The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Consumer Behavior in Digital Marketing

Isidora Todorov

Faculty of Organizational Sciences
University of Belgrade
Belgrade, Serbia
it20223506@student.fon.bg.ac.rs

Katarina Lazarević

Faculty of Organizational Sciences
University of Belgrade
Belgrade, Serbia
kl20223515@student.fon.bg.ac.rs

Mila Cvetković

Faculty of Organizational Sciences
University of Belgrade
Belgrade, Serbia
mc20223508@student.fon.bg.ac.rs

Abstract—**This paper presents key insights about the impact and effects of social media influencers on consumer behaviour. According to researched studies, social media influencers impact consumer behaviour in emotional and cognitive context, also impacting their decisions of purchasing and consuming products. An examination of positive and negative effects on consumer psychology impacted by influencers is also provided in order to fully understand consequences of influencer type digital marketing.**

Keywords - influencers, social media, consumer behavior, psychology, digital marketing

I. INTRODUCTION

The influence of social media has impacted various fields - businesses, marketing strategies, individuals and social life as a whole. Interaction between people has moved from the offline to the online world, and this transition has influenced individual's perception of interaction with others, especially through the appearance of influencers. Influencers can be celebrities, sportists, fashion and lifestyle gurus, or really any individual who has gained a larger following on social media platforms. They captivate user's attention through their curated content, charisma and luxurious lifestyles. By sharing parts and highlights of their exciting lifestyle through social media, they pose themselves as prominent social references for self-comparison among individuals. This can create a distorted perception of reality, beauty standards and expectations for individuals about their lifestyle and a constant subconscious need for comparison.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

A. Influencers as Social References for Self-Comparison

Social comparison theory, introduced by Festinger in 1954, proposes that individuals compare themselves to others in order to evaluate their own capabilities, values and beliefs. More precisely, the theory proposes the idea of upward comparison, which explains the need of individuals to create comparison between themselves and those who are seemingly more successful or superior. It is common that influencers represent those higher ideals and standards which are generally wanted by the majority of society and individuals and thus cause the need for upward comparison. Some of the effects that are generated by this include lower self-esteem between individuals and a general lower perception of one's self-worth.

Some studies have found that individuals who follow fitness influencers on social media tend to engage in upward comparison by comparing their bodies, fitness levels, and health behaviors to those of influencers (Fardouly et al., 2018). This can result in negative outcomes, such as decreased body satisfaction and increased body dissatisfaction, as individuals may feel inadequate or inferior compared to the seemingly perfect bodies of influencers. Similarly, studies have shown that individuals who follow fashion or beauty influencers may engage in upward comparison regarding their physical appearances, fashion sense, and lifestyle choices (Perloff, 2014). This can lead to increased materialism, self-objectification, and a preoccupation with appearance, as individuals strive to emulate the idealized lifestyles portrayed by influencers.

In addition to the psychological implications, influencers as social references for self-comparison also have social consequences. As more time passes influencers also gain broader knowledge from experience on how to produce even more attention captivating content, which is carefully aimed at their target audience and serves them in creating a desired image of themselves (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). When being presented with this kind of quality content, individuals start to compare it with their own and become super aware of their own flaws, which leads to the constant race of reaching proposed standards by influencers. This can also change what individuals used to consider as valuable or necessary in life (Khamis et al., 2017).

It is important to note that the phenomenon of influencers as social references for self-comparison is not inherently negative. As opposed to upward comparison mentioned earlier, there is also a term known as downward comparison, which happens when individuals compare their lifestyles to the ones they consider lower on the ladder of suc-

cess (Wills, 1981). Some of the positive effects influencer culture can have on the psychology of individuals are an increase in motivation for gaining a better life and inspiration for incorporating positive changes in life.

B. Emotional Engagement With Influencers And Its Impact On Consumer Behavior

Emotional engagement with influencers has significant psychological effects on consumer behavior. Emotional engagement with influencers refers to the emotional connection that individuals develop with influencers, often triggered by their relatability, authenticity, and perceived similarity to the followers (Buil et al., 2019; Phua et al., 2017). Influencers can inspire, entertain, motivate, or even create a sense of emotional attachment among their followers. This emotional engagement can profoundly influence the psychology of consumers, leading to various outcomes in terms of consumer behavior.

This kind of emotional engagement has immense potential in shaping consumer behavior, especially their intentions on buying products promoted by influencers. By consuming daily media content by influencers, individuals gain a stronger emotional connection with them, which is a good surface for building trust (Biswas et al., 2020; Khamis et al., 2017). The fast dynamic of social media platforms also provides a captivating space for consumers' attention, leading to the increase of total time spent in engagement with influencers. Consequences of this can include an even bigger influence on the behavior of users and also create a sense of codependency between consumers and social media figures.

Moreover, emotional engagement with influencers can also shape consumers' brand perceptions and loyalty. Emotional attachment to influencers can lead to a transfer of emotions and attitudes from the influencer to the endorsed brand (Hwang et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2019). Consumers may develop positive attitudes toward the brand and perceive it as more credible and trustworthy due to their emotional connection with the influencer. This can ultimately result in increased brand loyalty and advocacy, as consumers feel a sense of loyalty and identification with both the influencer and the endorsed brand.

It is also important to consider that emotional engagement with influencers can have various negative psychological effects. Influencers often portray luxurious lifestyles, unattainable beauty standards, or unrealistic ideals, which can trigger envy, social comparison, and feelings of inadequacy among their followers (Perloff, 2014; Tukachinsky et al., 2018). One of the known psychological impacts on consumer behavior caused by this is increased impulsivity and decision making regarding making purchases in order to compensate for the feelings of being less valued in comparison to prominent influencers.

C. Cognitive Processing Of Influencer Content And

Its Effects On Consumer Psychology

Cognitive processing of influencer content involves various cognitive processes, including attention, perception, comprehension, and interpretation. Influencer content is often visually and verbally stimulating, capturing consumers' attention and influencing their perception of the content (Schouten et al., 2020). Influencers use persuasive techniques, such as storytelling, humor, and emotional appeals, to engage consumers and shape their perceptions of the endorsed products or services (De Veirman et al., 2019).

In addition to that, a common communication technique used by influencers is incorporating a style of language which is relatable to broad audiences and also a practice of sharing more personal and vulnerable stories (Jin et al., 2019). The cognitive effects this has on individuals is their perception of influencers as of people who are actually close to them, in a way similar with the relationship they may have with friends or even family. Some of the effects also include a shorter attention span, which is expected due to high dopamine levels gained from dynamic content.

III. SOCIAL AND SOCIETAL IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

A. Origination Of Parasocial Relation And Its Contemporary Manifestation

The term parasocial relationship was first used by Horton and Wohl (1956). Horton and Wohl remark on the profound impact that the mass media has on viewers: "One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media - radio, television, and the movies - is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer". A relationship can be defined as a parasocial one when there is a one-sided connection made: meaningful to the viewer, but the performer is usually not even aware of the connection's existence. An important thing to remember is that sociologists and psychologists noticed these patterns and defined them within their own terms back then in 60's, when people were given their first opportunities ever to interact with celebrities and personas interesting and significant to them through different media forms - even though that the interactions and relationships were one-sided. People got to get insights into performers' lives for the first time, read about their everyday habits, learn about their personal relationships and form their own opinions about the mentioned things and much more. Of course, as some time passed by, the public could occasionally hear performers' own statements in press and television interviews, but the overall public impression was still mostly affected by one-sided contents - there were not enough opportunities for common people to interact with the stars, so the public did what they thought they had to do - come up with their own conclusions.

Access to the Internet provided significant amount of quality content to anyone interested in stars' work and life - suddenly people could get any wanted article or video in just a couple of seconds, along with contributing to discussions on newly formed forums, where anyone from anywhere in the world could find pieces of information and give some other back to the community. People talked about celebrities' bags, cars, diets and marriages, deciding what's exciting, important and appropriate, what's "in" and what's "out". The appearance of social media and stars' personal accounts changed everything - people were no longer restricted to billboards and music videos, and not even to the commercials and interviews - they could see their favorite people in their own homes, eating some chips or using their new makeup, taking their dog on a walk in the neighborhood, having fun at a certain bar with a certain cocktail in their hand while listening to a certain artist. It is now easier than ever to connect with people we want in ways more personal than ever before, because that's what social media grants us.

B. The Roles Of Source Credibility And Fairness In Parasocial Relationships And Product Interest

Nowadays not only performers, but anyone interesting enough to the public can use the unique interactivity of social media to build strong relationships with followers. Such relationships, which carry great marketing potential, appeal to corporations and brands. The results of an online survey conducted by Shupei Yuan and Chen Lou in 2020 showed that followers' perceived attractiveness of influencers, similarity to influencers, procedural fairness, and interpersonal fairness of their interactions with influencers are positively related to the strength of their parasocial relationship with influencers, which further mediates the effect of the aforementioned factors on followers' interests in influencer-promoted products. The findings of mentioned study explicate the mechanism through which influencers foster relationships with followers and also provide practitioners with insights on orchestrating strategic influencer campaigns, implicating that a lot of parasocial relationships are not formed organically, but rather strategically. That's where ethical considerations come to the surface - transparency of influencer's advertising decisions, actions and strategies, credibility of the information provided, fairness of the communication conducted, presence of any form of manipulation and even exploitation of the followers.

It is a common occurrence that influencers choose to advertise, mostly subtly, different products and services presenting them as a part of their everyday life, even though they most certainly know they are deceiving their followers who are trusting them based on formed parasocial relationships, most probably through the previous months or years. In some cases the only damage is misuse of given trust and not giving followers what they truly want - a real connection through sharing sincere stories, advice, confessions and experiences. Other cases may also include advertising risky advice about health (diets, medi-cines), non-examined products (make up, supplements) or low quality services (cosmetic treatments or even surgeries) in order to earn material resources (money, free products and services) by promoting suspicious or even illegal brands. However, social media also offers the opportunity of selecting out relevant influencers with some help from followers themselves - they can like, comment, block or even report the content to the social media managing teams. Followers do collect, share their experiences and they do decide together if the brands that influencer advertises are relevant or not, making it hard for the influencer to keep their reputation on social media once they choose to purposefully manipulate their followers.

C. Trans-Parasocial Relation In Influencer Advertising And Its Implications

Chen Lou (2022) goes further and explains that afforded by new digital technologies consumer interactions are breaking the basic assumptions about the long-held conventional concept of parasocial relations. The ever-evolving human interactions, along with the influencer-follower relation, needed to be reassessed in order to gain a better understanding. His current analysis recommends an updated notion and theorization - a trans-parasocial relation - to capture a collectively reciprocal, (a)synchronously interactive, and co-created relation between influencers and their captive followers. Unlike parasocial relations, the trans-parasocial ones rely on social media and their highly interactive features to enable easier community forming and large scale effects ("collectively reciprocal"), easier addressing the followers - even though it is sporadic and not always personal ("(a)synchronously interactive") and co-creating of content and strategies (sharing and re-sharing, live videos, other ways of including the followers into the advertising). This trans-parasocial relation concept offers a foundation on which new communicative and advertising theories can be developed to explicate new forms of social interactions and consumer behavior, claims Chen Lou (2022). Based on his study, modern-day followers indicate mostly benign attitudes toward influencer-sponsored posts, interpret influencers' sponsorship disclosures as genuine and transparent, and internalize disclosure actions as inspiring and admirable - unlike parasocial relationships where advertising could easily be seen as a persuasive, repellent act.

The study further identifies and elucidates several psychological mechanisms that account for followers' overall appreciation of influencer-sponsored posts: positive bias, verification by cross-validation, and inspirational internalization. When it comes to information whose negative aspect carries no threat, people may tend to display a "positivity bias." Such a processing style may be explained by human tendency to avoid harmful stimuli and approach beneficial stimuli, and it reflects the flexibility of humans' cognitive processing (Smith et al., 2006; Rothermund et al., 2008). In the case of a built relationship with an influencer, along with being in a meaningful community and knowing

the perks of working, socializing and simply being active on social media, people feel less in danger than before - thus, focusing more on favorable or potentially beneficial information. Verification by cross-validation addresses the existence of mentioned meaning communities which are easier to form and are developing greater than ever, giving their members the opportunity to discuss openly and in real time, collect their experiences and come to a certain conclusion about an influencer that's the most accurate - or at least the most sincere - from the beginning of existence of influencer-follower relationships. Finally, inspirational internalization is happening when the influencer becomes approachable, honest, familiar and relatable to the follower, so the follower can internalize the influencer's experience, talents and success as their own, making it easier for the influencer to create likable and influential content.

IV. INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

A. The Role Of Influencers In Raising Awareness About Products/Services

In this digital era influencers are the one of the most important roles in introducing new products and services on the market. Influencers can increase curiosity among their followers especially if they are already famous. A study by Influencer Marketing Hub (2019) found that 67% of marketers believe that influencer marketing campaigns help them reach a more targeted audience. A report by Nielsen (2015) found that most consumers trust recommendations from individuals, even if they don't know them personally, indicating the significant impact that influencers can have on consumer behavior.

One of the most problematic steps in increasing followers is attracting their attention and trust. But once they come to that stage, creating relatable content becomes a lot easier and more specific.

The advent of social media has changed the way consumers engage with brands and products. Influencers are a connecting link between brands and target audience. According to the theory of opinion leadership, opinion leaders are individuals who are knowledgeable about a particular product or service and are willing to share their opinions with others (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Consistently sharing content with their loyal public will strengthen the relationship and their opinions and recommendations will have more impact on their followers. This makes them an ideal partner for brands looking to raise awareness about their products/services.

B. Influence Of Influencers On Consumer Intentions, Such As Purchase Intention And Brand Loyalty

Influencers can shape consumer attitudes towards a product or service through their endorsements. Showing an honest opinion and realistic picture can help reach more followers and the public. Also that kind of audience is long term and will show more interest in such work and they can become more credible on this big market. A study by AdWeek (2016) found that 61% of consumers read online reviews before making a purchase decision. Influencer endorsements can, therefore, influence consumer attitudes towards a product, which can ultimately impact their purchase decisions.

Influencers can influence consumer intentions, such as purchase intention and brand loyalty, through their social media content. Providing a personal endorsement, influencers job is raising awareness and generating interest among their followers.

They are a popular marketing tool for brands in order to easily reach their target audience, because choosing the right person for presenting a product/service is, nowadays, the most important thing to do when it comes to making cooperation with people whose job is to promote products. About consumers' brand loyalty, a study by Takumi found that 60% of respondents are more likely to remain loyal to a brand that they discovered through an influencer (Takumi, 2019), so that is another proof that the relationship between those two is really strong.

The type of influencer can also impact their influence on consumer intentions. Micro-influencers, who have a smaller but more engaged following, have been found to have a higher level of influence on consumer behavior compared to macro-influencers and the reason for that is people recognize when someone's intentions are sincere and not just for profit. Macro-influencers have a larger but less engaged following (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021) and that on the other side is also good because people have more safety and trust when the person is followed by many. This suggests that brands should consider partnering with micro-influencers to maximize the impact of influencer marketing on consumer intentions.

C. Influencer Impact On Consumer Purchasing Decisions

Influencers can have a significant impact on consumer purchasing decisions. A study by Google and Ipsos (2018) found that 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers reported trusting influencer opinions over traditional celebrities. This shows that influencers are becoming crucial in making consumers' purchasing decisions. Moreover, a report by Influencer.co (2020) found that 63% of consumers reported purchasing a product after seeing it promoted by an influencer, and that is proving the theory of the significant impact that influencers can have on consumer behavior.

Influencers can also influence post-purchase behaviors, such as product use and advocacy. By providing valuable insights into a product's features and benefits, influencers

can encourage their followers to use the product correctly, ultimately leading to higher satisfaction levels. The interesting thing is that if an influencer uses a product after promoting and after consumer's purchasing, it leads to even more satisfied users.

Most common situation is that influencers can also impact repeat purchases. A study by Collective Bias found that 30% of consumers are more likely to buy a product again if it was recommended by an influencer (Collective Bias, 2016). In this way the consumer shows that they believe in a person who promotes stuff and is willing to buy again. So, this kind of commitment can help brands build long-term relationships with their customers by encouraging repeat purchases and all of that thanks to social media and their new ways of earnings and making people less dependent on jobs.

Also the impact of post-purchase behaviors is seen in encouraging user-generated content. The followers are often asked to share photos or videos of themselves using the products they promote, which can help create a sense of community around the brand. Encouraging consumers to share their experiences with a brand, can lead to increased product use and advocacy and from that all sides have profit. Of course, some of them are not happy with sharing their own experience and exposing it on social media, but luckily for those who are promoting, the number of non-cooperative people is not that big, so they still have an audience who are open to share their opinion.

Ability of social media influencers to raise awareness, form attitudes, and influence intentions, influencers have the potential to drive significant changes in consumer behavior. They have the power to make someone to love some product/service or even dislike them and influencer attitude becomes more relevant if the public trusts them. Their impact is felt the most among younger generations who are on social media all day, and tend to rely heavily on social media for product recommendations and lifestyle inspiration. It is important for brands and consumers to approach these endorsements with a critical eye and be aware that not everything is like it is shown on social media for the consumer side and for the brand side to choose wisely who they pick for their campaigns. Most probably, this kind of influence will become even stronger as time goes and there are big chances that this will make a bigger gap between generations.

V. CONCLUSION

The in-depth analysis of various impacts social media influencers have on consumer behavior provided in this paper allows for understanding the importance of this topic for individual human psychology and societal changes as well. Although powerful for digital marketing purposes, social media influencers can present negative effects upon consumer behavior and psychology, but also positive effects which are all presented in this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Chen Lou (2022). Social Media Influencers and Followers: Theorization of a Trans-Parasocial Relation and Explication of Its Implications for Influencer Advertising, Journal of Advertising, 51:1, 4-21, DOI: 10.1080/00913367.2021.1880345

2. Donald Horton & R. Richard Wohl (1956). Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction, Psychiatry, 19:3, 215-229, DOI: 10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049

3. Rothermund, K., Voss, A., and Wentura, D. (2008). Counter-regulation in affective attentional biases: a basic mechanism that warrants flexibility in emotion and motivation. Emotion 8, 34–36. DOI: 10.1037/1528-3542.8.1.34

4. Shupei Yuan & Chen Lou (2020). How Social Media Influencers Foster Relationships with Followers: The Roles of Source Credibility and Fairness in Parasocial Relationship and Product Interest, Journal of Interactive Advertising, 20:2, 133-147, DOI: 10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514

5. Smith, N. K., Larsen, J. T., Chartrand, T. L., Cacioppo, J. T., Katafiasz, H. A., and Moran, K. E. (2006). Being bad isn't always good: affective context moderates the attention bias toward negative information. J. Pers. Soc. Psychol. 90, 210–220. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.90.2.210

6. Influencer Marketing Hub. (2019). Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report. https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2019/

7. Nielsen. (2015). Global Trust in Advertising. https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2015-reports/global-trust-in-advertising-2015-report.pdf

8. Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications. Free Press.

9. AdWeek. (2016). Why Online Reviews Matter for Your Business. https://www.adweek.com/digital/why-online-reviews-matter-for-your-business/

10. Takumi. (2019). Influencer Insights: The Rise of Influencer Marketing. https://takumi.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Takumi-Influencer-Insights-Report.pdf

11. Influencer Marketing Hub. (2021). Micro vs. Macro Influencers: Which Should You Choose? https://influencermarketinghub.com/micro-vs-macro-influencers/

12. Google & Ipsos. (2018). YouTube Influencer Marketing: The Ultimate Guide. https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/video/youtube-influencer-marketing/

13. Influencer.co. (2020). The State of Influencer Marketing 2020. https://influencer.co/resources/the-state-of-influencer-marketing-2020/

14. Collective Bias. (2016). The Power of Influencer Marketing. https://collectivebias.com/resources/the-power-of-influencer-marketing/

15. Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2018). Social comparisons on social media: the impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. Body image, 26, 38-45.

16. Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. Sex Roles, 71(11-12), 363-377.

17. Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2014). NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 47(6), 630-643.

18. Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers. Celebrity Studies, 8(2), 191-208.

19. Buil, I., de Chernatony, L., & Martínez, E. (2019). Examining

the role of advertising and sales promotions in brand equity creation. Journal of Business Research, 96, 157-165.

20. Biswas, D., Kavaratzis, M., & Hemsley-Brown, J. (2020). The Effects of Emotional Engagement with Social Media Influencers on Purchase Intention. Journal of Business Research, 116, 356-364.

21. Hwang, Y., Hung, K., Chen, Y., & Chen, Y. (2020). When celebrity endorsement backfires

22. Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). Follow me and like my beautiful selfies: The impact of influencers on adolescents' self-esteem, social comparison, body image, and purchase intentions. Journal of Adolescence, 78, 232-240.

23. De Veirman, M., Hudders, L., & Nelson, M. R. (2019). The Persuasiveness of Influencer Marketing: The Role of Content, Credibility

24. Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Influencer marketing: Effects of source type, product involvement, and platform on consumers' purchase intention. Computers in Human Behavior, 101, 205-214.