

To clarify the typification of influencers:
A review of the literature

ABSTRACT

Current sources of information have diversified due to the ease with which it is shared. The emergence of the figure of the influencer and its various forms, in addition to the pervasiveness of the Internet and the availability to access information for consumers, have not yet been detailed as thoroughly as they should, and their relevance in having an impact in the decision-making process of current and potential consumers can no longer be overlooked. This paper offers a classification of influencers considering the criteria that reference group theory has proposed as relevant in identifying influencing actors, as well as the concept of opinion leader and their main characteristics, in addition to the concept of market maven, who has been recognized as reference in the decision making process for the consumer.

The importance of identifying and understanding the diversity of influencer profiles that currently exist lies in the relationships that can be formed between influencers and organizations in their effort to reach their intended customers. Influencers and their prominence among regular individuals as well as their reputation, professional experience or affinity with their audience, among other characteristics, offer a perception of closeness with individuals that are interested in the same topic for which the influencer is known, and thus take their opinion into consideration when making a decision towards their posture in said topic, about a brand or a specific product or service for which the influencer has presented their stance.

Keywords: opinion leader, social networks, influencers

INTRODUCTION

The way people communicate with each other has significantly changed since the appearance of the Internet. In 2016, an estimated 3.6 billion users accessed the Internet on a daily basis (InternetLiveStats.com, 2017), allowing people from distinct parts of the world to exchange information, ideas, and opinions about almost every possible topic without the restrictions and boundaries that had previously existed. This freedom to communicate has allowed marketing efforts on behalf of organizations to be more focused and targeted, through the identification and selection of a specific audience which is considered to be interested in the product or service that is to be advertised (reference). But how exactly are these efforts to be designed? How are audiences identified? What are the proper channels or ideal spokespeople to reach said audiences?

Previous efforts to clarify those questions have been the focus of research related to reference groups as well as opinion leaders, but the rapidly changing context in which this information exchange is happening merits an update on the specific mechanisms that are used. The emergence of concepts such as viral marketing and social networks that define the context in which this exchange is performed is also evolving at such a fast pace that an update to better understand how these changes impact marketing strategies and what firms can do to improve and profit from these advancements is both justified and indispensable.

Building on previously mentioned literature, the purpose of this paper will be on defining the types of influencers, due to their relevance and use in current marketing strategies. These individuals have a central role in the exchange of information and opinions about products and services which an audience, identified as followers, consider to be relevant. Their potential degree of influence to said audience can have a direct impact in the performance of a brand and thus the association of the organization with influencer should be done considering the purpose and specific needs related to this joining of efforts.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Current environment

Social networking sites are defined as websites where users exchange knowledge on their preferred topics, can offer their opinion on products or services and communicate among each other (Bolotaeva & Cata, 2010), and also allows individuals to participate in the creation of content (Hensel & Deis, 2010). Because people find that social networks in which they participate to be a valid forum to raise questions about topics of their interest, and often choosing this alternative over search engines, this presents an undisputable argument in favor of understanding why people perceive social networks to offer the answers they are looking for (Morris, Teevan, & Panovich, 2010). Factors, such as type of information, trust, response time, effort, personalization, as well as creation of social awareness and the fact that social networking sites are considered to be fun, are among the criteria used for people to decide in favor of using social networking sites for such information exchange.

Previous research on social networks has explored topics such as how the participation in social networks can exert an influence in online purchase decisions (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013) and how culture should be factored in in the development of marketing strategies (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011), the dynamics among members (Walther & Bunz, 2005), as a tool to improve marketing efforts (Hensel & Deis, 2010), how users respond to advertising efforts in social networks (Zeng, Huang, & Dou, 2009) and, more importantly, to identify who the most relevant participants in this information exchange are (Subramani & Rajagopalan,

2003) (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010) (Kiss & Bichler, 2008) (Li, Lin, & Lai, 2010) (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

If we are to understand how specific individuals participating in social networks acquire relevance, we have to first explore the concept of reference groups, and how any individual selects which groups he considers to meet the criteria for them to exert an opinion on specific topics which are of their interest. The concept of reference group can be traced back to Kuhn (1964), who offered the main criteria relevant to the individual in order to determine their belonging to a group, which is rooted in the concept of psychological identification by the individual.

Previous research on reference groups have provided arguments in favor of allowing consumers to identify themselves with a group via the use of a specific brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Childers and Rao (1992) identified two types of reference groups, normative and comparative referents, where the first group includes parents and teachers, who interact directly with the individual to provide them with norms and values. Comparative referents on the other hand, are to provide the individual with an aspiration, and considers the fact that the individual does not have a direct interaction with them.

Out of reference groups one can identify influential referents, in this case members with high credibility, such as are individuals with assumed expertise, and who provide consumers who lack information with the criteria needed for them to maintain their affiliation to said reference group (Childers & Rao, 1992). Examples of influential referents that are considered to belong to the type of comparative referents, are celebrities, who according to Thomson (2006) allow consumers to develop an attachment. But why are these attachments relevant?

Marketing literature has identified three salient influential consumers, namely the innovator, the opinion leader, and the market maven (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005). The concept of market maven was introduced by Feick and Price (1987), who focused on the role an individual has in the transmission of information about the market, and emphasize that these individuals do not necessarily have experience or product involvement, which means that they are not specifically users of said products. Among the main characteristics displayed by market mavens are awareness of new products, information seeking behavior in various sources, and more specifically, enjoyment of shopping activities, and attention to advertising as well as use of coupons.

Early exploration of the concept of opinion leader focused on determining their defining traits, such as is the work of Chan and Misra (1990), who based on previous work which had already identified the importance of possessing product-related knowledge, product familiarity, a preference for risk-involving situations, and media exposure, contributed with the concept of public individuation to the list of qualities that an opinion leader possessed.

One of the main contrasting points in the behavior of market mavens in comparison to opinion leaders is that the former acquire information about the general marketplace and diffuse that information, whereas the latter tends to focus on acquiring information on a specific type of product class, which limits their general knowledge (Feick & Price, 1987). These concepts encompass the characteristics that are currently seen in the various figures of influencers.

Previous efforts to offer a typology of social influencers are that of Wiedmann, Hennings, and Langner (2007), who developed a conceptual model proposing dimensions that feed specific forms of capital that help distinguish influencers from non-influencers, but their purpose was not to offer a detailed typology of influencers or how to identify and select which is best appropriate to associate with. The Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) offered a typology

and a more detailed account of the kinds of influencers that are to be found, and its focus was on providing practitioners with metrics and the relevant criteria to develop influencer marketing programs (Bertelsmann Group, 2013).

Methodology

In addition to the typology offered by WOMMA, a representative sample of 15 published online articles was selected, using the keyword “types of influencers”. The articles selected offer each a typology where distinctive qualities for each proposed profile of influencer are highlighted and serve as discriminating factors. Qualitative content analysis was performed on said articles to identify the proposed categories in each publication, as well as to determine whether there is a current homologation of the criteria used to identify them. This methodology is defined by Hsieh and Shannon as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The selection of this method is congruent with the purpose of this paper, which as was previously stated, is to define the types of influencers that have been already identified by practitioners in an effort to clarify their behavior and association potential with an organization, based on the purpose of marketing campaigns.

Results

The average types proposed by these publications is 5, ranging from 3 up to 10 different categories. The proposed typification attempts to unify the criteria used in the published articles as well as the classification proposed by WOMMA, since its main benefit was identifying and offering clarity to a figure that emerged in response to the fast-evolving marketplace. It is worth noting, that among the classifications offered in all the reviewed sources, only one took into consideration the specific social media platform in which the influencer was active. All other articles focused rather on their purpose or how they were seen by their audience, and thus, their name, such as the “thought leader”, the “forum junkies”, or the “industry analyst”. The proposed classification takes previous criteria into consideration, with the sole purpose of unifying the categories and profiles of influencers that have been currently identified by practitioners. The classification then includes the following types of influencers, which will be detailed further: opinion leader, expert, consumer, social media luminary, celebrities, trendsetters, bloggers and potential influencers.

The first distinction among them is their source of influence, which is whether the information about their main topic of knowledge is due to their profession or if it is gathered because of a personal interest in it. For the purposes of this classification, opinion leaders and experts tend to source their information and gain attention from their audience due to their profession, which encompasses journalists, CEO’s or professional in their field of work; consumers, social media luminaries, celebrities, trendsetters, bloggers and potential influencers tend to source and gather reputation due to their own personal interests, as is the case with consumers, who decide which brands to use and talk about with their networks; social media luminaries, who due to the pervasiveness and ease of access to information can surge because of the speed with which information is shared via the Internet and become instant viral sensations; celebrities, who are recognized because of their professional field which is seen as their passion; this is similar to the case of trendsetters, who tend to identify new products or services congruent with their personal interests, and bloggers, who develop a following that is interested in the topics that they publish about. The final category, potential influencers, encompasses all individuals who do not have a massive follower base but are active in their networks and tend to

share information with their contacts, thus not having an extensive reach but still influencing their networks.

How the influencer obtains their persuasive capacity depends on their specific profile, and as such, opinion leaders rely on their reputation, which allows them to voice their opinion towards their audience and be taken into consideration; on the other hand, experts are generally recognized due to their position on the organizational hierarchy, and that is what gives them their status. Social Media luminaries depend on the quality and content of their publications, this in stark contrast with celebrities who rely mainly on their personality and have much more freedom in the content that they publish. Trendsetters have a need to set themselves apart from the crowd towards they appeal, thus making the information that they publish to be as novel as possible. When evaluating bloggers, their audience considers that their opinion is perceived to be as unbiased possible, which confers them with the authority to be taken into consideration when deciding on a position towards the specific topic for which the blogger is known. Finally, potential influencers should be regarded as trustworthy in order to be effective in their influencing capabilities.

Finally, one of the main indicators of the potential influence power for an influencer is the size of their audience, also known as followers. Depending on the number of followers, influencers are to be classified as mega-influencers, who have a following base of more than 1 million users; macro-influencers, with 10,000 and up to 1 million users, and micro-influencers, who tend to oscillate between 500 and up to 10,000 followers. In addition to the size of their follower base, is the engagement that their posts generate, with mega-influencers driving between a 2% to 5% engagement; macro-influencers generate between 5% to 25% engagement, and micro-influencers with a 25% to 50% engagement per post, which makes them very attractive to organizations.

The following table offers a summary of the criteria identified as relevant to discriminate among the various types of influencers that are currently to be found as active actors and considered crucial in the decision-making process for consumers. This overview will allow to easily identify the profile of the influencer and their main characteristics as well as the potential congruence with the organizations' influencer marketing programs.

Table 1
Main Characteristics of Influencers

Profile Criteria	Opinion leader	Expert	Consumer	Social Media luminary	Celebrities	Trendsetters	Blogger	Potential influencers
Origin of influence	Profession	Profession	Profession	Personal interest	Personal interest	Personal interest	Personal interest	Personal interest
Main source of influence	Reputation	Organizational position	Experience	Content quality	Personality	First-hand knowledge	Unbiased opinion	Trust
Number of followers	10,000 – 1 million	10,000 – 1 million	500 – 10,000	More than 1 million	More than 1 million	10,000 – 1 million	10,000 – 1 million	500 – 10,000
Engagement per post	5% - 25%	5% - 25%	25% - 50%	2% - 5%	2% - 5%	5% - 25%	5% - 25%	25% - 50%
Examples	Activists Analysts Journalists Networkers Thought leaders	Businessmen CEO Executives Insiders	Advocates Employees Fans Users	Instagrammers Social Media mavens Viners Youtubers	Actors Athletes	Platform-specific sensations Rockstars Beauty and fashion	Blog writers	Sharer Summertime player

FINAL COMMENTS

The purpose of this paper was to review current criteria used for the classification of influencers based on how they are currently perceived by practitioners. The relevance of this effort lies in the unification of criteria that has been identified as relevant by practitioners but has up until now not been the focus of scientific consideration. The figure of the influencer is pervasive and the quality, amount and detail of information that they share with their audience should be of the utmost relevance to the organization, since their power to sway the consumer into a decision has been found to be quite strong: an astounding 92% of people have stated to trust the opinions of influencers in comparison to the brand (Gryffin Media, 2017).

Further research should focus on evaluating the level of impact that each of these previously identified factors exert on the consumer, to determine the relevance that each factor holds and more efficiently select the influencer most compatible to the organization and the intended purpose of their relationship. Also, the identification of further discriminating factors and their relevance will aid in this endeavor, such as the breadth of focus of the specific topic for which the influencer is known, or whether there is an evidence of sponsorship on behalf of a specific brand and how the consumer takes this into consideration when evaluating the trustworthiness or bias that the influencer is subject of.

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APPENDIX

Table 2

Reviewed Articles

Title	Date of publication	Number of categories	URL
The 5 types of influencers on the web	Jul.15/2010	5	https://smallbiztrends.com/2010/07/the-5-types-of-influencers-on-the-web.html
Five types of social media influencers	Feb.18/2012	5	http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/five-types-social-media-influencers
WOMMA influencer guidebook 2013	2013	5	https://es.slideshare.net/svenmulfinger/womma-influencer-guidebook-2013-pdf
5 types of influencers B2B marketers need to engage now	Jun.4/2014	5	https://leadtail.com/b2b-influencer-marketing/5-types-influencers-b2b/
The 7 types of social media influencers	Jul.26/2015	7	http://www.audiencebloom.com/the-7-types-of-social-media-influencers/
Types of social media influencers	Aug.10/2015	4	http://www.manobyte.com/types-of-social-media-influencers
The 10 types of online influencers [infographic]	Aug.13/2015	10	http://www.smartinsights.com/online-pr/online-pr-outreach/types-of-influencers/
3 types of influencers your brand needs	Sep.26/2015	3	https://www.sideqik.com/influencer-marketing/3-types-influencers-brand-needs
The 5 types of social influencers you must know	Oct.13/2015	5	http://mediakix.com/2015/10/social-influencers-you-must-know/#gs.D8cb8qg
Identifying the three major types of influencers	Jan.5/2016	3	https://everwall.com/blog/identifying-the-three-major-types-of-influencers/
Seven types of influencers and why they're important	Apr.25/2016	7	https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2016/04/25/seven-types-of-influencers-and-why-theyre-important/#d77a0e246840
The three types of influencers all marketers should know [infographic]	Oct.18/2016	7	http://www.mavrck.co/the-three-types-of-influencers-all-marketers-should-know-infographic/
Meet the five types of influencers	Feb.14/2017	6	http://dureeandcompany.com/meet-the-five-types-of-influencers/

5 types of brand influencers: which one is right for you?	Feb.17/2017	5	http://www.gryffin.com/5-types-brand-influencers-one-right
5 different types of influencers decoded	Abr.21/2017	5	https://www.socialseeder.com/blog/5-different-types-of-influencers-decoded/
4 types of digital influencers and how to connect with them	N/A	4	http://quickbooks.intuit.com/r/marketing/4-types-of-digital-influencers-and-how-to-connect-with-them/
