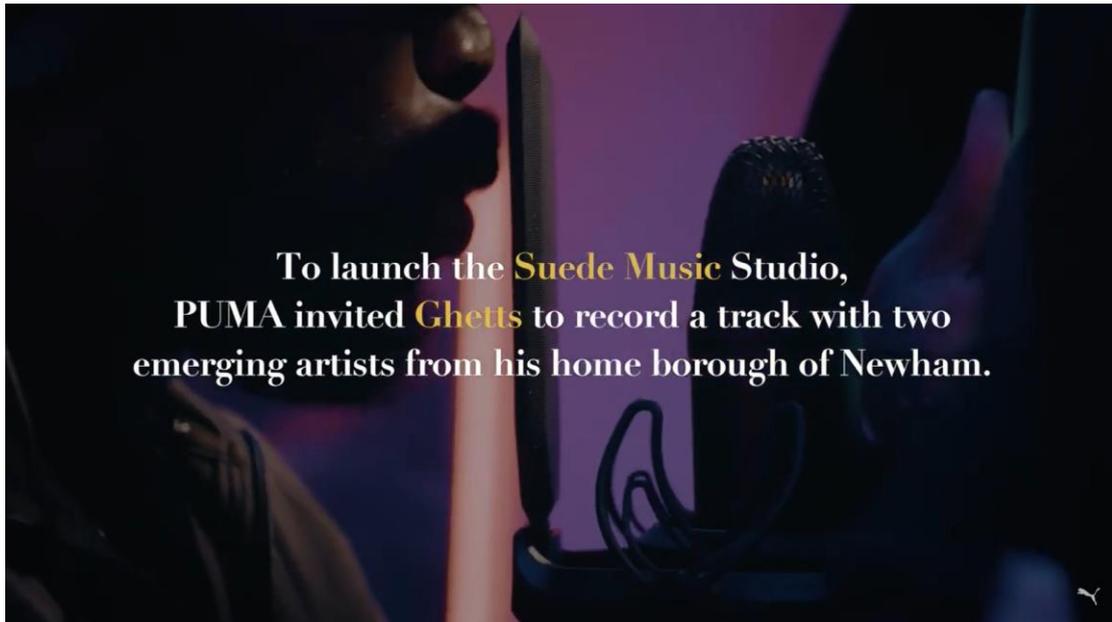


Figure 11 – Suede Music Studio video for Puma  
[Suede Music Studio ft. @Ghetts | PUMA - YouTube](#)



Figure 12 – Good Humor Ice-Cream video  
[Good Humor | Good Humor x RZA A New Ice Cream Truck Jingle for a New Era - YouTube](#)

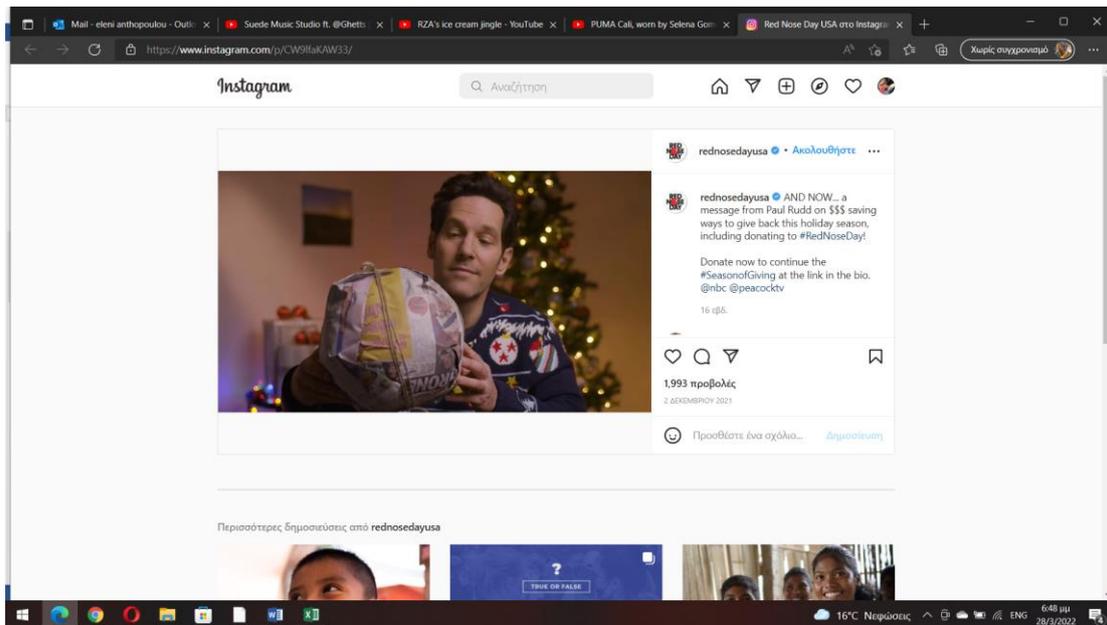


Figure 13 - Red Nose Day USA video on 2/12/21  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CW9lfaKAW33/>



Figure 14 – Pantene video  
[My Hair Won't Be Silenced Full Film- Pantene Gold Series with Black Minds Matter and Project Embrace - YouTube](#)

Leftovers Challenge video link:

[Binging with Babish, Mythical Chef Josh, and Alvin Cook the Ultimate Leftovers Burger - YouTube](#)

Hellmann's Island video link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSI-i-3ExNw&t=307s>

Absolut's video link:

[Absolut Planet Earth's Favorite Vodka 30 Second 16x9 - YouTube](#)

#### ***4.9 Influencers – Who & How many***

With influencers being the core of the present thesis, I observed an army of influencers of different nature and number employed across all campaigns.

Specifically, in campaign no. 2 there is a diverse mix of multiple local people (Danes) sharing their professional or personal experience in Denmark to attract tourists in Denmark. In Pantene's campaign no. 3 Afro women are employed, together with an advisory board and ambassador Katie Piper as influencers: six (6) Black British women talk about their own experiences of hair discrimination, micro aggressions, and their own personal journeys to accepting their natural Afro hair. Also, scientist Dr. Rolanda Wilkerson talks about the science of Afro hair and Funmi Fetto, Editor in British Vogue magazine, about micro-aggressions. In campaign no. 4 the Finish government has utilized 1,500 social media influencers as critical actors to educate and approach the public with Covid-19 information. In most creative IM campaign no. 5, Hellmann's cooperated with Stephen Fry, game enthusiast, who provided his voice to cut through the holiday noise on social and provide narration to a wonderfully Christmassy film. Also, lots of social media influencers were spreading the message about this social cause campaign on the respective platforms, together with Jason Isaacs, famous actor in Harry Potter. Method cleaning products in campaign no. 6 employed seventy-eight (78) various Instagram influencers, being diverse in age, gender and ethnicity to spread joy to homes through gifting joy bundles products during Covid-19 lockdown. In campaign no. 7 by Vodafone, over three hundred (300) experts acting as mentors and sponsors from politics, business and science supported small businesses in UK and Germany and offered feedback, networking, and brainstorming, being startups themselves and actors of civil society. In campaign no. 8 Axis Bank leveraged the power of social media influencers and eighteen (18) technology bloggers in India, such as Amit, Sreejesh, Shabarish, Santosh, and Amarendra, to raise awareness regarding Axis Thought Factory innovation lab providing banking solutions through new technologies and to attract more and more startups to join them. Puma with its best IM campaign no. 9 collaborated with one hundred and four (104) Influencers, Ghetts artist and two (2) emerging talents to promote new music movements and talents and support the music scene during Covid-19. Absolut Vodka in campaign no. 10 employed an

activists' army of influencers to create awareness and excitement about its planet-centered campaign: ninety-five (95) eco-conscious sustainability advocates and activists with passion for protecting planet and people, as well as LGBTQ community influencers. Good Humor ice-cream in campaign no. 11 employed an iconic Black musician and celebrity influencer, RZA rapper, to create a new timeless jingle for all ice-cream trucks in USA and replace the old racist jingle. Stella Artois through its social good campaign no. 12 supported clean water through actress and fashion influencer Olivia Culpo and six (6) other fashion influencers/ Instagrammers, Kat Anita, Erica Hoida, Brittany Xavier, Michelle Madsen, Gina Ybarra and Katie Rodgers. In Red Nose Day USA campaign no. 13 Walgreens raised money for children in need around the world to keep them safe, healthy, educated and empowered with the help of thirty-four (34) influencers, children, CEOs and employees. Josh Scherer, food YouTuber who hosts the Mythical Kitchen channel, teamed up with multiple food YouTubers and influencers, such as Andrew Rea of "*Binging with Babish*" and Alvin Cailan of "*First We Feast*", to introduce the Leftovers Challenge campaign no. 14 and support the food industry workers hurt by the pandemic. Finally, Mark Jacob launched the new fragrance "*Perfect*" with three (3) massive TikTok influencers (Rickey Thompson, Jojo Siwa and Bretman Rock), German singer Kim Petras, model Precious Lee, infamous nail artist Mei Kawajiri, model Madelyn Whitley, model Lila Moss and forty-two (42) more influencers, to make women feel perfect with themselves, promote the new fragrance and increase perfume sales.

Subsequently, the above findings evidence the theoretical effectiveness of Instagram and blogs as ideal for electronic word-of-mouth (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). It is shown that in most campaigns there is a prevailing preference for ordinary and everyday people, social media influencers (especially from Instagram), bloggers and experts, and in less cases for traditional celebrity influencers, like musicians and models. Most of the brands promoting the above campaigns leveraged the engaging power, massive strength and creative inspiration of not just one, but a multitude of social media influencers and especially "*Instagrammers*", as said above, irrelevant to the number of their followers, to capture their audiences and achieve their campaign goals and objectives with great success. Such selections were made by the brands naturally because the pandemic has made authenticity and credibility top priority for brands. With the isolation of lockdowns, people and customers increased time online and turned more to social media for

meaningful connections, feeling closer to such authentic influencers with higher perceived similarity, in the context of increasing influencer demand (Hickey, 2021).

Herein below follow indicatively a few of the influencers employed in the campaigns:

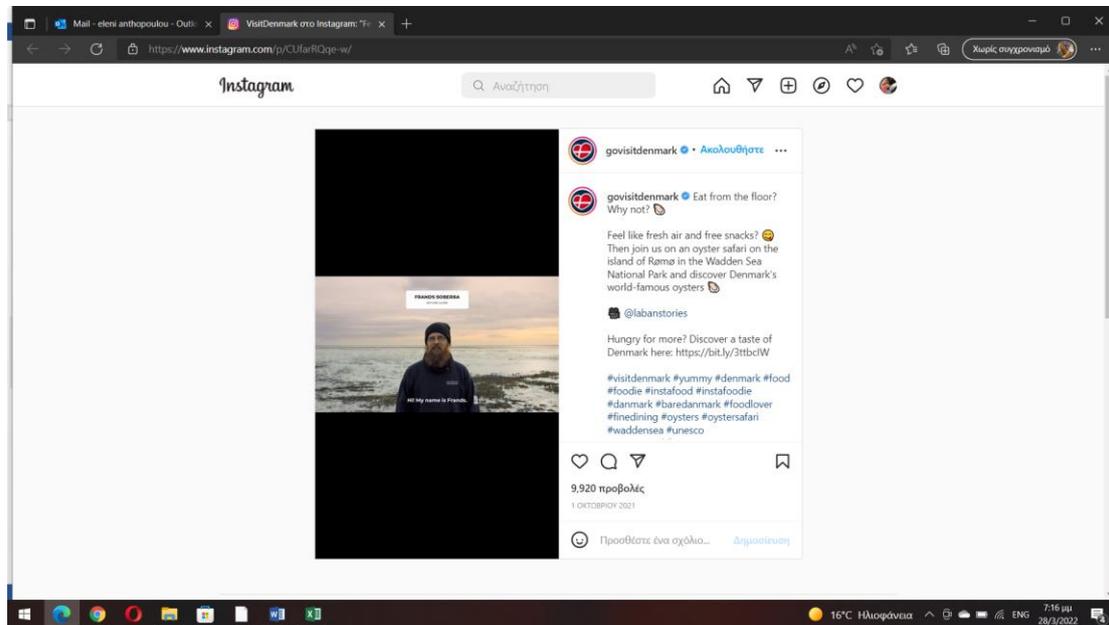


Figure 15 – Influencer in Visit Denmark campaign  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CUfarRQqe-w/>

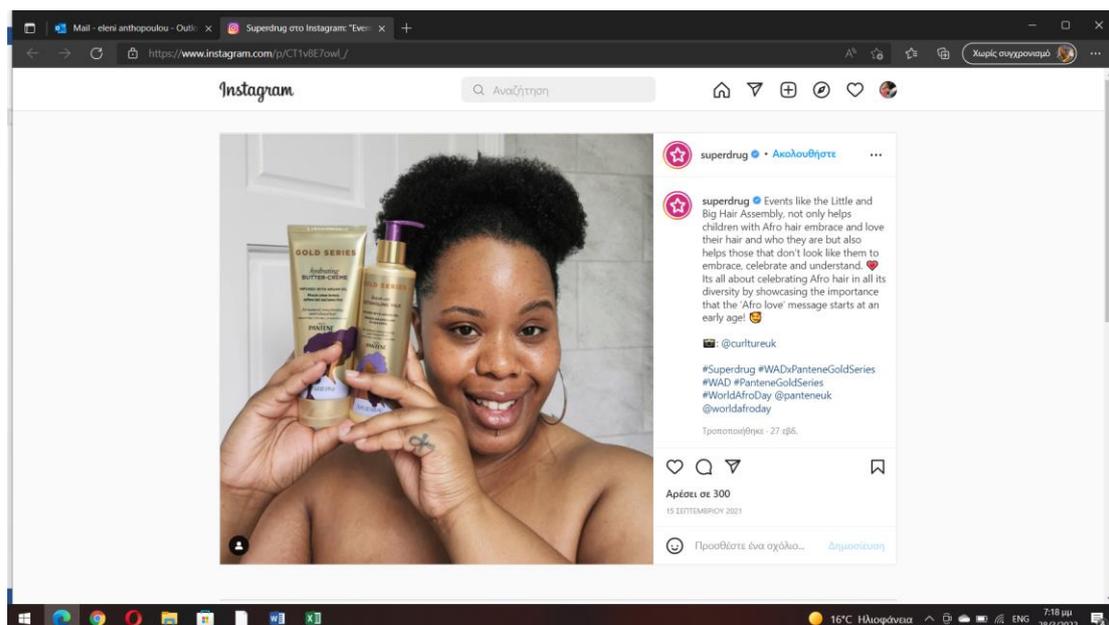


Figure 16 – Influencer in Pantene's campaign  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CT1v8E7owl/>

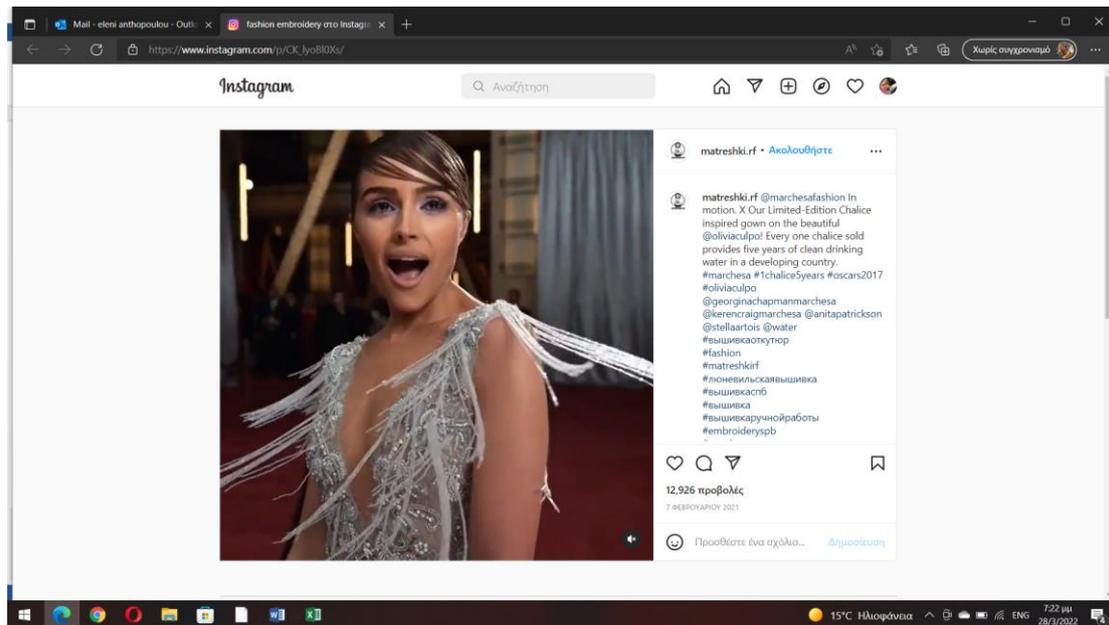


Figure 17 – Actress Olivia Culpo in Stella Artois’ campaign

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CK\\_lyoBlOXs/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CK_lyoBlOXs/)

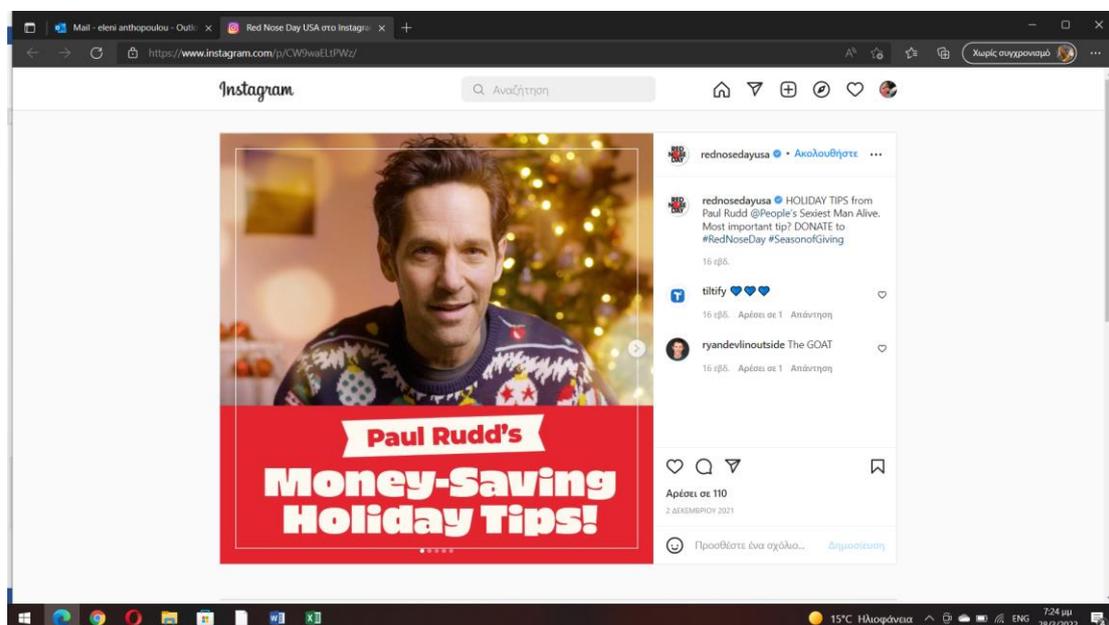


Figure 18 – Paul Rudd in Red Nose Day USA campaign

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CW9waELtPWz/>

#### 4.10 Type of Influencers

Based on follower count and according to the categories of influencers examined in the theoretical part herein (in chapter “*Influencer Marketing: definitions, platforms, and strategies*”), it was found that of the totally fourteen (14) campaigns, the majority of them employed micro-influencers and nano-influencers, while less of them employed celebrity and macro influencers. Specifically, in eleven (11) campaigns (nos.

2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15) the companies collaborated with various micro and nano influencers, in five (5) campaigns (nos. 10, 11, 12, 13, 15) I noticed the presence of celebrity influencers and in six (6) campaigns (nos. 5, 6, 9, 12, 14, 15) there were macro influencers.

Based on the specific content published by the influencers or niche target audience, there was a variety in type of influencers utilized in the campaigns, such as food (campaigns nos. 2, 14), fashion (campaigns nos. 12, 15), gaming (campaign no. 5), music (campaigns nos. 9, 11), travel and lifestyle (campaign no. 10) influencers and technology bloggers (campaign no. 8), depending each time on the specific theme, concept, industry, targets, and objectives of the campaign. It is then evident, in agreement with the theoretical research (Santora, 2021), that micro-influencers and nano-influencers were mostly preferred by the brands in their promo campaigns during the pandemic, since these types of influencers offer better engagement and broader reach than celebrity influencers, especially on Instagram and YouTube.

#### ***4.11 Type of Collaboration***

Many brands in the analyzed campaigns proceeded to diverse and multiple collaborations with their preferred influencers, as well as various other organizations in the context of their promoted campaigns to engage, create noise and achieve their goals, although the specific terms and conditions of cooperation are kept private and confidential, not disclosed to the public. In majority there were long-term partnerships with NGOs, independent funds, charities, foundations and environmental organizations due to the pandemic conditions and relevant social good purposes (campaigns nos. 3, 5, 12, 13, 14), such as the partnership of Pantene in campaign no. 3 with the organizations Black Minds Matter, Project Embrace, World Afro Day and The Ideas Foundation, Hellmann's partnership with FareShare charity in campaign no. 5, the partnership of Stella Artois with Water Org. in campaign no. 12 and the partnership of Walgreens with Red Nose Day Fund and NGOs, like Action Against Hunger, Amref Health Africa, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, The Chicago Community Trust and Children's Health Fund in campaign no. 13.

There were collaborations also between private agencies and public sector, like the Danish and Finnish government in campaigns nos. 2 and 4 respectively, with fashion brands, like Vice and Marchesa in campaigns nos. 9 and 12 respectively, music platforms, like Spotify in campaign no. 9. We, therefore, observe great extent of

cooperation and team work of different type, with more than one organizations unified to make the campaigns stronger, more visible and effective.

#### ***4.12 Characteristics of Influencers***

According to theory, (please refer to chapter “*Source Credibility: definition and dimensions*”), source credibility is related to the positive characteristics of the communicator, who in our case is the specific influencer, while the effectiveness of an endorser is linked to the factors of expertise, trustworthiness and physical attractiveness as the main characteristics that drive the perceptions of source credibility. At the same time, it has been evidenced that “*ordinary celebrities*”, who are born in the context of social network sites add credibility to the products that they endorse. This new type of social media celebrities, such as micro influencers, are perceived to be more authentic, real, credible, trustworthy and effective.

Examining now the main characteristics of influencers among the campaigns investigated in the present thesis, it is obvious that there is uniformity and repeated presence of specific traits found in the partnered influencers, who are mostly micro-influencers and nano-influencers, as found above. The most common characteristics are indeed related to authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, and originality in all analyzed campaigns, as shown in the coding Table (Appendix 1). Influencers appear to be authentic, genuine, spontaneous and unique in their natural environment with their posts, videos and creative content. They were also innovative and progressive (campaigns nos. 5, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15) with significant informative value and perceived similarity. All these virtues add value to their credibility and reliability towards their audiences. In less cases, I encountered influencers who were physically attractive and referring mostly to traditional celebrities (like in campaigns nos. 9, 12, 15) and different or diverse (like in campaigns nos. 3, 10). Finally, it can be noticed that in most campaigns’ influencers seem to be joyful, happy, positive, kind, fun and entertaining, taking also in consideration the fact that they attain to uplift their followers and create a pleasant atmosphere within the difficult pandemic circumstances.

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 5 “*What type of influencers are employed and what are the specific characteristics of the collaborating influencers*”.

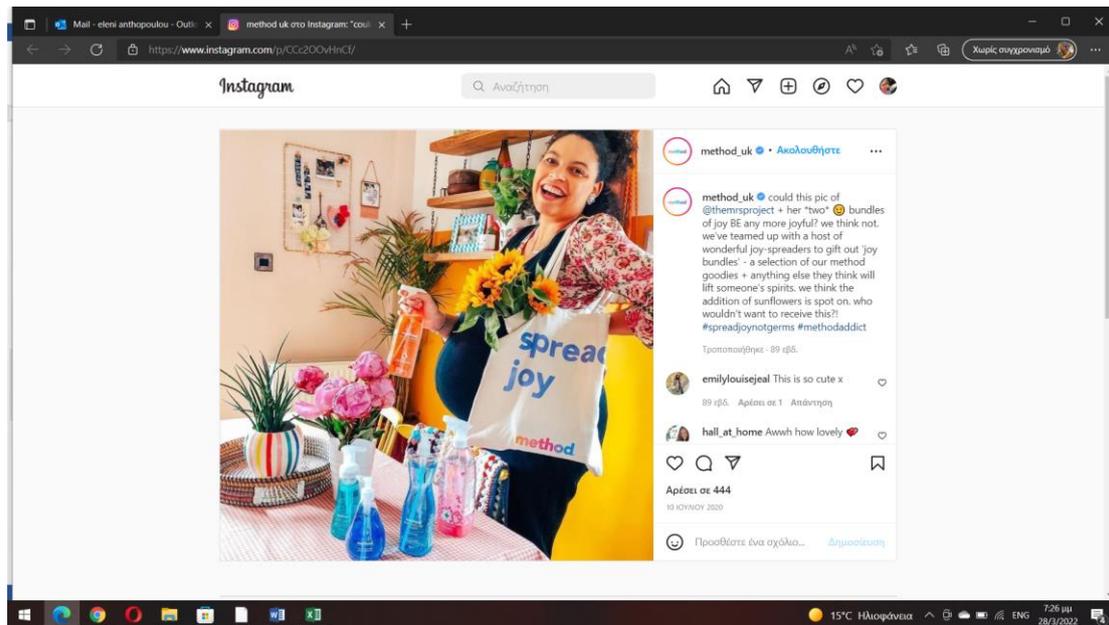


Figure 19 – Influencer in Method’s campaign.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CCc2OOvHnCf/>

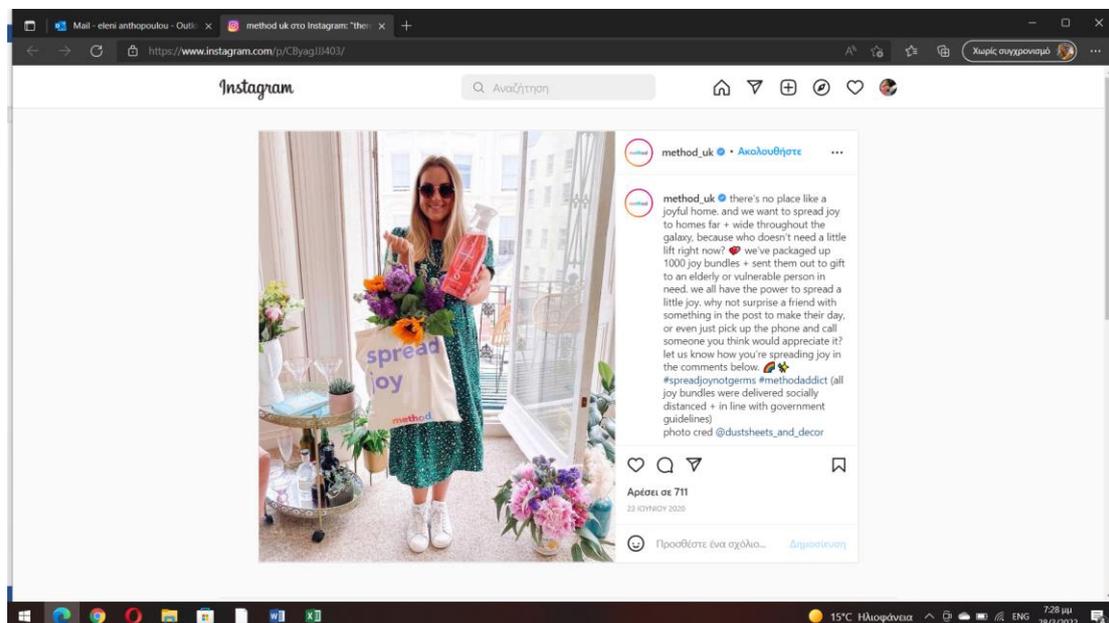


Figure 20 - Influencer in Method’s campaign.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CByagJJ403/>

#### 4.13 Source Effects

As it was found in the theoretical part (please refer to chapter 4 “*Source effects in Influencer Marketing*”), the effectiveness of source (ie. influencer) is strongly connected to the followers’ trust in influencer branded content, source credibility of influencer, brand awareness and consumer engagement to a specific campaign. All the positive characteristics of influencers described above, like trustworthiness, expertise,

uniqueness and originality, play an important role in trusting the relevant brand campaign, especially through social media in the frame of Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns during the Covid-19 period of 2020 – 2021.

My study on the source effects among the analyzed campaigns confirm the above theory, since all fourteen (14) campaigns resulted in the engagement of their audiences in most cases by creating brand and campaign awareness, enhancing brand's reputation and image, educating the public, providing useful information (awareness objectives) or changing attitudes (acceptance objectives). Overall, it is evidenced that the principal source effect in the majority of campaigns, thanks to the partnered influencers, was to create great social engagement and huge number of impressions on social media, excitement, trust, awareness, acceptance, positive sentiments, and as secondary effect to cause action and change behavior by donating, purchasing or fund raising (campaigns nos. 5, 11, 13, 14). Through the power of social media influencers, the organizations leveraged digital media channels and managed in this way to create buzz and make their campaigns viral.

As examples of the above effects, campaign no. 11 of Good Humor ice-cream attained amazing media coverage, massive impressions, publicity on national news, radio, local TV, online and offline channels, as well as resulted to change of attitude and behavior by replacing the old problematic jingle with a new vibrant tune permanently. Campaign no. 12 of Stella Artois had huge engagement with 9 million impressions on Instagram and Walgreen's campaign no. 13 had large-scale public awareness and engagement by raising more than \$270 million and helped 25 million children within 7 years.

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 7 "*What are the source effects of influencer marketing in CSR communication*".

#### **4.14 Platforms**

The most popular platforms that the brands used to promote their campaigns were first Instagram (campaigns nos. 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15), second Facebook (campaigns nos. 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14) and YouTube (campaigns nos. 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 14) with Twitter coming third (campaigns nos. 5, 8, 10, 11, 13). Two of the campaigns used each TikTok (nos. 4, 15), Snapchat (nos. 4, 13) and Spotify (nos. 9, 11) and one campaign used Twitch (no. 5) and one Pinterest (no. 13). There were also three

organizations that promoted their campaign on their official website or microsite (campaigns nos. 2, 3, 4).

It is then evident, in agreement with theory, that Instagram, Facebook and YouTube were among the most used and popular social media platforms for Influencer Marketing, with Instagram being the first choice.

The above findings refer to Research Question no. 6 “*What are the IM platforms used*”.

## Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic was a highly challenging period for both the brands and their clients, bearing great deal of uncertainty, stress, and physical isolation with the lockdowns, psychological pressure, and insecurity. Consumers developed new daily routines by spending more time online, especially on social channels, so it was time for companies to develop new ways to connect with them. In this context, new types of influencers and digital content creators, born principally from the social networking sites, were asked to inform, educate and motivate their followers during these tough times, and serve brands as spokespersons in their new strategic communication.

As it was found also from this study, influencers employed by the brands were in their majority nano-influencers and micro-influencers, who are considered to be more authentic and more effective in disseminating messages rapidly and sharing information with their audiences in a human, sensitive and empathetic way. The influencers in the examined campaigns utilized social media platforms and generated content in order to raise awareness and engage their audiences and networks around a specific cause. With the flow of communication being multidirectional and influencers acting as the new online opinion leaders, the brands had the opportunity to develop and spread their CSR campaigns effectively to massive target audiences. The Covid-19 crisis actually brought a shift within the influencer industry, impacted PR and marketing industry to great extent, increased influencer marketing as core marketing strategy and reshaped the way businesses are interacting with their customers. Amazing authentic content was produced in extraordinary times.

Visuals and messaging had a highly empathetic tone of voice, since people were facing difficult circumstances, personal and financial, and needed a sense of normality, stability and safety. It was then essential for companies to build trust with their audiences, through hopeful, inspiring messaging and authentic content. Videos continued to be popular tool to create great video content, like on TikTok and YouTube, as the most popular video mediums during Covid-19. Insights from the analyzed brand campaigns in the present thesis have also shown that consumers constantly desired trustworthy source of information, brands and influencers who communicated in an authentic and empathetic way, since people were seeking escapism from the pandemic.

Finally, we expect that companies will continue to collaborate and depend on influencers in a human and trustworthy way in the future, while influencers will

continue to support social media marketing and affect behavior with their posts and digital content even in the post-lockdown era. These large trends have shifted the way of communication and companies' content strategies, while it seems that some trends will stay much after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Word Count: 17,555

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Coding Table