PERSONAL BRANDING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE ROLE OF INFLUENCERS

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ABSTRACT: This research paper aims to establish a connection between the concept of Personal Branding and Social Media, understanding how in the 21st-century people do their personal branding through Social Media, taking into account the role of Digital Influencers on Instagram. It is to be expected that these individuals, given their social status, make good personal branding.

The methodology approach used was a qualitative one, developed through an interview with 25 questions and counting with 10 responses, half woman, and half male. The interviewees were Portuguese Instagram Influencers.

Some conclusions that were possible to draw were that becoming an Influencer is something well thought, people do intentional personal branding, they often plan their content, consider the impact of their actions on others, the number of followers is important when addresses to job opportunities. In the perspective on how Influencers build that online presence, the main factors mentioned are consistency, authenticity/genuineness, and interaction with the audience.

KEYWORDS: personal branding, social media, instagram influencers.

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1.   Introduction

The globalized world is a new reality, the competition is more aggressive day by day in almost everything of our daily lives, which causes the need for individuals to differentiate themselves (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016). Bearing in mind, the pressure currently felt, the idea of stand out from the rest has become a more common notion, which awoke interest among professionals. The literature about this subject reference that branding yourself is the key to have success in terms of personal and professional life (Gehl, 2011; Khedher, 2014; Peters, 1997). Shepherd, (2005, p. 590) refer that "if you don't brand yourself, others will" and it seems that this is something that people are taking into account.

Peters (1997) was the first to recognize that everybody can be a brand, what generated the term "personal branding", and this concept transgressed until the modern era, were, for example, Khedher (2015) support the idea by saying that humans can be strategically managed and have additional features.

Traditionally personal branding was directly associated with celebrities or politicians(Labrecque et al., 2011). But now with the technological evolution and the emergence of social networks, personal branding is a phenomenon available for everyone.

Through social media, individuals can interact, communicate, share, search for information in a matter of seconds. This tool allows the creation of profiles where people can share the content that they want, to a great audience what made personal branding easier. However, studies reveal that unprofessional behavior in social media can have a very negative impact on a professional career (Johnson, 2017).

With the use of these tools, it emerged a new third party, the influencers, these individuals use personal branding in order to brand themselves and to create a competitive advantage. To Tisell and Myslek (2017, p.3) "there is a need for a deeper understanding of how social media influencers brands have been build" and Bryman and Bell (2005) said that when speaking about influencers the firsts thing coming to mind is the platform Instagram.

Instagram is a social media network created in 2011, that revolutionized the way how people interact, the simplicity of sharing and communicate through photos had attracted more than 400 million people. This platform has the features needed for personal

branding, for example, the possibility of interacting almost instantaneously with a big number of people, the chance of creating adds to reach more people, the capacity to share photos and videos, and the statistical control of the page (Breen & Breen, 2015; Bryman & Bell, 2005).

Potgieter et al. (2017, p. 1) mentioned that "through personal branding, the individual creates the image of who he or she wants to be in everything they do in order to create their unique selling proposition in the marketplace", with the creation of social media the possibility of sharing that image became common in the digital world.

The main research question is: How Instagram Influencers build their Personal Brand on Social Media?

The importance of studying this topic is the lack of formal information about it, usually, the literature about personal branding is available in self-help books or through gurus. The challenge is that "intuitive and informal approaches often predominate, and professional advice is often hype-ridden and rooted in uncorroborated casa study experience" (Shepherd, 2005, p.592).

If, there is a gap of information about personal branding that is a subject that has been talked about since 1997, the same is expected to happen when talking about influencers. Some scholars affirm that there are a few works that explain the previous behavior that leads the individual to become a digital influencer (Mariano et al., 2017).

2. Theoretical backgroung

2.1. Personal branding on social media

Considering the technological world that we live in, where the internet is growing, having a bigger presence in people's lives, and where social media platforms are developing, involving everyone, we can understand the transformations in society that come through that evolution (Fournier & Avery, 2011). With Social Media we can see how different the way of communication and interaction has changed between people (Fotis, 2015). These facts have twisted how the digital world works into a space for consumers where they can express their opinions and feelings about everything to a big audience in seconds (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Online communication is done without boundaries, people can easily share information that results in a new level of consumer-to-consumer, now the feedback is almost instantaneous (Khedher, 2015). Using social media, consumers can share their opinions and thoughts by just creating an online profile, that will be a tool of presentation of themselves to a broad audience (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Labrecque et al. (2011) said that this new reality can be seen as a way for individuals to build a personal brand, they also add that in an online perspective personal brand is related to self-presentation. Through social media people are using their voices, and they are being heard by their audience (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Nowadays social media represents the easiest way to do personal branding (Heath, 2019). Taking into account that social media is composed of seven elements: presence, sharing, conversations, groups, reputation, relationships, and identity and that the main notions of personal branding are: brand identity, brand positioning, and brand image we can see how one fits into the other (Hu et al., 2014).

Therefore, it is understood by taking the elements of personal branding and comparing them with the ones of social networks how that fit together, so brand identity can be present through the online profile that the individual creates as mentioned above, brand positioning can be related to the posture and opinion express on the platform and finally a brand image with the reputation (Lee et al., 2015).

2.2. Instagram influencers

The social media platform Instagram was created in 2010 and is an example of huge popularity, growing rapidly on a global scale over the past few years (Khamis et al., 2017; Pereira, 2017). The photo-sharing network has increased in terms of users. People can share with their followers their photos and videos to which they can add captions, hashtags, tag other accounts and it is even possible to edit photos trough available filters on the app. The platform also allowed a different engagement between celebrities, influencers, and brands with their consumers, with that the relationship has become closer and more active (Woods, 2016).

According to Lindahl and Öhlund, (2013) the simplicity present on Instagram is their biggest advantage, when words are difficult to use, photos replace it by their easiness. Viewers feel more attracted to images, that powerful sensation when transmitted makes them to abstract from the rest.

Having this evolution in terms of communication and sharing information a third-party was born, the digital influencers, this are users of the social networks with a wide audience (followers), that somehow has the power to influence mentalities and affect opinions. This happened because of their social status, their knowledge, their position, or their relationships. These influencers are people that had grown in an online dynamic because of their strong opinions, consistent and valuable content about one or more subjects, by sharing their interests succeeded to attract others with similar preferences and from that start created their public (Bryman & Bell, 2005).

According to Brown and Hayes (2008), there are four types of influencers: (1) Traditional influencers – celebrities and public relations of a certain area, (2) Emerging (digital) influencers – in a specific subject, these are people that are bloggers who accomplish a great audience, (3) Influencers by connection – people with a lot of friends on social media, and (4) Influencers by topic – opinion leaders in a certain subject. On the other hand, for John and Shymala (2019) the existent types of influencers are: (i) Celebrity influencers – the original influencers are celebrities because of their fame and money, they attract more people and therefore influence, (ii) Authority influencers – people who accomplish a big audience through their expertise in a field, (iii) Social Media Sensations – people that naturally give a review about products\ services, (iv) Micro-influencers – users that have a smaller audience but very loyal that like their interesting content, normally specialize in a niche, and (v) Bloggers – being the owner of the space where they post allows them to have a better understanding of what their audience wants or likes.

Is possible to say that Influencers make part of our daily life, they are present in almost every platform of Social Media, however, Instagram is one of the first to come to mind when the matter is mentioned. Instagram as building an all-new dynamic that allows and supports this initiative to happen, the visual engagement, the 400 million users, and the possibility of promoting and sponsored posts to make the content achieve a bigger number of followers all over the world (John & Shyamala, 2019). These scholars defend that "The future is not about marketing to influencers – it's about marketing with them. Treating influencers as an extension of your company – rather than a distribution channel – will result in a more impactful experience for influencers and consumers alike" (p. 125).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The chosen research strategy was through a qualitative study, using open responses, leaving the respondent free to respond based on what they think, this exploratory methodology focus on the subjective character of the topic analyzed, in other words, it tries to understand the behavior of a certain group, considering the particularities and unique experiences of the individuals. The qualitative research is normally used when the purpose of the study is to understand why certain behavior as it happened in this thesis.

This study aims to understand how people build their brand through social media, focusing on important aspects of it, like how they do it, why, what are the benefits. In this research, the focus is on the words because then we can get a better explanation for the aspects asked, what does not fit in a quantitative method (Creswell, 2012). It is suitable to say that qualitative investigations serve this study because the purpose is exploratory (Provdanov & Freitas, 2013).

3.2 Participants

In scientific investigations the sample represents a part of the population of the universe and this one can take two ways probabilistic or no probabilistic (Bryman & Bell, 2005), and therefore, in this particular situation, the sample use as no probabilistic for convenience, therefore, not be representative in terms of population.

The respondents in this study have been chosen by their online status as Digital Influencers, where the universe is represented by the users of the online platform Instagram.

The interview was sent for more than 70 people, but only 10 of them respond to it. The sample consisted of ten people, half of them female and the other half male. 70% were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, 20% between 25 and 30, and 10% between 30 and 40 years old. Half of the interviewees were students and the rest were workers, their areas of expertise vary between civil engineers, personal trainers, and marketing management. 50% had a higher education. All of them were single.

Table 1: Sample description

Name	Gender	Number of followers	Ages	Occupation \ Educational Level	Marital Status
1	Female	63k	25 to 30	Social Media \ Marketing Management / master's degree	Single
2	Female	50k	18 to 25	Student	Single
3	Female	10k	18 to 25	Student	Single
4	Female	61k	18 to 25	Student	Single
5	Female	27k	18 to 25	Student	Single
6	Male	28k	30 to 40	Civil Engineer/master's degree	Single
7	Male	12k	18 to 25	Student	Single
8	Male	15k	25 to 30	Personal Trainer\ Fitness Instructor/bachelor's degree	Single
9	Male	17k	18 to 25	Photography draw / middle school	Single
10	Male	10k	18 to 25	Youtuber / high school	Single

Source: Own.
In order to, keep their identities anonymous, numbers from 1 to 10 were assigned (Table 1).

3.3. Interviews' structure

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research (Heath, 2019). The point of using this, is to have richer and descriptive answers, being such a new a reality the information about it is not that deep, so the need to have more details and perspectives about can help to generate knowledge and fill some gaps.

The interview use was based on the theoretical approach in the previous chapters of the Literature Review was adapted from the study accomplished by Lindahl and Öhlund (2013). This was divided into three parts, therefore having questions corresponding to the characterization of the sample, the motivations for Instagram, and the transparency of your personal brand through the social network.

At the beginning the survey was introduced by the title and by a small description with the objective of the study. Involving a structured interview with 25 questions that 7 of them were close questions and the rest open ones. The study includes 10 interviews conducted in Portuguese and then translated to English by the author of the thesis. All interviews were made in writing by Google forms. It was delivered on the 5th of May through Instagram direct messages and Email and collected o the 15th of May.

This can be considered as an Ethnographic study because it investigates the motivations through observation of a lifestyle of a certain group (digital influencers), to get a better perspective of their points of view, their position towards the subject (Labrecque et al., 2011; Roper & Fill, 2012).

4. Conclusions

This paper aim was to understand the phenomenon of Personal Branding on Social Media, considering the role play by Instagram Influencers. The main research question was:

How Instagram Influencers build their Personal Brand on Social Media?

In order to answer this question, it was built an interview based on the theoretical concepts explored. It was possible to conclude that to build a personal brand on social media, some aspects are important to keep in mind. Influencers revel that the consistency in their publications, as well as their interesting and different content, was what made them grow, another aspect was the truth, authenticity, and genuineness that they transmit to the public that consequently created a loyal audience. Additionally, that loyalty to the profile allows them to become more open and comfortable about showing their personality, believes, and opinions (brand identity). An aspect that was also referred to as a reason for the increase of the digital presence was the interaction with the audience, responding to messages and questions.

In a first phase, the creation of an Instagram profile emerged as a way of being able to share the taste for photography, or a social issue, however as the platform evolved into a job market, the attitude towards it changed, with the possibility of earning money, individuals began to spend more time and attention to it.

As a result of greater investment in the platform, the number of followers has also increased, from the perspective of influencers, this number represents a recognition of their effort and dedication regard to the creation of more appealing content. It is also seen as a competitive advantage when it comes time to be selected for partnerships with brands.

Due to the increase in their online visibility, they claim to pay special attention to the type of content shared, so as not to hurt any kind of susceptibility, values or beliefs, as such an event could have a negative impact on their social and work life.

It is also possible to draw some more simple and objective lessons, normally, women have more followers than men, however through the answers given, it is easy to see that men give richer and more detailed answers than women, highlighting a certain level of knowledge about the area. It is also observed that on average the presence on the platform is around 6 years old, which brings us to the thought that building a strong personal brand takes time.

This research investigated how Influencers make their personal branding on social media, in this particular case, Instagram, in order to have a better perspective I would suggest gathering a greater number of opinions. Were it only here collected 10 responses, which does not allow generalizations.

Also, it must be interesting to understand how influencers are and build their brand on other social platforms. Because if on Instagram people express themselves through photos, for example, in Twitter that happens through words. All online channels have different means of communication.

Additionally, it should be curious to see how recognized Influencers build their physical brand, I am talking about creating a product or service, and match it with their personal brand. It is something that is starting to become common, an example of that is @lilianafilipa_ in Portugal that has 619k followers and that has already created two brands. Comprehend how useful it is to have that online presence when it comes to building an actual brand.

One of the first limitations that can be named is the use of qualitative study that is related to subjectiveness. Another one, is the use of a small sample that does not allow to make general conclusions.

Something that was also noticed was the lack of detail in certain responses to the interview, which goes against the main objective of qualitative research.

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