Influencer marketing: An exploratory study on the motivations of young adults to follow social media influencers

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Abstract   The advent of social media has changed how businesses engage with their audience. Companies today are identifying key opinion leaders (also known as influencers) to promote their products via social media, leveraging the ability of these people to engage target audiences, generate recommendations via electronic word-of-mouth, and influence their followers to purchase the company's products. However, little is known about what motivates people to follow these influencers. To address this gap in the literature, the present exploratory study aims to understand the reasons why young adults follow influencers. The findings contribute to the growing literature on influencer marketing by exploring the consumption of influencer content by young adults and their motivations for following influencers. The findings can help both companies and influencers improve their social media marketing strategy.

KEYWORDS: social electronic word of mouth (eWOM), social influencer marketing, uses and gratifications theory

INTRODUCTION

People often share opinions and information about products within their social networks. Not only does such word–of–mouth (WOM) influence impact on consumer behaviour and perceptions, but its impact is greater than that of traditional marketing communications.[1] Indeed, WOM has been demonstrated to influence awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioural intentions and behaviour.[2] It is therefore unsurprising that both researchers and marketers have long been interested in understanding how to generate WOM in order to enjoy the rewards associated with consumers' recommendations.

Today, new communication technologies are facilitating the diffusion of messages to larger audiences. In particular, social media communication has shaped WOM to

what is known as social eWOM.[3] Thanks to social eWOM, a new phenomenon has arisen — that of influencer marketing. This entails companies identifying key digital opinion leaders (also known as influencers) to promote their products through either straightforward means (eg an advertisement post) or more subtly (eg product placement) on their social media channels to generate social eWOM. In this sense, social eWOM is the medium and influencer marketing the process by which companies leverage the ability of these social media influencers to engage target audiences, generate social eWOM and influence their followers to purchase the company's products.[4]

Despite the growing body of studies investigating the topic of influencer marketing, there is still scant academic literature addressing the topic, with no studies addressing the question of what makes people follow influencers and consume their content. To address this gap in the literature, the present study used an exploratory approach to conduct semi-structured interviews with 29 Mexican young adults in order to understand what drives young adults to follow influencers. In particular, the study explores young adults' perceptions about influencers, their consumption of content created by social media influencers, and the reasons why they follow them and consume their content. The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review and theoretical framework is presented. Secondly, the methodology of the study is explained. Next, findings regarding of the research are addressed. Finally, a discussion section is presented providing future research questions on the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Social electronic word of mouth

Consumers often share and receive opinions and information about products with their social ties; this phenomenon is known widely as word-of-mouth or WOM.[5] WOM includes product-related discussion (eg discussing product attributes), sharing product-related content (eg promotion materials), direct recommendations (eg suggesting someone should visit a restaurant), mere mentions, and reviews of brands or products.[6] Previous literature suggests that WOM can occur both actively (eg providing and/or receiving a recommendation) and passively (eg observing the brands and products that other people are wearing or using).[7]

Previous literature on WOM has addressed people's motivations to talk about products and services. On one hand, it has been found that those who provide information about products and services by talking to other people about them receive various forms of psychological gratification, such as recognition, status or self-verification.[8] For instance, transmitters of WOM may be driven by the following motivations: impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding and persuasion.[9] On the other hand, recipients of WOM will accept and act based on the assumption that the speaker is interested in their wellbeing and has no material interest in the recommendation.[10] However, it has been found that receivers of negative WOM tend to be more cautious than receivers of positive WOM in changing their views about a product or service. [11]

Although traditional, face-to-face WOM is a longstanding phenomenon, thanks to new technologies and communication media (such as the internet and social media sites), it can now be supported in the online context. This new phenomenon is known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and has changed how people buy and make purchase decisions.[12] Researchers have categorised eWOM into the following four classes: specialised, affiliated, social and miscellaneous. Of particular interest for the present research, social eWOM refers to sharing any information related to brands/products among the users of social networking sites.[13]

Previous studies on the topic of social eWOM suggest that it has certain unique characteristics that differentiate it from anonymous eWOM, namely: intended audience, information trustworthiness, source evaluation and interpersonal relationships. First, compared with the anonymous types of eWOM (eg specialised and affiliate), social eWOM is non-public and limited to a restricted social network, meaning that it has a clearly intended audience. Secondly, because social eWOM comes from individuals known to the receiver, the information is considered to be more truthful (ie not fabricated) than when provided by an anonymous source; also, knowing who publishes the information allows interactivity, as with traditional WOM. Thirdly, with social eWOM, recipients can evaluate the source of the information in order to adjust how much value or weight they place on information from that source. Finally, social eWOM serves a purpose other than exchanging brand/product-related information as it can also be used to build one's own identity, to enhance one's social status within the network, and enrich existing social ties and relationships.[14–16] Social eWOM has allowed the rise of influencer marketing, which will be explained in the following section.

Social media influencer marketing

The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) defines influencer marketing as 'identifying key communities and opinion leaders who are likely to talk about products and have the ability to influence the opinions of others'[17]. In particular, the concept of social media influencer marketing has recently entered in the literature, with scholars defining it as a viral marketing approach that uses online celebrities (opinion leaders) to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours through one or more communication formats (eg tweets, posts, blogs) on social media.[18,19]

Influencer marketing is not a completely new concept. Since the 1950s, the literature has identified the importance of so-called opinion leaders in the dissemination of information. Opinion leadership is most often identified with the innovation diffusion model, which states that opinion leaders can remove barriers for the diffusion and adoption of innovations.[20,21] Opinion leaders are those individuals who have the ability and power to influence the opinions, motivations, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of others.[22]

The concept of opinion leadership helps to explain the phenomenon of people passing on information of various kinds through their social networking sites, in other words, social influencer marketing. For many years, celebrities and other influential people have collaborated with brands in order to promote their products. As has been addressed in several studies, today's opinion leaders are ordinary consumers — also known as influencers — who work in the social media context.

An influencer can be defined as a person who has significantly more reach and/or impact through word of mouth in a relevant marketplace than other people.[23] Several aspects that characterise influencers can be identified in the literature. For instance, it is considered that influencers tend to have less social media reach than celebrities (eg actors, singers, athletes). However, because influencers are considered reliable information sources by their followers, they are considered opinion leaders who can influence the opinions and behaviours (eg purchase decisions) of the people who follow them, much like a celebrity.[24,25] Unlike celebrities, social media influencers build their careers and popularity online, become famous among a small group of people (audience) with whom they maintain consistent communication by sharing content from their daily lives within a particular domain of interest (in which they are considered an expert) via all kinds of

social media platforms, but most commonly on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.[26]

As the concepts of WOM and influencer marketing are so interlaced, it is easy to confuse the two concepts with one another. To make it clear, previous literature has noted that when a message is diffused by consumers or influencers, WOM is the medium and influencer marketing the process.[27] As mentioned previously, several studies have shown that consumers tend to place more trust in the information provided by their acquaintances than the information provided by a company/brand.

Literature has suggested that social media influencers share some characteristics, such as that they are perceived as successful, talented, attractive, authentic, trustworthy, and close to their followers, who admire them, associate with them, and aspire to be like them.[28] Yet, it is still unclear what makes some influencers more influential than others. To shed some light on this aspect, the present study explores young adults' perceptions about social media influencers and their consumption of content created by these influencers.

Uses and gratifications theory

The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) is one of the most influential theories in communication research.[29] Since the 1940s, this theory has been used as a theoretical framework to study audiences' motivations to use media and new technologies such as television, radio, the internet and mobile phones.[30] More recently, this theory has been used to address why people use social media. In general, research has found social needs, informational needs, entertainment needs and psychological needs as drivers for social media use.

According to the literature, there are ten key gratifications that people obtain from social media usage, namely: social interaction (using social media to communicate and interact with others); information seeking (self-education and findings information about products, sales, events, etc); passing time (when they are bored or have spare time); entertainment (playing games, listening to music, humour and comic relief); relaxation (as an escape from reality); expression of opinions; communication (gossip, talking friends and others); convenience utility (accessible anytime and anywhere); information sharing (sharing personal information with others); and surveillance (watching what others are doing).[31]

Previous research has employed the UGT to understand the motivations of social media users for viewing user-generated advertising content. Information, entertainment, personal identity and social interaction were found to be the drivers for consuming this type of user-generated content.[32] The UGT has also been used as the basis to explore the motives that drive the use of hashtags on Instagram. Six motivations were found in this context: self-presentation, chronicling, inventiveness, information seeking, venting and etiquette. In particular, influencers are heavy users of hashtags mainly because of self-presentation (self-branding and self-promotion) and status-seeking motives.[33] Other research has used the UGT to examine consumers' motivations to follow brands on social media. The findings of this research show that consumers follow brands because of brand affiliation, opportunity seeking, conversation, entertainment and investigation motives.[34] Furthermore, research has studied adolescents' motivations to consume video content made by internet celebrities (ie influencers) to learn about enterprise aspects such as finance; entertainment, convenience and information were found to be their major reasons for consuming this content.[35]

As previously discussed, UGT has been widely used to understand the gratifications that individuals obtain from media and technology. Because the phenomenon of social media influencer marketing

involves the use of digital media platforms, the present study uses UGT as a basis to understand people's motivations to follow influencers. Although there are many studies into the uses and gratifications that users obtain from social media, and some recent research has explored the motivations for consuming influencers' content, these studies focus on a particular form of content (eg video content or the use of hashtags), hence there is still ample opportunity for research. The present study contributes to the literature by exploring the reasons why young people follow influencers and consume their content in the light of the UGT.

METHODOLOGY

It is known that the state of prior knowledge should be a determinant of the appropriate research methodology. In particular, a qualitative methodology is considered appropriate for studying phenomena that are not well understood.[36] Additionally, according to the criterion of methodological fit, for topics where little is known, qualitative methods such as interviews and observations are appropriate to shed light on the subject.[37] As the topic of influencer marketing is still in a nascent state, the present research adopts a qualitative methodology. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were employed as research method. The interviews were held at the participant's home or at a public location that was convenient and comfortable for the participant and interviewer. The sessions were video-recorded and a transcript for each of the interviews was developed. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2019. Participants were Mexican young adults (15 men and 15 women) aged 20–25 years old, with a medium to high socioeconomic background. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants used social media and followed at least one influencer.[38]

FINDINGS
Perceptions about influencers

The participants in this study described social media influencers as people who: (a) are 'normal' (ie not public celebrities) but have an influence in the lifestyle, preferences, behaviour and purchases of a considerable amount of followers; (b) share their daily lives with their followers; (c) are famous because of the content they post; and (d) collaborate with companies and are paid to promote brands and products. For example, some participants mentioned:

> 'For, me an influencer is a person who influences others to follow their lifestyle, what they do, eat, dress or buy.' (Guillermo, 21).

> 'They are people like us, I feel that they are people very close to us.' (Fatima, 23)

> 'It is a person who, for some reason, has followers and likes in their [social media] networks and companies hire them to promote something or transmit messages.' (Abraham, 21)

Characteristics

The study participants suggested that the influencers they follow have certain characteristics that boost their popularity and encourage people to follow them. The most mentioned characteristics were personality traits such as self-confidence, genuineness, optimism, trustworthiness, charisma, cheerfulness, creativeness, eloquence, extroversion, humour, spontaneity, sociability and accessibility. Additionally, participants mentioned that physical attractiveness, high socioeconomic status, innovativeness, interaction with their followers, regular updates and interesting content were considered determinants of their popularity as well. As some participants mentioned:

> 'Characteristics such as how beautiful they [influencers] are or that they are from a high socioeconomic status.' (Alejandra, 21)

'[The influencer] is a very positive person, with a lot of sparkle, I feel that he transmits charisma to others … he has self-confidence.' (Guillermo, 21)

'Well, because is very charismatic, very creative and speaks eloquently.' (David, 25)

Participants also mentioned some negative aspects of influencers (but not particularly of the ones they follow), such as being fake (pretending to be someone they are not), feeling superior to others, and that some — once they become popular — become more interested in promoting brands (in some cases even when they do not genuinely like the product) and living an extravagant life than producing good content. For example, some participants mentioned:

'Because they reach so many people, sometimes they feel superior to others.' (Guillermo, 21)

'What I don't like of them [influencers] is that they start normal and calm [in terms of amount promotion of brands], but when they become famous and with money their life begins to change, their world only revolves around brands [promoting brands], money and giveaways, so they don't care about the content so much, and they start living an extravagant life.' (María, 20)

Consumption of social media influencer content

All participants reported following influencers on Instagram, but some also followed them on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as well. Interestingly, only one male participant reported consuming influencer content on a daily basis. By contrast, most female participants in this study reported checking for fresh influencer at least once a day.

Types of content

Both female and male participants in this study reported preferring following influencers who share content related to lifestyle (eg when influencers share their daily activities), human development (eg motivational content and tips for living a good life), food (eg cooking tutorials), health (eg exercise routines), social and political issues (eg opinions about approving abortion law, ecology), fashion (eg new trends on how to dress), gossip and sports. Female participants in particular preferred content related to cosmetics (such as makeup tutorials), travelling (tips and recommendations) and interior design (eg new decoration ideas) while some male participants reported consuming content related to cars and music. All participants reported consuming video content that their influencers had posted in their Instagram stories. The participants commented that for content to be appealing, it should be original, updated, humorous, short (under ten minutes), limited to a small amount, and have good production quality (image and sound).

All participants reported consuming promotional content produced by the influencers they follow, such as product/brand recommendations, unboxing videos, product placement and giveaways. However, purchase behaviour among female participants' appeared to be more influenced by influencer recommendations than was the case among male participants, as most of the women reported having made a purchase based on influencer recommendations. By contrast, most of the men reported never having made a purchase following an influencer recommendation. Interestingly, participants reported enjoying promotional content when the promoted products/brands related to their interests, when such content was infrequent, and more importantly, when the recommendations appeared to be genuine. Some participants even reported unfollowing those influencers they perceived not to be making genuine recommendations:

'I have unfollowed influencers because they seemed fake when promoting a product, not as if they really liked the product.' (Juan, 25)

Motivations to follow social media influencers

Six motivations to follow social media influencers were identified: information, inspiration, communication, entertainment and surveillance. These motivations will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Information

Most participants in this study mentioned that one of the reasons for following influencers is because they share information about relevant and interesting topics, such as new fashion trends, new products in the marketplace, recommendations of products and places, and useful ideas for their daily lives (eg makeup tutorials, fashion tips, etc). As commented by some participants:

'I like influencers because I can get to know many brands that I would not have known if it weren't for them … because I do not follow brand accounts they [influencers] help me know a lot of what is trendy right now, in fashion or whatever is on the market right now.' (Valeria, 21)

'I like that they give you so many ideas of everything, how to dress, where to eat, where to have breakfast, where to exercise, where to do your nails and everything.' (Melissa, 20)

'… they share things that can help you or to be informed, to be aware of what is happening in your city and in other countries.' (Fernando, 20)

Inspiration

All participants reported admiring some aspect of the influencers they follow and most of them suggested that it is important for influencers to share content that can make a positive impact on society. Interestingly, most participants mentioned that they like to follow influencers who create content that is inspiring and motivating with respect to some aspect of their lives. For example, some participants mentioned:

'He [the influencer] is a person who motivates you to go to the gym, well not only to the gym … somehow he inspires you, he motivates you to do sports, read, go to the gym, whatever, but to be active.' (Fausto, 21)

'… she [the influencer] talks about self love and self-esteem, I really like the content she gives to people because it has an impact on society, I feel that people listen to it and they start thinking that is true, everyone has their own value and you have to be aware of that.' (Francia, 21)

'For example, the publications of this person [the influencer] talk about his failures, of what he is been through to get where he is right now, maybe he is not the most successful person in the world, but he shares his failures without fear … so that people realise that everyone fails but that knowing how to get up is very important.' (Mauricio, 22)

Communication

Many participants mentioned that they began to follow some influencers because their friends, family or other acquaintances who followed those influencers would talk about their content, so they wanted to be part of those conversations too. For example, in the words of one participant:

'I did not used to follow anyone because I considered it boring and unnecessary, but it [content shared by influencers] becomes a topic of conversation and you like to be included in what others talk about, so I decided to follow them … because I wanted to be part of the conversation of my friends and know what they are talking about' (Francia, 21).

Entertainment

Some participants reported following influencers to pass time and entertain themselves with humorous content. Participants commented:

'I follow them just to pass time, they do a lot of jokes … just to have fun.' (Leonardo, 20)

'I like to follow them because it is entertaining … sometimes I am bored and I watch them [influencer content].' (Zulmara, 20)

'I follow her because she is very entertaining and funny.' (Daniela, 20)

Surveillance

Some participants reported following influencers in order to see how they live their daily lives. These participants like to stay abreast of what their influencers do and where they go. For some participants, this helps them to feel like they are part of their influencers' lives. The following comments were typical:

'To follow their adventures and see how they live their lives.' (Guillermo, 21)

'Because they share their lifestyle, what they do, where they go, what they eat is basically that, if they go to an event.' (Fatima, 23)

'I like that they make you feel part of their daily life … that inclusion is what several people are looking for.' (Paulina, 22)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has explored why young adults follow influencers and consume their content. The empirical findings reveal five motivations: information, inspiration, communication, entertainment and surveillance. In particular, it was interesting to find the inspiration motivation, as this has not been reported in previous literature on uses and gratifications.

In line with similar studies of social media influencers,[39–41] the present study found that participants consider influencers to be normal people (rather than celebrities) who are followed by others; that their popularity comes from sharing content; and that they collaborate with brands. Previous literature has identified common characteristics shared by influencers;[42] the present study similarly identifies common characteristics among followers.

Furthermore, as all participants have consumed social eWOM content created by the influencers they follow, the genuineness of this content was found to be particularly important for participants.

Because of its exploratory nature, this research has some limitations. For example, due to the research and sampling methods employed in this study, it not possible generalise the findings. The motivations found in this study, however, could be used as a starting point for more exploratory research and quantitative studies with people with different demographic characteristics. Additionally, the participants in this research mentioned some influencer characteristics that encourage them to follow and that they consider help the influencers to become popular. Because this study was exploratory, however, it is impossible to confirm the extent to which these characteristics contribute to influencers' popularity. Thus, future research could measure these (and others) characteristics of both successful and unsuccessful social media influencers to identify which characteristics are most responsible for the influencer's level of success. Similarly, future quantitative studies could measure which of the motivations identified in this study are more important for determining the likelihood of someone following an influencer. The findings suggest that men are less likely than women to be influenced by social eWOM from influencers; future quantitative research could address this issue.

This research has implications for companies and influencers as it sheds light on the characteristics of influencers that this particular segment likes; this could help companies to improve their selection of social media influencers to promote a product. The findings regarding the importance of different content characteristics and the motivations identified can help influencers to create better content. For example, the participants in this study follow their influencers because they create

content that is inspiring and motivating with respect to some aspect of their lives; to respond to this, influencers might consider integrating more inspirational content, while companies could focus their influencer marketing campaigns on an inspirational theme. In addition, as mentioned by some participants, a perceived lack of sincerity in influencer-generated content can be a relevant factor in the decision to unfollow the influencer. Unlike celebrities, most influencers do not have a team of experts to help them 'act' in their promotional content; for this reason, influencers should consider 'keeping it real' by promoting only those brands and products that they genuinely like.

Finally, this research is useful for academics and practitioners as it shows that UGT can be used to help explain what motivates people to follow influencers and consume their content and not limit the use of this theory to media platforms. In other words, the UGT is relevant and could be given more prominence in social media research and influencer marketing.

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